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PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION FOR WETLANDS ISSUES

*Leigh Taylor Johnson
University of California Cooperative Extension*

As the Cooperative Extension Marine Advisor for San Diego County, California, I have used techniques of public policy education, the National Issues Forum and mediation in educating about wetlands issues.

Public Policy Education

The steps of the model, "Ladder for Policy" (Wallace, et al.), lead from perceiving and defining a problem through developing goals and implementation strategies to arrive at a policy for solving it. The public policy educator or team convenes a group representing different perspectives on the problem. They work through a process that includes: selecting a topic; defining the situation, concerns and issues; generating and choosing among possible goals; generating alternatives for achieving the selected goal by examining the consequences of each alternative using objective criteria; selecting an alternative; developing strategies for implementing it; and evaluating the effectiveness of the process, the resulting policy and future actions.

The ladder requires participants to reject some possibilities and focus on a choice at each decision point. Parts of the ladder can be repeated for complex problems requiring multiple goals, alternatives and strategies. As the process develops, participants will be able to decide how many elements should be incorporated in the final policy.

A key element in the success of the process is that generating and evaluating alternatives based on their consequences and objective criteria allow participants to determine the values attached to the problem. They are then able to make choices based on a clear understanding of those values.

National Issues Forum

The goal of the National Issues Forum (NIF) is to stimulate and sustain public discussion on issues of national importance. Its popularity has resulted in projects that apply NIF methods to regional and local concerns, such as western water issues (Ford) and airport siting (San Diego Dialogue).

The NIF recognizes that citizens may not be well informed on the complexities of issues and develops books, summaries and videotapes to establish a common foundation of knowledge on each issue. These materials incorporate information from mass media, interviews with knowledgeable parties, relevant statistics, and citizen focus groups.

The information is used to develop a series of choices, supported by data and public concerns. For example, their issue book, *The Health Care Crisis* (Melville), presents three choices for resolving the problem: minor changes, radical overhaul and mandated coverage. Participants review the background materials and deliberate collectively on the choices with the aid of a trained moderator.

The NIF believes that “citizens need to grasp the underlying problem or dilemma, and they should understand certain basic facts and trendsThe most important thing to ponder and discuss is the kernel of convictions on which each alternative is based. The . . . National Issues Forums help people sort out conflicting principles and preferences, to find out where they agree and disagree and work toward common understandings” (Melville, p. 24).

Emphasis is placed on sorting out values and examining choices in a deliberative atmosphere. The NIF states, “the ‘choice work’ that takes place in Forum discussions involves weighing alternatives and considering the consequences of various courses of actionForum participants learn how to work through issues together . . . using talk to discover, not just to persuade or advocate” (Melville, p. 24).

The NIF believes, “citizens who have deliberated together are the best predictors—the best source of information—about what the public as a whole would accept as sound policy, and that the judgment reached by such citizens is, therefore, worth heeding for both political and policy reasoning . . . that citizens want a partnership with policy makers in deliberation concerning the choices open to the public” (Kingham, p. 49). NIF suggests methods for participants to communicate their concerns and conclusions to policymakers and others in the community.

Mediation

Mediation principles developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project include four basic points:

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| “People: | Separate the people from the problem. |
| Interests: | Focus on interests, not positions. |
| Options: | Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do. |
| Criteria: | Insist that the result be based on some objective criteria” (Fisher and Ury, p. 11). |

Separating the people from the problem involves identifying substantive (what one needs) interests or issues and relationship (how one wants to be treated) interests or issues. Dealing up front with relationship issues clears the deck for dealing with substantive issues. Both are influenced by perceptions and emotions that determine how people interpret what they see and hear. Negotiation can be stopped in its tracks if parties do not understand each other's points of view and feelings about the dispute. To facilitate the exchange of perspectives, parties are asked to employ techniques such as active listening, role reversal and summarizing to the other what he or she has said. The San Diego Mediation Center has developed a well-defined process using these techniques. They also emphasize obtaining agreement to a set of ground rules for maintaining a constructive atmosphere (Community Mediation Program, Fisher and Ury).

This method is often called "interest-based" negotiation, as opposed to "positional" negotiation. In positional negotiation parties start with a position, or suggested action, in the belief that it will promote their interests or needs. Problems arise when one party's position threatens the other's interests (Fisher and Ury). For example, an employee's request for a raise may pose a fiscal problem for the employer.

Interest-based negotiation begins by identifying and discussing each party's interests, needs and concerns. Parties then propose actions to satisfy their interests and objective criteria are developed to evaluate them. Negotiation proceeds to evaluate, modify and select a mutually-agreeable set of actions to resolve the dispute. Ideally, the agreement will be fair, balanced and SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and include a Timetable to produce an enduring solution (Fisher and Ury, Community Mediation Program). In the above example, discovering why the raise is needed may help the employer meet the employee's need with a benefit or perquisite.

Comparison of the Methods

All three methods help participants to make choices by expressing, exchanging and clarifying the values they bring to making decisions on difficult issues. Public policy educators call this examining the consequences of alternatives, NIF calls it "choice work" and mediators call it focusing on interests. They all use group discussion with a neutral facilitator as the arena for deliberation. All employ factual information as a background for discussing values and making choices.

Public policy education is a comprehensive process for working through public issues and developing specific policy strategies to resolve them. It is a flexible process that has been used extensively for local, regional and national issues. NIF develops well-researched background materials, uses the materials to educate large numbers of people on public issues, and involves them in well-managed deliberation to develop an enlightened electorate. Communicating choices to

policymakers is recommended, but less developed than in public policy education. NIF processes can be used to strengthen earlier steps of a public policy education ladder. Mediation is a well-defined process for voluntary conflict resolution, drawing extensively on human relations skills. It has a strong track record in international negotiation, as well as smaller scale issues. Employing mediation's techniques and criteria for an enduring agreement can strengthen public policy education discussions, decisions and final policies.

Educating about Wetlands Issues

Public policy issues are complex and my role as an educator evolves over the course of involvement in a given wetlands issue. The three processes have been useful at various stages of involvement in an issue. Two projects, one regarding San Diego Bay water quality and the other regarding agriculture and nonpoint source pollution in coastal waters of San Diego County, have provided opportunities to employ these techniques.

The San Diego Bay project began with a request from the San Diego Interagency Water Quality Panel to help organize a seminar. Technical information on Bay water quality was scattered over many organizations and policy makers were having difficulty obtaining a comprehensive picture for decision making. The information was extensive and complex, a large number of individuals were interested in the issue of managing bay water quality, and there was a need for policymakers to receive summaries and to interact with technical experts and the public.

The panel decided to hold a symposium, which I chaired. Written, technical summaries were prepared, technical sessions were planned with invited speakers, knowledgeable participants and facilitators. On the first day of the symposium, participants in these sessions analyzed and revised the technical materials; deliberated on the issues of pollution sources and monitoring, human health risks, and cleanup of contaminated sediments; and produced a set of technically-based recommendations to policymakers.

On the second day of the symposium, technical recommendations were presented to policymakers who then responded with their opinions on priorities and how their government sector could help resolve some of the Bay's pollution problems. The audience of about 150 concerned citizens and scientists interacted with the policymakers and all completed an opinion survey on critical Bay pollution issues. Symposium findings were summarized in an extensive report (Johnson, et al.) that the panel sent to policymakers at all levels of government, concerned citizens and scientists.

The intensive research and discussion methods used in the symposium and report phases are much like those of the National Issues Forum. I have continued to participate as a panel member and have

used mediation techniques to help panel members deliberate and decide on the best means for implementing their recommendations. Overall, public policy education methods have provided a framework for guiding the group and I have received advice from members of the University of California Cooperative Extension Public Policy Education Workgroup.

Various organizations and agencies are developing ways to implement the recommendations of the symposium. For example, the Port and the Regional Water Quality Control Board considered a joint pollution monitoring effort and the Port of San Diego has targeted urban runoff for attention as a pollution source. A panel member is modeling some of my methods to help the county's committee on stormwater pollution management chart a course. A local environmental group submitted a nomination to the governor for San Diego Bay to be included in the National Estuary Program, which mandates development of a comprehensive conservation and management plan. The state is preparing the nomination for submission to the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

In 1992 the panel asked me to facilitate a workshop in response to a request from a state senator, who wished to submit reauthorizing legislation for the panel. The group agreed that the goal of reauthorizing the panel should be pursued. I used the "Ladder for Policy," leading the participants through alternatives for reauthorizing the panel, generating a list of consequences for the top five alternatives, and prioritizing the alternatives. The discussion generated by this process brought out underlying values, concerns and interests that had remained unspoken in previous meetings. Thus, panel members achieved a better understanding of each other's interests and could negotiate appropriate courses of action. The senator's staff participated in this workshop. I wrote up the results, including lists of alternatives and consequences and summarized highlights of the discussion. A bill is now before the legislature that incorporates many elements from the workshop. Unlike in the symposium, participants in the panel reauthorization workshop were well informed on the issues and had worked together for years. Therefore, the emphasis on background information was unnecessary and the public policy education and mediation methods were most valuable.

The agriculture and coastal nonpoint source pollution project began with a request from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop a pilot project to empower agricultural producers to reduce impacts on coastal estuaries (Johnson and Mellano). The nonpoint source pollution focus was chosen, because it was a developing issue and policies had not yet been fixed. My colleague, Dr. Valerie Mellano, [Agricultural] Environmental Issues Advisor, and I identified agricultural producers, government agencies and environmental groups as the primary concerned parties. We hired a graduate student in public health to interview members of the three groups to determine their

knowledge, concerns and likely action plans regarding the issue. We also hired an attorney to summarize the regulatory framework for the issue. Their work was developed into a set of extensive background materials for the issue. This reflects a National Issues Forum approach to educating citizens before convening them for deliberation.

We developed participation by decision makers for all three groups and held two forums in which we used the "Ladder for Policy" to generate and decide on goals and alternatives. Mediation techniques were used in development phases and in the forums to help people feel that their interests would be represented and during the forums to help establish a constructive atmosphere. Unlike the San Diego Interagency Water Quality Panel, this group was unused to working together, so progress was much slower. One alternative recommendation of the forums was for a steering committee, that is carrying on the decision process. Another alternative forum recommendation was to provide educational assistance to agricultural producers in developing best management practices for reducing nonpoint source pollution. Federal EPA staff participated in the project and encouraged us to apply for funding to implement an educational project. We have been advised this funding will be approved. We also received comments from the Regional Water Quality Control Board that this approach was much needed.

Conclusions

Public policy education, National Issues Forum and mediation methods can be employed effectively in educating about and resolving wetlands issues. The key factors are developing and presenting sound background information, examining values, building trust, and acting as a neutral facilitator for balanced and fair discussion leading to wise decisions. Familiarity with the techniques allows the educator to combine and adapt them for each situation.

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The Rural Social Infrastructure

