

Framing Public Issues for Deliberative Dialogue

Using deliberative dialogue in a Community Forum is one approach for making public choices. A community is the product of its choices – and that choice-making is difficult because it inevitably involves disagreements. The community forum process is a way of supporting “choice-making” about difficult, complex, potentially divisive problems. These are structured discussions in which people weigh the consequences of various approaches, in which people acknowledge conflicting values or motives and “work through” those conflicts – without assuming the conflicts will be eliminated. Philosophically, deliberation assumes that people may come at an issue – enter the discussion – from a variety of value-based directions. At a very fundamental level, it is about diversity – about acknowledging and listening to one another. The end goal of a deliberation is not consensus or compromise but “common ground” – the identification of interests or values that are “sharable” and on which we may base actions that are acceptable to a community whose individual members may continue to hold different opinions (beyond that specific area of agreement) about the larger issue. In addition to being itself useful, the identification of “common ground” may enable “complementary” actions – actions by members of the community with very different value-based positions, which nevertheless may move the community in the same direction.

Participants in deliberative forums don’t change their opinions on issues so much as they change their opinions on other people’s opinions. Emotions are tempered by mutual understanding, even when there is serious disagreement.... People have to use what they hear to integrate diverse experiences into a more comprehensive picture of reality.

Framing Issues

Framing an issue involves pulling together facts, identifying dilemmas, identifying alternative approaches (and the pros and cons of those alternative approaches). The “issue framing” provides a shared foundation for deliberation. Issues are “framed” through a public lens – not through the lens of academics, journalists, politicians. Framing is about actionable choices – not “solutions.”

A completed framework will have the following characteristics:

- It will reveal values and motivations underlying different points of view.
- Each of the various choices will address the problem presented for framing.

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- The framing will make a strong case for each of the choices presented.
- There will be tension between the choices.
- Potential actions – and trade-offs – will be clearly identified for each choice.
- Potential actions will feel reasonable and doable.

Step One is selecting an issue to frame. Not all problems or issues are frameable. Issues appropriate for this approach to deliberation generally have the following characteristics:

- There is a broad concern within the community – however you define community.
- Choices must be made – and there is no clear, “right” answer.
- This isn’t a yes/no question.
- The problem isn’t a highly technical one requiring a technical answer.
- Multiple individuals and groups must act in order to move forward.
- You aren’t asking the community to “rubber-stamp” a solution that has already, really, been determined.
- You do not have an “agenda” to promote.
- New approaches would help the community move forward.
- People in the community have not already had an opportunity to consider different approaches – and the consequences of each.
- Decision-making will be informed by deliberation.

Step Two is to identify the range of “fundamental concerns” people have about this issue. The goal is to make sure that “everyone can see themselves in the choices or approaches they’re asked to consider.”

- List the people/groups who care about this issue or who are affected by it – directly or indirectly – whether they realize they are affected or not.
- Develop questions that will help you discover the concerns people have about the issue – and the concerns they believe others may have, and what they

believe should be done about it – and what they believe others think should be done about it.

- You can use one-on-one interviews (in-person or telephone), focus groups. You're aiming for 50-100 interviews.
- Review available studies and statistics, using library, online resources, etc.

Issue framing is a team – not an individual – exercise. The issue-framing team is, essentially, the “steering committee” for the forum or deliberation. You want to be sure that all voices are heard in this phase of the work.

Interview questions should be reasonably broad and open-ended, e.g.:

- When you think about <this problem/issue>, what concerns you personally?
- What concerns your friends or neighbors?
- When you think about <this problem>, which people/groups are affected by it directly? Indirectly?
- What would they <people/groups identified in previous question> say their concerns are?

Step Three is to list people's concerns. From the interviews, focus groups, etc. identify “concerns” – and transfer them to flip charts (or your preferred electronic substitute, I suppose). The objective is to be as comprehensive as possible in identifying the concerns that people have related to this issue. This phase is critical. Think carefully about the array of concerns and try to identify missing voices. If you identify missing voices, think about what they might say and include it.

Step Four is to group or cluster like concerns. You are aiming, ultimately, for 3-4 “clusters.” Here you are looking for “the concern behind the concern” – the underlying principles and values. Pick a concern from the (lengthy) list and ask yourself what was really “eating” at the person who expressed that concern, what was the deeply-held underlying value or belief. Then, scan through the list of concerns and identify other concerns driven by the same value or principle. Put a “shorthand” label on that concern cluster, e.g. “fairness.” Repeat the process. Some concerns may end up in more than one cluster; this is OK. The first round should get you to 5-8 groupings.

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For each grouping, write a statement that describes that grouping as a choice or approach. Use action words suggesting the direction that should be taken for each choice or approach. For instance, in a framing on affordable housing, one cluster was described as "Allow market forces to correct the balance between supply and demand," one as "Communities must accept responsibility for the social well-being of all residents," and one as "Empower all stakeholders to make more effective decisions about housing options."

Reduce the number of choices to 3-4. It is difficult for people to fully consider alternatives if there are too many of them. You want a manageable

Step Five is to look at all the paths, choices, approaches identified above – and identify the common thread connecting them. What you are trying to identify here is the common, **shared** "problem statement." One way to do this is for each member of the work group to try to complete the following statement: "The common problem I see is..." The problem statement must reflect the full range of concerns, all the approaches.

This "naming" step is critical – covering too much ground will be ineffective (e.g. "world peace" isn't a problem statement, neither is health care or education) and covering too little means too few people/too few perspectives will be included in the deliberation.

Here's an example of a final statement from an issue framing on affordable housing. The final "problem statement" on affordable housing read: "A home of one's own is the American dream, a dream that is increasingly beyond the means of many Americans. What does the dream look like? Housing that is safe, decent, integrated into the community, and that costs less than 30% of gross annual household income (following HUD guidelines). Who's affected by this problem? In 1999, 12 million renter and homeowner households paid more than 50% of their annual income for housing. Many families are unable to purchase or rent homes in the communities where they work. Seniors are frequently forced to new neighborhoods to find housing to meet their needs. Employers may have trouble finding a workforce in communities where low-and middle-income housing does not exist. Community growth is limited by the community's ability to provide affordable housing. Across America, in rural and urban areas, we've created a landscape of unlivable communities."

Step Six is to write a summary of the framework. At this point, you have two key pieces: a statement of the problem and choices. You want to be sure there are

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“tensions” between the choices – so that people involved in the deliberation have to examine their values and priorities not only **between** choices but also **within** choices. Examine each approach and be sure that (1) approaches are distinctly different – not just opposite (no “yes/no” decisions which cause people to polarize; (2) each approach is presented “best foot forward” – with aspects that might appeal to anyone, (3) each approach captures something that is truly valuable to people, and (4) that there is, therefore, “tension” between the approaches. Any approaches that don’t pass this test are not useful choices, for this purpose

At this point, you can prepare a one-page summary of the framework – the problem statement and approaches – and add a title that will capture the essence of the issue, help draw people into the conversation, and not prejudice them in favor of any particular approach. For example, a title that would draw people into a dialogue about affordable housing might be *Affordable Housing: What Are the Options for our Community?* versus *Does our Community Need Affordable Housing.*

Step Seven is, for each approach, to identify (a) the advantages and disadvantages, (b) actions that could be taken, and (c) trade-offs that would have to be made.

For each approach, you should try to identify 5-6 of the “best” reasons for approaching the problem from this perspective; you also need to identify the consequences of taking that approach. Guides to framing tend not to use “pro” and “con” – as those words are identified with debate rather than deliberation. Thus, the focus is on advantages, disadvantages, consequences – and tradeoffs.

Also, for each approach, you need to list possible actions that are consistent with the philosophy or underlying value behind that approach. The actions should be active (not “supporting” something, doing something). So, for instance, under approach 2 in an affordable housing framework one of the possible actions listed is: “Provide options for people to stay in place, i.e. changing local zoning laws to allow “granny flats” (accessory apartments localities often forbid), etc.”

Finally, for each approach, list the tradeoffs you would have to make were you to approach the problem from the perspective of this approach. Again, using the affordable housing example, the “tradeoff” for approach 2 in the above affordable housing example might read: “In seeking broad-based community solutions, this approach will require extensive staff and programming support, dollars that otherwise might be spent on other affordable housing development.”

Again, this is an iterative process. At this point, you want – again – to test the framework, to be sure that all remaining approaches really address the same problem, that there are recognizable differences and tensions. The framing should **provide directions for actions** – not specific solutions. These are complex problems, they do NOT HAVE OPTIMAL SOLUTIONS. So consider this with your issue framework: Can you identify what people consider valuable in each approach – the motivation? Can you identify advantages, disadvantages, trade-offs, possible actions? Would you be comfortable moderating a community forum on the issue as framed?

Step Eight –is to identify questions that can be used at the end of the forum to help participants reflect what they have heard. Typically questions are designed to discover (a) how people view the issue, (b) what kinds of actions are/are not supported, (c) what trade-offs people are/are not willing to make, (d) how people felt about the forum experience, (e) demographic information.

Remember that the objective in a community forum or deliberative process is to identify some “common ground.” Remember, closing questions at the forum itself are **not** designed to push people toward consensus or compromise. Both of those involve people giving up something. People aren’t giving up anything when they find common ground. They find it because they discovered **shared** interests or values. And this leads to action. Furthermore, one of the roles of the moderator is not to allow, let alone encourage, debate. So, closing questions might probe for insights gained, for changes in thinking, for areas where there is agreement, for areas where there is disagreement, for what individuals might do – and, most important, what the group, collectively, might do.

Step Nine is to test the framework by holding test forums – which must include the full range of stakeholders. This might include a number of forums. Gather data on what people say.

So then, **step ten** is to revise the framework, based on the test forum(s).

Remember, this is not a “quick” process. And it is not suitable for every issue or problem. The combination of issue framing and moderated discourse does provide a viable way for a diverse group to approach difficult and potentially contentious issues.

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