
Working Through Difficult Decisions



“We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.”

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

Many people would like a stronger hand in shaping their collective future, and that requires making choices about what they want that future to be. This brochure is written for these citizens—citizens interested in joining with others to do something about critical issues facing their community, their country, or both. Standing in the way are the inevitable disagreements over what should be done. Citizens may recognize that what is happening to them isn't good, yet not agree about what would be better. They may even disagree about the nature of the issue that is confronting them. And they may or may not make decisions that are in their best interests.



If people are going to master these challenges and act together wisely, they need to be able to make sound decisions together. This is not a how-to guide, but it does provide insights into the kind of decision making that leads to effective collective action and helps turn first impressions and hasty conclusions into a more shared and reflective public voice.

The Kettering Foundation has found that sound decisions are more likely to be made when people weigh—carefully and fairly—all of their options for acting on problems against what they consider most valuable for their collective well-being. This is deliberative decision making. It not only takes into consideration facts but also recognizes the less tangible things that people value, such as their safety and their freedom to act.

People regularly do this type of decision making with those that they see every day. They discuss community events and policy issues over work

breaks, at the grocery store, and at the lunch counter. The research that the foundation is presenting here is drawn from these self-selected gatherings. It was done this way in order to supplement studies of opinions based on polls and focus groups. The objective is to account for how people ordinarily go about making up their minds.

YOU CAN DO IT

There are many books on facilitating small group meetings, and that information is not repeated here. Unquestionably, all meetings go better when everyone is encouraged to speak, no one dominates, and participants listen respectfully. Productive conversations usually begin by agreeing to these ground rules. Those moderating or facilitating meetings have to keep the discussion on track and move the conversation along when a topic has been exhausted.

Public deliberation, however, is distinctive; both the individual organizing the meetings and the participants have responsibilities. The key to effective deliberation is for everyone involved to be aware of the work that has to be done and expect to contribute to doing it. So deliberative decision making begins by recognizing what has to be decided and not just discussed.

In presenting its research on deliberative decision making, the foundation has learned that too much information can discourage people from conducting forums. Deliberation seems like neurosurgery or something only an outsider can do. Kettering is trying to correct that impression without going to the opposite extreme by suggesting that collective decision making is easy or that practice can't help people become more proficient at it. (Other foundation publications can provide more information on deliberative decision making and its role in democracy.)

If this is the first time you are involved in deliberative decision making, you might keep in mind what you know from personal experience about making good decisions. In choosing a career, for example, we have to weigh various options against what we think is most valuable, and we often have to accept difficult trade-offs. While weighing different options carefully and fairly in a public setting is difficult work (what we call choice work), it is a natural act, not a skill only possessed by experts. In fact, people around the world have made difficult decisions together since the dawn of recorded history. In the United States, collective decision making has a rich history: it began in tribal councils and colonial town meetings.

GETTING STARTED

The most important things to keep in mind in any kind of work are what has to be done and what is required to do it. There are three keys to doing choice work—assuming that those involved in the decision making have agreed to work toward a decision.

- The experiences and concerns of all participants have to be recognized. Deliberations can follow from a simple question: how has this affected us and our families? The stories that individuals tell enrich people’s understanding of the problem they face, as well as their understanding of those who need to be enlisted in order to solve the problem.
- Trade-offs have to be identified, and those that are and aren’t acceptable have to be sorted out. Anything we would like to do to solve a problem will have benefits as well as costs or downsides that we may not like. We have to face up to these tensions.
- All options must get a “fair trial”; unpopular views need to have their “day in court.”

Sometimes deliberative decision making is demonstrated in specially designed forums. Those using the National Issues Forums (NIF) issue books to jump-start public deliberations have three or four options for action laid out to structure the conversation. The description of each option



lists some of the advantages and disadvantages to be considered. Seeing that there is more than one option and that each has consequences that may be unacceptable

helps move the conversation beyond the highly partisan, bipolar framing that dominates much of today’s political discourse.

The ideal conversation in a forum sounds very much like what goes on in the best of everyday decision making. The questions being discussed are usually along these lines:

- What's happening? What are we up against?
- How are we affected? How are others affected?
- What do we think we should do?
- If we did what has been suggested, do you think there might be any downsides?
- If there were, should we still do what has been proposed?

Research drawn from thousands of NIF forums for more than 25 years identifies 3 obstacles that can block this conversation. The most obvious is when

the person presiding at a forum doesn't maintain judicial neutrality and tries to influence the decision. The second is when the convenor takes a laissez-faire approach and loses focus on the work to be done. The third and most common



pitfall is when the person organizing the forum or a few participants intervene so often that they disrupt the person-to-person exchange of stories and opinions that makes public deliberation work.

The foundation has also seen forums that are so intent on covering all options fully, with equal time for each one, that participants may miss the point. They don't get to experience the interpersonal interaction that produces deliberation. Even though it is desirable to consider every option, it is more important that forum participants are able to distinguish

deliberation from other types of policy discussion. That is what forums demonstrate so that participants can bring deliberative qualities to other decision-making venues. No one forum of a few hours can provide enough time to make a sound decision on a difficult issue, but it can establish a precedent or introduce a different way of making decisions for civic organizations, legislative bodies, school boards, or other groups where collective decisions have to be made.

HOW DELIBERATIVE DECISION MAKING WORKS

To repeat: deliberative decision making is weighing various options for action or policy against what we think is most valuable in a given situation. This kind of decision making recognizes that we differ about what *should* be most important to accomplish. Unfortunately, the importance of the things we hold dear is not always acknowledged, and people may try to make decisions by debating facts alone. Facts are essential, yet they are often used as surrogates for the less tangible things we value. People battle over facts when their differences are over what should be. Consequently, they never deal with the real source of their disagreements; these remain in the background, only to reemerge later.

Agreeing and Disagreeing at the Same Time: Although deliberative decision making takes into account what people value, as well as the facts, it is not a debate over values or an exercise in selecting some things of importance and disregarding others.

In presenting its research, the foundation has learned to stop at this point and explain what is meant by phrases like “the things people value,” “hold dear,” or “consider deeply important.” These refer to things that are essential to our collective well-being. Being secure from danger and being treated fairly by others are some examples. We all tend to agree about the importance of such things. What human being doesn’t value being secure?

We have our own ideas about what should be done to solve our problems because our experiences aren’t the same. This causes us to assess the situation we are in differently when we try to make a decision. What one person thinks is most valuable to achieve in a given circumstance isn’t the same as what another thinks is most important, not because they don’t care about the same things, but because conditions affect them in different ways. The result is that some of us will accept trade-offs that others won’t. In other words, even though we agree on the things that are most valuable, we also disagree. Still, recognizing that we have both common concerns as well as differences of opinion on the circumstances facing us can change



the tone of our decision making. People in a forum may be more likely to agree to disagree.

DEALING WITH TENSIONS

Although recognizing that we both agree and disagree may temper animosities, there is no escaping the pull and tug people feel when confronted with having to make difficult trade-offs. As noted, any action we might take to solve a problem will inevitably favor some of the things we care about more than others. For example, on economic issues like promoting growth, which could help provide the jobs we want, we have to take into consideration the downsides of growth, such as urban sprawl and environmental damage.

Becoming aware of these tensions can bring emotions to the surface. Deliberation provides a means to work through these feelings, not to the extent that they disappear, but to the degree that we can get on with the business of weighing all the options. Weighing each option fairly and recognizing the range of concerns at stake gives people confidence that their point of view will get a fair trial. Furthermore, our differences are less likely to be polarizing when we realize that the tensions are within each of us, as well as among us.

These are some of the reasons that NIF forums have seldom, if ever, been plagued by disruptive behavior. Recognizing tensions doesn't seem to create the problems some forum organizers fear. While people dislike controversy, many in the NIF deliberations have said that they welcomed opportunities to talk about hot topics frankly because they could exchange

opinions without being personally attacked. Forum participants have given high marks to meetings where they could express strong views without others contesting their right to their beliefs.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION IN PROBLEM SOLVING

Certain problems are particularly difficult to solve because they come from many sources, so no one institution or group of citizens can remedy the problems alone. This is a situation in which public deliberation is needed to foster

broad-scale public action. The first decision citizens have to make in these cases is whether or not to have a forum. If the decision is to proceed, you may find that participants in your forum are initially



spending a good deal of time determining exactly what the problem is. The nature of the issue is the issue. Making decisions together begins with, and continuously involves, naming problems in a way that captures the things people hold dear.

Naming, or describing, a problem is critical because the name influences what follows, even the solution that is selected. Deliberative decision making is part of acting, not something prior and separate. Deliberation doesn't lead to action; it is integral to action. And that is why an effective forum has to be focused on working toward a decision about action; citizens quickly lose interest in talk just for talk's sake.

Since particularly persistent problems require action by numerous actors, citizens can't just settle on one name for a problem. While we value the same things because they are essential to our well-being, we hold more than one thing dear. For instance, we want to be secure and to be treated

fairly. So the way people come to see problems as they deliberate tends to be broad and inclusive rather than narrow. This allows for multiple actions by different actors rather than one solution that everyone must support.

Another reason deliberation fosters what scholars have called an “enlarged mentality” has to do with the way participants get beyond their own experiences. Caught in the dilemma of having to make difficult choices, people are prone to be less certain—even about the options they favor. Despite the tendency to seek out the like-minded when looking for affirmation of our opinions, when uncertain, we become curious about how others have been affected by a problem or what they have done to solve it. We open ourselves to experiences other than our own.

This opening is a key ingredient in problem solving. First, the experiences of others allow us to see a problem more fully; and second, we may come to see others in a different light. These insights allow us to find new approaches to problems that were obscured by narrow definitions. And we come to see potential actors and resources that we didn’t recognize because they, too, were obscured by the way the problem was defined. The implication for what has to happen in a forum is that interaction among participants is essential.

Moving in Stages: Insights about the nature of our problems and the people around us don’t come quickly, and Kettering’s findings assume that deliberation has occurred in more than one meeting. Recognizing and working through tensions takes time because people’s thinking moves in stages.

In your forum, you may find participants at different points. Initially, citizens may be unsure whether a problem is serious and, if it is, whether they can do anything about it. That is what they will want to deliberate about. Later, if they have decided that a problem is real and urgent, people may try to find someone to blame or they may look for an easy solution. It may be some time before they identify options for action and face up to possible disadvantages of options they favor. For example, is climate change really a problem? They may be uncertain. Then, if convinced that there is a danger, they might be prone to look for someone or something to blame and deny their responsibility. (Government waste, fraud, and abuse is a common scapegoat.) Or they may latch onto something that they hope will save us and remove the necessity for accepting painful trade-offs. (Science and technology are often seen as saviors.) If finally convinced that blaming others isn’t getting them anywhere and that someone or



something else isn't going to provide painless solutions, they may settle down to confronting the trade-offs they have to make and working through the strong emotions that well up when having to make sacrifices. Eventually, they can reach a point at which they are reconciled to what has to be done, and they can move ahead. Depending on the issue, the public may be at any one of these stages. By deliberating, however, citizens can move along to the next stage and not get stuck.

Results: While public deliberation can change the tone of decision making, you shouldn't expect it to result in total agreement. The foundation once described the goal of a deliberative forum as "common ground for action," but this was often understood as "common ground," implying unanimous consensus. Because we never found that unanimity, we had to change our terminology. What forums are good at locating is the terrain between full accord and polarized conflict; it is ground that is more shared than common—large enough for most everyone to stand on and still maintain differences. Participants in deliberation have been able to settle on a general direction or broad purpose to guide their actions, which may be many and varied, yet coherent.

Public deliberation is not a cure-all for every problem, but by helping people make sound decisions, it helps generate the power to act wisely. And this enables citizens to come closer to making the difference they would like to make in a democracy. Deliberation also helps integrate individual voices into a more coherent and nuanced, though not uniform, public voice, one that can explain how the citizenry goes about making up its mind.

Professional associations and legislative bodies benefit from hearing this voice. It tells them how to engage with citizens as they attempt to explain the policies they favor. Government agencies have also used public deliberations to defuse potentially polarizing issues. And NIF issue books have been used in educational settings to introduce students to one of the most basic roles citizens play—making decisions with others on issues that affect their future. Young people learn a form of democracy they can use every day.

For communities, one of the most important effects of deliberative decision making is to put the community in a learning mode. The ancient Greeks referred to this as “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.” This sort of learning is the key to experimentation, innovation, and enterprise. And communities that are learning are usually able to keep up the momentum for change despite setbacks because they know how to fail successfully: they learn from their experiences to plan a new round of civic initiatives.

Deliberative decision making also builds a political culture that is focused on problem solving rather than adversarial combat between partisans. In addition, the people participating in the deliberations bring a distinctive type of leadership to their communities. This is leadership for expanding civic capacity, for enhancing the ability of citizens to come together as a community to do the work only citizens can do. It is a leadership that draws out and validates the innate powers of people acting together, building on what is already growing. It is a leadership for civic learning. And it is a leadership that anyone can exercise, a leadership that can help make communities become leaderful.

For more information on public deliberation, see these three Kettering Foundation publications: *We Have to Choose: Democracy and Deliberative Politics*, which elaborates on much of what is covered in this brochure; *Public Deliberation in Democracy*, which clarifies the type of deliberation the foundation studies and deals with common misconceptions of public deliberation, such as the perception that it is a special methodology only used in forums; and Kettering’s new report on naming and framing issues for deliberation, *Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions*. For more information on National Issues Forums, visit www.nifi.org.



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