

# CD PRACTICE

• PROMOTING PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE •

No. 1 • 94



**The dysfunctional elements in public controversies can be turned around to build empathy, understanding and critical thinking among citizens.**

## COMMUNITY ISSUES GATHERING: A TOOL FOR RESOLVING CONTROVERSY

Community developers are often involved in helping people deal with controversial issues that require some deliberation or critical thinking on the part of the community. Discussion of such issues requires that differences be discussed in ways that do not destroy relationships. Ideally, discussions can reveal a sense of "we" where public knowledge emerges and people move toward a common ground.

There are many instances however, where public discussions are not conducive to democratic problem-solving. A heated discussion over a controversy becomes dysfunctional when: 1) it builds a battle between two groups that involves name-calling or bitter power contests; 2) it builds barriers between people and groups who are likely to have to work together to accomplish other community goals; and/or 3) it appears that little deliberation or "thinking through" the issue to examine the various alternatives and consequences.

These dysfunctional conditions make it difficult for public knowledge to emerge so we can understand our connections, others' perspectives and the consequences of the options before us. To make a reasoned choice as a "public" about controversial issues there must be a mutual understanding of each others' values and interests.

### Turning Lemons into Lemonade

The dysfunctional elements in public controversies can be turned around to build empathy, understanding and critical thinking among citizens. Many community leaders have acquired tools to build constructive and thoughtful dialogue among diverse groups in the community. They use a methodology for "public talk" developed in hundreds of rural and urban Community Issues Gatherings that have been held in Kentucky as part of the Kellogg Foundation funded Appalachia Civic Leadership Project. The Issues Gatherings borrow from methodologies devised by the Study Circles Resource Center and the National Issues Forums. They are designed to help people think through the choices and to move towards "common ground."



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S O C I E T Y

**The issue framing committee must be careful not to settle the issue before it is discussed by the citizens.**

Author:  
Ron Hustedde

Editor:  
Kenneth Pigg

Reviewers:  
Jack Timmons  
Hugh Muldoon

**CDPRACTICE**



**2**

No. 1 • 94

## Homework Prior to the Community Issues Gatherings

Before the public and elected officials discuss a controversial issue, some homework must be done by a small committee or group. The role of this committee is to reframe the issue in ways that might be helpful to deliberative public talk. The committee attempts to answer several major questions:

- 1) What is the real issue that needs more public discussion? Is a more basic issue "underneath" the issue?
- 2) Who is most likely to be affected by this issue and why?
- 3) Who is the least likely to be affected by this issue and why?
- 4) What are the alternatives for dealing with this issue? (Brainstorm as many ideas as possible.)
- 5) Can these alternatives be framed into three or four major public policy choices? If so, what are the major choices? Have any of the choices worked elsewhere? (Ideally, the choices should reflect the diversity of thought in the community about how to solve the problem.)
- 6) Is the issue framed in ways that are likely to divide the community? If so, can the issue be re-framed as a problem question or statement that reflects diverse interests (rather than positions) in a community? (For example, the issue may be initially framed as "Should we have zoning or not?" This question may lead to two positions that sets the stage for a major community battle. If the question is changed to "How can we best manage our land for economic growth and still maintain our small town flavor?" it may stimulate more problem-solving approaches rather than divide people into ideological camps.)

It is likely that the issue framing committee will not be able to answer all these questions on their own. There are three major sources for information: 1) the local library; 2) the stakeholders—the people who are most affected by the issue; and 3) "experts" or technicians who understand the technical components of the problem or who have a "scholar's perspective" about the problem and the public policy choices for addressing the issue. The latter two groups may be interviewed individually or in focus groups of 6-10 people. While interviewing these individuals, the issue framers should behave in a neutral and probing way, as fair-minded researchers who are trying to get to the heart of the problem and the major policy choices for addressing the issue. The issue framing committee must be careful not to settle the issue before it is discussed by the citizens. Input from citizens is critical for ultimate framing of the issue and the variety and feasibility of the alternatives.

### Writing an Issue Brief

After the information is collected, the issue framers can write a three- to ten-page brief that describes the problem. The reader should be offered adequate technical information without being overwhelmed. The problem

should be presented in a way that respects those with diverse opinions or stands about the issue. The issue should avoid offering only two policy choices because an either/or proposal may further divide the community. Rather, the framers should describe three or four public policy choices for dealing with the problem. The choices may not be mutually exclusive.

However, they should be distinct. Ideally, the framers should put the best foot forward when describing each of the choices. For example, it would be inappropriate to describe one choice in glowing terms and the other two choices with lukewarm language. It would not be considered fair if one devoted three pages to one choice and only one page to others. The issue framers should avoid labeling choices in ideological terms that would further divide the community. Certainly, one would never describe the choices as Republican, Democrat, liberal, conservative or middle-of-the-road.

In addition to a description of the choices, the issue brief may also contain some questions that might be posed in a community gathering.

### **Evaluating the Issue Brief**

After the first draft is prepared, the issue framers should ask readers to evaluate the issue brief, particularly in regard to adequacy, fair-mindedness and readability.

First, readers are asked if they have adequate facts to understand the problem? Do you need more facts or technical information? Is there too much technical information? Do you need more facts or other information to understand the public policy choices? If so, what kind of information would be the most helpful?

Second, readers can be asked if they think the writer favors one choice more than others? If so, what choice do you think he/she likes the most? Are each of the choices described in a fair-minded way? Why or why not?

Third, is the issue brief written in language that is easy to read? Is the writing too complex or too simple? Is there any kind of language that you find offensive? If so, what is the problem?

Responses to these and other questions may lead to some revisions of the issue brief. Some briefs have been printed in the local paper or presented on the local radio or cable television before the discussion begins. Copies can be distributed throughout the community or to a targeted group.

### **Setting the Stage Before the Issue Gathering**

After the brief is developed and refined, community issue gathering leaders attempt to create or nurture a setting where open discussion can occur. Ideally, the setting should be comfortable for all participants, a place that they trust and is conducive to dialogue, learning and problem solving.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the local courthouse or a library may be viewed as alien to participants. The volunteer fire station, someone's home or a restaurant where people gather for coffee to discuss issues may be considered more appropriate. Generally, chairs are arranged in a semi-circle or in a way that everyone can see each other. Rather than attempt to hold a large issue

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**CDPRACTICE**

**3**

*No. 1 • 94*



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gathering where people may feel lost in the crowd, several gatherings may be conducted with groups of thirty people or less. Potluck or other kinds of food and refreshments are often integrated into the gatherings to create a hospitable atmosphere. Personal invitations are extended rather than exclusive reliance on newspaper or mass mailings. A hospitality and invitations committee can handle many of the details.

### **Suggested Rules for the Gathering**

The moderator suggests several rules for a healthy discussion. The rules are posted on flip chart paper in the meeting space. They include:

- 1) Moderators guide the discussion but moderators and scribes remain neutral.
- 2) Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one should dominate.
- 3) Our discussion should focus on the issue and choices that brought us here.
- 4) We agree to disagree with ideas, not each other.
- 5) We listen to each other and respect each other.

Some participants may want to add extra guidelines such as "no smoking" or a time for adjournment.

### **Suggested Goals for the Gathering**

The moderator suggests several goals for the meeting that are posted on flip chart paper:

"After the meeting is completed, we should be able to:

- 1) Identify the range of public policy choices for dealing with this issue and recognize common ground on which we agree.
- 2) Make a good case for positions we disagree with; be able to critique our favorite choices and consider new choices we haven't thought of before.
- 3) Understand that other people have reasons for their choices and their reasons are not dumb, immoral or unreasonable.
- 4) Understand that our own understanding of an issue is not complete until we understand why others feel the way they do.
- 5) Recognize the values and beliefs that underlie the issue and choices."

Participants may want to change some goals or add new ones.

### **Starting the Issue Gathering**

Generally the issue is summarized by a neutral party in a 10-12 minute time frame. The three or four choices for addressing the issue are highlighted. Each choice is posted on a large flip chart paper. There is a flip chart paper posted with the question "Choice #4? or Choice #5?" in case there is a choice that has not emerged in the initial research.



### *Analyzing the Highlights of Each Choice*

After the issue is summarized and the choices are clear, the discussion leader asks some key questions about each choice:

- 1) What would the proponents of this choice say? Why would they choose this alternative? (or) You may not believe in this choice but if you had to walk in the shoes of defenders of this choice, what would you say?
- 2) What would opponents of this choice say? Why would they choose this alternative?
- 3) Who might gain or profit the most if this choice were selected? Who would lose the most if the choice were implemented?
- 4) What are the key values that defenders of the choice hold? Are their values different from people who would oppose this choice?

Usually, the scribe records the comments on separate sheets marked "Choice #1 -- Defenders" or "Choice #1 -- Critics" and so on for subsequent choices. These recorded comments become the group's visual memory.

After each of the three or four choices have been examined, the discussion leader asks if there is a fourth or fifth public policy choice that has not been considered before.

### *Bringing the Ideas Home*

After the major choices have been considered, the discussion leader can ask questions to bring the group towards a sense of common ground:

- 1) Now that we've considered this issue, how do we see the problem?
- 2) What are the concerns we have about resolving this issue one way or another? Have we considered the downside of each choice?
- 3) Given that each of us is motivated by beliefs and values that are important to us, how can we redefine the issue in a way that highlights our values? Are there values that we feel any public policy on this issue must respect?
- 4) Are there ways of resolving the issue that we can reject because the consequences are unacceptable?
- 5) Is there a general way of proceeding that would address everyone's most serious concerns and protect the things we care about deeply?
- 6) Concluding questions: What have we learned here today? Do you want to meet again? Do you want to act on this issue now? If so, how?

Usually, the discussion leader asks the group if they abided by the guidelines for discussions they set and if they met any of their goals.

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**CDPRACTICE**

**5**

No. 1 • 94



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### Some Moderator Dos and Don'ts

- The moderator and scribe behave in a neutral way during the entire discussion.
- Help the group explore deeper dimensions of the issue, such as trade-offs or how people in different situations might feel about the issue or the choices.
- The scribe attempts to summarize the major ideas and stops the meeting (if needed) to make sure that ideas are recorded accurately.
- The moderator does not let anyone dominate or assume an "expert" role.
- The moderator does not allow the group to drift away from the task at hand. There may be a need for someone to serve as a timekeeper.
- The moderator does not talk too much or insert his/her personal views and feelings.

### Lessons Learned

- Community Issues Gathering have been used in a variety of settings. For example, some groups have had a series of meetings because they wanted to spend about one to two hours examining each public policy choice.
- Discussion leaders have used the Gathering approach creatively. Some have led Gatherings on the radio with local call-ins (so the sick and shut-ins could participate) and a live studio audience. Others have led Gatherings on cable TV or in people's homes in conjunction with potluck suppers.
- Some have used this approach for non-controversial issues such as pasture management choices in order to encourage more creative thinking among farmers.
- The Gatherings can lead to a climate of active tolerance where people appreciate each other's differences and learn from each other.
- The Gatherings have been used by low-income groups, the mentally ill, teenagers, women or other groups that have felt left out of the political process in order to stimulate the capacity of their members to address difficult problems.
- At their worst, the Gatherings are merely interesting intellectual exercises if they don't address issues that local people want to work on or learn more about.
- Each group needs to be respected for what it wants to do. Some groups want to study and learn about issues. Other groups will want to take immediate action after the Gathering. The discussion leader should never push a group in one direction or another.

At a recent gathering, one of the participants observed with amazement "none of the choices are perfect. . . there are trade-offs with each choice."



In essence, the structure of the gatherings can alter public posturing about certain public policy choices. The gatherings lead to a better understanding of the trade-offs associated with each choice. No one is asked to give up their values or to neglect their self interests for the "common good." Rather, citizens can learn to think through the consequences of each choice and who might gain or lose the most if a public policy alternative might be carried out. This understanding about differences can set the stage for a sense of "we" or "common ground" to emerge. It can lead to creative problem-solving where everyone's interests and ideas are respected.

Indeed, democratic problem-solving requires deliberative or critical thinking about difficult and controversial public problems. It requires respect for diversity of thought and true listening. The gatherings provide a structure to meet that end.

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For further Information/Materials About Civic Governance & Community Issues Education contact:

Study Circles Resource Center  
P. O. Box 203, Rt 169  
Pomfrey, CT 06258  
203-928-2616

National Issues Forums (NIF)  
Kettering Foundation  
100 Commons Road  
Dayton, OH 45459-2777  
1-800-433-7834

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<sup>1</sup> Betty S. King and Ronald J. Hustedde. 1993. "Community Free Spaces: Creating and Nurturing Schools of Democracy." *Journal of Extension*, Vol. XXXI, Winter. Pp. 10-12.

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**CDPRACTICE**

**7**

No. 1 • 94





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