

MAKING CHOICES TOGETHER –The Power of Public Decision Making

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Barbara Rugen trains in public deliberation, has consulted on public deliberation in Cincinnati for the Kettering Institute, and presented on the methodology at the national conference of the Community Development Society. She was the head moderator for the Cincinnati race relations public deliberation initiative and trains facilitators for the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Barbara is founder and president of Audience Impact Research, a qualitative research consultancy since 1996.

Public deliberation is a qualitative methodology that is applied to get people with conflicting or opposing points of view to join forces. It is used in “us vs. them” situations or where the issues are framed divisively. In public deliberation, people are challenged to face the consequences of various options and to work through the often volatile emotions that are a part of making public decisions.

Why Deliberate?

(from the Kettering Institute,

http://www.kettering.org/ketterings_research)

Public deliberation is useful when there is a discrepancy between what is happening to people and what they think should be happening—yet there is no agreement on what should be happening. There is no such thing as an expert on what should be; that is a matter of judgment. To make sound judgments, people have to weigh possible actions against what they consider valuable.

Unlike purely rational decision making based on objective data, the deliberation we are talking about takes into consideration people’s subjective experiences and the intangibles they hold dear. Facts are important, but determining what they mean is also important. Because deliberation deals with what should be, it

has been called moral reasoning. Still, deliberation is not simply a therapeutic discussion.

There are many occasions when we deliberate—in juries and neighborhood associations. The type of deliberation that is appropriate varies accordingly. While this sort of deliberation certainly benefits from practice, it doesn't require expert skills. If this were the case, it is unlikely that deliberation would be so ancient and commonplace.

Example: Cincinnati

In April 2001 Timothy Thomas, a 17-year-old unarmed black male, was shot and killed by the police. He was the 15th African-American in 6 years to die in confrontations with the predominantly white Cincinnati police force. For a community already divided along racial lines, the shooting was too much to bear. Unprecedented violence swept through the city, and an anxious Cincinnati police force all but withdrew from certain black neighborhoods. The city's main newspaper, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, sensed an opportunity to help salvage the situation and assembled a team to convene forums throughout the city to bring blacks and whites together for frank discussion about the reasons for the racial division and possible solutions. 106 volunteers were trained to handle the dynamics of the interracial groups in 145 neighborhood forums.

Other Examples. Public deliberation has been used in schools, businesses, and community groups on such topics as coping with the cost of health care, controlling alcohol consumption, racial and ethnic tensions, the future of affirmative action, working with immigrants, the troubled American family, solving the daycare dilemma, who benefits from economic growth, competing in the 21st-century – moving the human capital meter, opportunities and challenges of our aging population, work-life balance, regulating smoking, the rising cost of food, and pathways to community prosperity.

In Cincinnati, it is currently being used by Cincinnati State Technical College to teach critical discourse in the classroom in several disciplines. It is also being applied at the UC Law School to train law students for involvement in improving the justice system. It has been adapted by the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center to reduce racial tensions and to help visitors to the more troubling exhibits at the Center to process their reactions.

Using materials provided by the National Issues Forum (NIF), participants in training sessions learn how to moderate a deliberative forum, with the goal of helping the group find common ground. They participate in a deliberative forum, learn the concepts that support the value of deliberation, and practice moderating a forum.

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