

The Role of Public Deliberation in Leadership: Crossing Boundaries to Reach Diverse Perspectives

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Introduction

The challenge for individuals in a leadership role is to base decisions on the needs of the diverse peoples impacted by those decisions. An additional challenge lies in how to gather those diverse perspectives in an authentic and transparent way. Public deliberation through deliberative forums is emerging as an effective way to engage the citizenry in sharing their diverse perspectives on public issues and the public solutions to those issues.

From Public Problem to Public Decision

When a public problem requires a public solution, there are three things to consider in the decision-making process: myths, facts, and values/beliefs (Figure 1). One step in the process involves giving people factual information about the problem and possible solutions. As is the case with most public problems, people have some limited knowledge about and experience with the problem. Educating the citizenry helps to provide the pertinent facts for making a more informed decision.

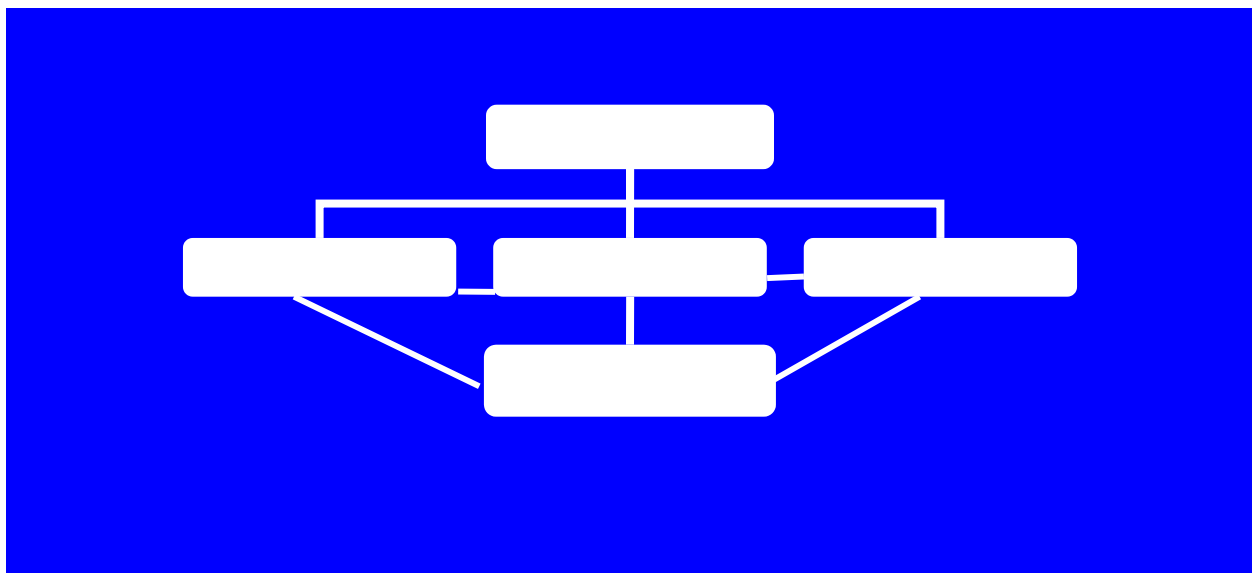


Figure 1. Anatomy of the Public Decision-Making Process

Another step in the process addresses moving people from myth to fact. With arguably any public problem, some members of the public will have some level of misinformation or misunderstanding that they believe to be factual or true – i.e. myths. The presentation of facts to help correct erroneous information or perceptions helps to address this factor.

Dealing with people's values and beliefs adds another layer to the decision-making process. Patton and Blaine (2001) noted the sharing of facts and research-based information may only address a small part of a public issue that involves a value-based conflict. It is necessary, therefore, for leaders to become familiar with information and perspectives originating outside of facts and research-based information.

Public Deliberation and Deliberative Forums

Public deliberation is a means by which people make difficult choices as a citizenry by reasoning and talking together in a deliberative forum. To deliberate in a public forum is to examine possible policy directions or approaches to a public problem or issue. In that examination, forum participants weigh the consequences and costs of each approach based on what is truly valuable to them (Mathews & McAfee, 2001). Public deliberation involves listening to the views of others and considering those views in light of one's own beliefs. In addition, public deliberation forces people to identify the trade-offs they are willing to make in order to put one or more policy directions into action. Also, it is a means to find common ground for action and/or a shared sense of direction. The goal of public deliberation forums is to make sound decisions as a community and country about what action is best for the public as a whole.

The formalization of public deliberation and deliberative forums evolves from familiar forms of civic engagement. The roots of public deliberation in its earliest forms are in tribal peace making and tribal decision making, and the evolution continued in the town hall concept. Founded in 1927, the Charles F. Kettering Foundation conducts research to learn what it takes to make democracy work as it should. Building on the founder's interest in inventive research, the Kettering Foundation created the National Issues Forums (NIF) in the 1980s to learn through research the effects of public deliberation and deliberative democracy. In a related effort, the Study Circles Resource Center supports public deliberation through a study-circles format of on-going deliberation on public issues.

The National Issues Forums is one model of a national effort to engage citizens in public deliberation. NIF work is based on non-partisanship and non-advocacy – the emphasis is on engaging the citizenry in participating in public decision making on public issues through public deliberation, rather than advocating a certain stance on an issue. To facilitate public deliberation, Williams (2001) noted that the NIF network identifies issues of concern expressed by a wide range of citizens across the nation. Typically, three or four issues are selected for development into issue forums each year. After an issue is selected, the NIF network frames the issue for deliberation by identifying three or four alternative policy approaches as well as possible actions that could be taken in each approach. Key arguments are identified *for* and *against* each approach. To enhance the forum experience for participants, NIF develops an issue book and brief companion videotape. The issue book provides an overview of the issue and presents the alternative policy approaches, actions, and arguments for and against the approach.

What Does a Forum Look Like?

While there is no typical forum, an effective forum can consist of 20-30 persons from a cross section of the community. Forums are usually two hours in length. The moderator and participants convene in a circle, and a recorder documents the deliberation on flipchart sheets that are posted around the room. The moderator and recorder are specially trained in working with deliberative forums.

Forums are organized into four parts:

- the opening
- the deliberation of the alternative policy approaches
- reflections
- closing

In the opening and welcome, the moderator describes the purpose of the forum and the recorder, has participants complete the pre-forum questionnaire, reviews the ground rules, introduces the issue, and asks for volunteers to share how the issue has touched their lives (the *personal stake*).

The personal stake provides a transition into the major part of the forum: the deliberation of the alternative policy approaches. Moderators use a variety of questioning strategies to encourage participants to do the following:

- describe what appeals to them about each policy approach as well as what concerns them
- identify what they hold valuable
- identify the tensions between the approaches
- think through the possible consequences of each approach
- describe what they think someone with an opposing view would say about the approach – i.e. the diverse perspectives on the issue
- note whose voices are absent from the forum, and what they might say
- recognize that there are not adequate resources to implement each policy approach to its fullest extent
- state the trade-offs they would be willing to make

As the recorder completes flipchart sheets, they are posted around the room. The moderator encourages participants to look the sheets at any time throughout the forum as a reminder of the group's progress in deliberation.

The reflections segment of the forum is followed by the very brief closing. In the reflections, the moderator asks participants how their thinking about the issue and possible approaches has changed, as well as how their thinking about other people's perspectives has changed. Participants are also asked if their deliberation has identified any shared sense of direction or common ground that could be the basis of acting publicly on the issue. The moderator involves the participants in further consideration and identification of trade-offs, as well as what they did not cover in the forum that still needs to be addressed. The group may decide to reconvene for further deliberation or to begin to act on some area of common ground. They may also decide to end the deliberation at the conclusion of the forum. The forum closes with participants completing the post-forum questionnaire.

After the forum, the moderator and recorder prepare a report on the forum and its outcomes using the one-page "Moderator Response" form. The recordings on the flipchart sheet are transcribed and shared with forum participants, if desired. The pre-and post-forum questionnaires are sent in to the NIF network, along with the "Moderator Response" form. Local news releases are often developed to share the forum outcomes with others. NIF will sponsor three or four national studies on selected issues each year to report on the outcomes of hundreds of forums.

Crossing Boundaries through the Use of Public Deliberation

No one leader or small group of people has all the experience and insight needed to lead a community or organization in the best policy direction. It is the thinking of diverse peoples that provides the basis for sound public decision making.

Studies of public deliberation have been conducted by the Kettering Foundation and other groups since the 1980s and have shown that this practice works with all types of older youth and adults, socioeconomic levels, community size, and ethnicities. The studies have revealed that deliberative forum participants:

- Come from every part of society
- Reconsider their own opinions and judgments
- Approach issues more realistically by considering costs, consequences and trade-offs associated with policy options
- Reconsider and develop greater understanding for the views of others
- Define their self interest more broadly
- Develop a greater sense of confidence in what they can do politically
- Become more interested in political and social issues

A deliberative forum convener (T. Willingham, personal communication, February 1, 2001) reported on her work with California prison inmates in the 1990s, where she used deliberative forums as part of an adult literacy program. She noted that inmates learned to participate effectively in forums and expressed surprise that people would value their perspectives on public issues. They asked if they could attend forums after their release from prison, and commented that nobody had ever before asked them to participate in decision making.

Public Knowledge, Public Judgment, and Public Voice

One product or outcome of deliberative forums is a kind of knowledge about an issue that is not available from experts or polls. Both the deliberative forum participants and the leaders who look at forum outcomes and reports gain this knowledge or perspective about the issue. Mathews and McAfee (2001) called this “public knowledge” (p. 15), noting that it reveals three things:

- how the public sees an issue;
- what is valuable to people and what tensions exist among the many things that are important;
- what people are or are not willing to do to solve a problem; what costs and consequences are or are not acceptable; and
- where there is any shared sense of direction

They add that “deliberation produces public knowledge by synthesizing many different experiences and perspectives into a shared framework of meaning” (p. 16).

Yankelovich (1985) stated that a deliberative dialogue can distill judgment out of mere opinion. He described this by noting that public opinion polls measure the public’s viewpoint at a moment in time – however vague, ill-informed or clouded in emotion it might be – whereas *public judgment* represents the public’s viewpoint after all elements of mere opinion have been distilled from it, once people have had an opportunity to confront an issue seriously and over an extended period of time.

A third product of deliberative forums is the *public voice*. Mathews (1999) described public voice as “the voice that emerges from structured forums or serious public dialogue” (p. 94), adding that “it is not the voice of the majority but the voice of a synthesis”.

Supporting Public Deliberation – The Capacity to Partner

In recognition of the value of public deliberation and deliberation to community and organization leaders, Williams and Daugherty (1999) conducted a study in Oklahoma to determine the capacity of statewide organizations to support an educational program to develop the habit of public deliberation in the citizenry. It was essential that partnership organizations and groups represent diversity in ethnicity,

gender, age, economic and education level, and philosophical perspective. Through partnership, the groups could capitalize on a variety of resources. The project directors developed a 33-item telephone interview survey instrument addressing resources, motivational factors, and network/communication. Over 80 interviews were completed involving persons representing approximately 15 organizations or groups that shared an interest in involving diverse citizens in public decision making.

The Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD) was formed in 2000. The partnership continually grows and evolves to accommodate the “partnership’s voice” on how to engage citizens through public deliberation. Through the efforts of the OPPD, public deliberative forums are becoming strong components of community and statewide leadership development programs and activities.

Closing Thoughts

Public deliberation and deliberative dialogue have a most valuable role to play in leadership. Leaders can consider public deliberation from several viewpoints. As skilled conveners, moderators, recorders and reporters of deliberative forums, leaders have an effective tool to elicit from the citizenry the diverse perspectives that people have on public issues. Another choice for a leader is to call on others who are skilled in convening and moderating forums, and to employ the habit of public deliberative forums in the leader’s community or organization. Through public deliberation, leaders can gain an understanding of the public’s knowledge on an issue. Leaders can appreciate the depth of public judgment when compared to the capricious nature of public opinion polls. Finally, leaders can hear the public’s voice on a given issue, richly flavored with the nuances of diverse perspectives.

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