

# **Leaders and Public Deliberation: A Study in Citizen Involvement**

## **Abstract**

This study examines 13 persons who used the concepts of public deliberation in their leadership roles in one or more environments, such as communities, organizations, families, and places of employment. Through in-depth personal interviews, the subjects shared experiences, successes, and lessons learned, as well as comments and recommendations for how public deliberation can be used to develop existing and future leaders.

## **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.

Stories abound of angry, frustrated citizens who feel they have little power to influence important public decisions affecting their lives. This frustration is often characterized as apathy with little effort made to look deeper at the desire of regular people to express their views on public issues, but believe they do not have a venue to do so.

Deliberative forums and study circles provide a safe, nonpartisan venue for community leaders to help citizens to struggle with challenging public issues. These deliberations are based on the idea that, in a democracy, citizens have the responsibility to get together to talk through their common concerns, to weigh possible alternative actions to address these problems, and inform policy makers and other community leaders about the desired direction for public action. Public deliberation provides a means by which citizens make choices about the basic purpose and direction for their communities and country. As conveners, moderators, recorders, and reporters of deliberative forums, community leaders perform a non-biased, non-advocacy role in engaging citizens in building community. One form of implementing public deliberation has emerged from the National Issue Forums model and is captured in the slogan of the Kettering Foundation's work in deliberative democracy as "a different kind of talk, another way to act."

This paper describes a study conducted to determine community leaders' use of public deliberation. Through a previous study, the researchers identified 13 persons who employed concepts of public deliberation, sometimes including public deliberative forums, in some fashion and agreed to in-depth interviews to share their experiences, successes and lessons learned. The study had the following objectives:

- Document how subjects applied concepts of public deliberation following their participation in institutes.
- Identify how the subjects used public deliberation in their leadership roles.
- Determine how subjects think public deliberation could be used to develop future or existing leaders.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Public Deliberation**

Mathews (2002, p i) indicate that the Kettering Foundation has “discovered an unrealized potential for constructive community change – the power of an engaged public.” He defines a public as “a diverse body of people joined together in ever-changing alliances to make choices about how to advance their common well-being (p. i).” Further, he describes an engaged public as “a committed and interrelated citizenry rather than a persuaded populace.”

Mathews and McAfee (2003, p.1) state that “Public deliberation is one name for the way we go about deciding how to act. In weighing – together – the costs and consequences of various approaches to solving problems, people become aware of the differences in the way others see those costs and consequences.” Public deliberation is a particular way of reasoning and talking together. It is, as Mathews and McAfee state, a “dialogue for weighing, not a debate for winning” (p. 10). Deliberation involves *listening* and *weighing* the views of others. One objective of deliberative dialogue is to get beyond facts to what is valuable to people in the common life they share in the community, in whatever way they define community.

The current practice of resolving public issues at all levels of society, from neighborhood to the national level, leans heavily on special interest group politics, adversarial proceedings (debates, public hearings, litigation), and/or ersatz citizen participation devices such as advisory committees and listening sessions. Mathews (2002) notes that public engagement has been used to describe a form of public relations aimed at gaining popular support for an institution or a cause. In the study reported in this article, public engagement means that community members have decided and acted on their own rather than being persuaded to take a particular action by others – especially those outside the community.

### **Does Public Deliberation Work?**

The basic proposition of public deliberation is that it produces *public knowledge*; that is, knowledge that can only occur through face-to-face engagement between people. Public knowledge is not available through opinion polls or from experts in the problem area at hand. Rather, it is knowledge that can only occur when people gather together and focus on finding *common ground* – even though they do not agree with each other – upon which they might fashion efforts to address the issue.

In a study of citizens and deliberation, Farkas, Friedman, and Bers (1995) found that about half the participants (53 percent) changed their minds on deeply held positions after participation in repeated deliberation experiences. A much larger percentage (71 percent) said they have second thoughts about their opinions, even though they did not change their minds. More than three-fourths (78 percent) said they encountered viewpoints different from their own and thought these views were good.

It is not likely that a single deliberative forum will change deeply held beliefs, but participation in a number of deliberative forums on different issues begins to develop a different way of listening and thinking about issues and creates a “habit” of deliberating. Moreover, Patterson (n.d.) notes that people begin to see themselves as political actors, not just clients or consumers. In summarizing from John Dewey’s work on problem solving skill development, Patterson observes “This approach [public deliberation] asserts that skills for deliberation have to be cultivated over time . . . this perspective also suggests that deliberative enterprises that are one-shot and short term are not adequate; rather, sustained problem-solving processes where participants can see the results of their actions and adjust accordingly are important” (page 8).

Mathews (2001) notes that the outcomes that are appropriate measures of deliberative dialogue are such things as “change in the way issues are raised and framed, by the extent to which people look carefully at both the pros and cons of all their options, and by the way they relate to one another when facing a difficult, controversial issue”(p. 66). Or as Patterson notes, “The most important criteria for

establishing whether a particular instance qualifies as an example of deliberative democracy, is whether citizens engage in deliberation or public reasoning and the exchange of arguments oriented towards mutual understanding and the common good” (p. 10).

To develop an *engaged* public, the full range of diversity among the population must be involved, and involvement must include as many people as possible. Mathews (2003) notes that if the only people involved in community issues are the usual movers and shakers, things will get done. However, when the changes do not work (i.e., the changes fail to connect to what is *valuable* to most people), the blame game will begin.

There is a growing body of experience that supports the notion that public deliberation can produce public knowledge (sometimes called a public “voice”) that can lead to action and resolution of public issues. A summary of major findings has included the following (Twelve Major Findings from Studies of Public Deliberation, 1996):

1. Anyone can deliberate.
2. Participants come from every part of society.
3. As a result of deliberation, people reconsider their own opinions and judgments.
4. People reconsider the views of others as a result of deliberation. They develop a greater understanding of other groups and viewpoints.
5. After participating in deliberation, people’s knowledge and understanding of an issue increases.
6. After deliberation, people think more realistically about issues (e.g., they are willing to consider costs and trade-offs).
7. As a result of public deliberation, people become more inclined to see themselves as political actors.
8. Through forums, people develop stronger communication skills (e.g., speaking, writing, etc.).
9. After public deliberation, people become more interested in political and social issues.
10. After participating in public deliberation, people construe their self-interests more broadly.
11. Through deliberation, people increase their activity around issues.
12. Public deliberation establishes and enhances communication between groups.

Charged with the responsibility of finding solutions, public officials are looking for approaches that find the “common ground” rather than the nearly endless list of areas of disagreement, which is the typical outcome of public hearings, political action and special interest groups. Mathews and McAfee (2003) summarize the various ways that public deliberation can have an impact:

- Makes public action possible
- Finds a way for people to work together even when they don’t agree
- Informs officials about what is politically possible
- Changes relations between citizens and officeholders
- Meets the public’s responsibilities that cannot be delegated

Arnone (1999) cites several examples of these products of deliberation and the impact that communities of varying sizes and types have experienced.

### **Public Deliberation and Leadership**

Public deliberation has been linked with leadership. Gastil (1994) built on the concept of democratic leadership, describing the roles of leader and follower and illustrating them through an example of National Issues Forums. He contended that a democratic leader had three primary functions:

distributing responsibility so that all members of the group were responsible; empowering the membership of the group; and helping the group to deliberate. Gastil asserted that no one person could fully perform all of these functions, thus making a case for leadership being a behavior which many members of the group should perform in turn. He also noted expectations for followers: responsibility for the wellbeing of the group; accountability for their actions; autonomy; and working with those who are leading.

Community leadership development programs have been classified in terms of public deliberation. The Harwood Institute (2003) sought to provide greater clarity on differing approaches to leadership development and identify the extent to which different programs worked to cultivate democratic habits in communities. Researchers studied 15 community leadership development programs across the U.S., and identified four basic types of programs according to how change occurred in communities and who in a community held authority for leading such change. Each type of leadership program was associated with a particular strategy for executing its work – Networking, Information Intake, Skills Development, and Perspective Change – though the strategies were not mutually exclusive. The types of programs and associated strategies included the following:

- **Traditional** (strategy: Networking) – Assumed that changes happened through coordinated efforts of business and civic leaders who hold authority. Democratic practice was purely trustee democracy.
- **Deepening Awareness** (strategy: Information Intake) – Assumed that change came under the direction of an established group of recognized leaders; however, also say a need for up-and-coming leaders to take on responsibility. Democracy meant understanding community issues and working with other leaders to solve problems.
- **Expanding Diversity** (strategy: Skill Development) – Assumed that communities functioned better with more adept backgrounds other than just the business community and existing leaders. Democracy was strictly representative and one-way; community engagement and dialogue were not part of the program.
- **Hidden Layer** (strategy: Perspective Change) – Assumed that the people most affected by a problem should be involved in solving it, and that all people in a community must exert leadership. Democracy meant encouraging people from deep within the community to come together to find solutions to problems, then move the solutions through the existing system; deliberation was not a major focus.

Though many leadership programs have talked about improving communities, the programs examined in the Harwood Institute study showed little evidence of focus on any of the hallmarks of democratic or public-forming practices as described by Mathews (2002).

## Methods

The purpose of the study was to determine community leaders' use of public deliberation. The study had the following objectives:

- Document how subjects applied concepts of public deliberation following their participation in institutes.
- Identify how the subjects used public deliberation in their leadership roles.
- Determine how subjects think public deliberation could be used to develop future or existing leaders.

Through a previous study, the researchers identified 13 community leaders throughout Oklahoma who employed concepts of public deliberation, sometimes including public deliberative forums, in some fashion and agreed to in-depth interviews to share their experiences, successes and lessons learned. Community was defined broadly, and included towns, neighborhoods, university campuses and organizations. The subjects were a self-selected sample from a population of approximately 175 persons who had participated in one of four institutes held during 2001 – 2002. The institutes taught participants to convene, moderate, and record public deliberative forums.

The researchers developed a 13-item instrument in collaboration with the Bureau for Social Research at Oklahoma State University. They piloted the instrument and made appropriate revisions. In spring, 2004, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the 13 subjects. The interviews were conducted by a research associate skilled in personal interviewing and knowledgeable in public deliberation. Interviews averaged approximately one hour in length, and were held in the communities where the subjects lived or worked. The Bureau for Social Research transcribed the interviews. The content of the transcripts was analyzed relative to the objectives of the study.

## Findings

Demographic information was collected on the 13 community leaders. There were seven women and six men, and ages ranged from 20 to 65 years. Two were university undergraduate students, two worked for the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, six were involved with the Oklahoma Early Settlement Volunteer Mediation program, two worked with students at Oklahoma's two land-grant universities, and one worked for the state's Department of Education.

Analysis of the transcripts revealed that the community leaders used the concepts of public deliberation in a variety of settings, including the following:

- University classes
- Campus Compact's VOICE program
- High school social studies programs
- Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service county-based leadership programs
- Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service's Community Listening Sessions
- Community meetings and forums
- Neighborhood meetings and forums
- County/Municipal government meetings and forums

One community leader described a volatile and contentious issue (county zoning) in a county where his colleague worked in another part of the state. The colleague was not trained in public deliberation, and recruited him to come to the county as an outsider to conduct a deliberative forum on land use decisions. He used an issue framework developed at the national level and available from the National Issues Forums Institute (*Land Use Conflict: When City and Country Clash*). Because he anticipated that people were upset about the issue and the impending forum, he prepared individual copies of the forum Guidelines posters in addition to individual copies of the issue framework. He reported that his application of the moderator skills learned at the institute, including the use of the Guidelines, helped to defuse the tension at the forum almost immediately. He also noted that a newspaper reporter from a nearby large city left the forum when she realized that there was not going to be an argument or debate. During the two-hour forum, the group found common ground from which to begin the work of developing a public policy for the common good.

The community leaders overwhelmingly recognized the value of incorporating training on public deliberation into the curriculum of community leadership programs. Several had been through leadership training programs in their towns, professions, and/or universities, but only two persons (the university students) received public deliberation training in the leadership program. The most common theme among the interviewees' comments was how valuable the concepts of public deliberation can be to existing and future leaders as they work with their various publics to shape the organizations, schools, communities, and states for America's future. One person responded that she has already incorporated deliberative forums into the curriculum of the countywide leadership program that she coordinates along with a steering committee.

## Conclusions and Future Implications

The community leaders in this study have reported multiple successes using public deliberative forums and related concepts of public deliberation in various settings. Their successes may spur the thinking of leadership educators to explore how to incorporate public deliberation into community leadership development programs, in some ways going beyond the four types of programs identified in the Harwood Institute (2003) study, perhaps with the ultimate emergence of a fifth type of program.

For public deliberation and democratic leadership to become the rule rather than the exception, leadership educators will want to experience public deliberation themselves. Much could be gained in becoming familiar with the those communities and organizations that have a long history of public deliberation and have developed what is often called a "deliberative habit" in addressing the difficult and contentious issues that arise.

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