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ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION APPROACHES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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For many years, extension public policy educators have placed their faith in the standard alternatives/consequences (A/C) model. Among the variations promoted at the National Public Policy Education Conference for more than four decades, the alternatives/consequences model has at least three common steps: 1) clarify the problem or issue; 2) develop alternatives; and 3) identify consequences of each alternative.

An essential corollary of this A/C model has been the notion of “the teachable moment,” defined as an unspecified, but generally short, period of time bounded by: 1) when people are not interested in the issue and 2) when the lines are drawn between fighting parties. In other words, teaching alternatives and consequences will not work very well if people do not pay attention, due to either indifference or intolerance. As so eloquently stated by one of our panelists, “Teachable moments occur when stakeholders are concerned enough about a public issue to participate in an education program, yet not so fervent that they would be unable to accept objective information.”

The two plenary presentations by Otto Doering and Alan Hahn raise challenges about innovative public policy education in a changing society. Some fundamental questions include:

- How is the problem defined and by whom?
- How are the alternatives identified and by whom?
- Concerning evaluation of the alternatives, how are the criteria for choice selected and by whom?

I believe these questions raise some serious implications for how extension educators conduct public policy education, with whom and when. As we examine new methods for how to conduct public policy education and with whom, I suggest there is a need and an opportunity to expand the notion of “the teachable moment.” In particular, as we are increasingly faced with highly contentious issues that tend to escalate more quickly, the timing dimension of when we can conduct education, and for how long we are able to remain engaged with the audiences and the issue, becomes critical.

We planned these three concurrent workshops on “Skills for Enhancing Education About Public Issues” to address some of these

fundamental questions and to explore new methods for enhancing the A/C model. In examining "Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR): Approaches to Conflict Management," consider the possibility of rethinking the teachable moment. Specifically, by paying closer attention to the elements of "who" and "how," we may be able to stretch out the "when." I suggest a general proposition that "the teachable moment" can be extended by approaches designed to involve the broadest possible spectrum of people affected by the issue in the definition of the problem, in the generation of alternatives, and in the identification of criteria by which they evaluate the alternatives. In this sense, alternative or collaborative dispute resolution can be seen as an enhancement of the alternatives/consequences model rather than a replacement for it.