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## Special topics in public issues education

# chapter 4

**T**his chapter addresses five topics that are important to the success of public issues education:

- creating new structures, such as coalitions
- science and dialogue: blending technical information and process information; helping scientific experts contribute effectively to public issues education
- collaborative conflict resolution with polarized groups
- the news media
- evaluation

### Creating new educational structures

It is possible to create a new educational structure working from the perspective of either an educator or a learner.

### Partnerships to deliver public issues education

In recent years, partnerships have proliferated in the corporate world. Toyota and General Motors teamed up to create

Geo automobiles; Ford and Mazda are collaborating on several models. Northwest and KLM Airlines have linked their routes to offer

"Worldwide Reliability." Several other airline pairs also offer joint ticketing and shared flight numbers. Organizations of many kinds now realize that even their competitors are potential collaborators.

A partnership strategy may be a useful way to deliver public issues education. A partnership might be formed by two or more organizations committed to a non-advocacy educational approach: Cooperative Extension and a state or local League of Women Voters; town government and the public library. Or organizations with differing stakes and positions on an issue might agree to form a coalition that would work to inform all interested parties about the issue.

Partnerships can provide better access to people, information, money and other resources and can gather more diverse audiences. They may be able to produce programs which:

1. incorporate multiple perspectives on the issues being considered
2. ensure balance or fairness in the treatment of each perspective on the issue
3. include both technical information and process assistance
4. reach multiple audiences, including citizens and policy makers and groups on different sides of an issue
5. address issues selected or defined by citizens or policy makers rather than by educators.<sup>28</sup>

(Most of these points are among the essential elements listed at the end of Chapter 2. You may want to use that complete list of elements as a guide for deciding whether a partnership will contribute to a better program.)

These are important qualities in public issues education programs. They can be accomplished by a single organization working alone, but can often be carried out more easily or effectively through joint efforts.

**Organizations of many kinds now realize that even their competitors are potential collaborators.**

An example is an Extension organization and League of Women Voters in the same state that brought farm and nonfarm people together for roundtable discussions of issues related to agriculture and the environment. Extension's contribution to the project included providing expertise on the issues and access to rural audiences, while the League furnished experience in facilitating roundtable discussions and better access to urban and suburban audiences. Project leaders from both organizations were adamant that they could not have carried out the project without the other organization.

Creating a partnership takes time, and may not deliver all that is expected. Educators need to consider carefully both the benefits and the costs of working with other organizations.

### **Deciding to develop a coalition**

Here are five steps you can take in developing a coalition for public issues education:

**Step 1:** Decide whether you need a coalition to accomplish your public issues education objective. To do this, consider the following questions:

- Can you, by working alone, reach all the individuals or groups that are involved in or affected by the issue and involve them in meaningful public dialogue?
- Do you have access to all the relevant information?
- Are you or your organization perceived as having a particular bias with regard to the issue? (That is, are you credible?)
- Do you have adequate resources as well as the talent, creativity and motivation to undertake an independent public issues education effort, including the necessary process skills and educational delivery strategies to involve all the relevant stakeholders?
- Are enough different groups and individuals concerned about the issue so that the community's interest is best served by presenting all of the diverse perspectives equitably and fairly?
- Would the visibility of a new issue be enhanced if the stakeholders came together before sides were drawn or the issue framed by the media?

**Step 2:** Weigh both the potential advantages and disadvantages of a public issues education coalition.

There are many advantages to working in educational coalitions, but there are also disadvantages. The major advantages have been summarized as limits, leverage and learning.<sup>29</sup> Limits refers to the fact that organizations and individuals are limited in the resources they need to adequately educate the public on complex and contentious issues. Leverage means that, working together, individuals and groups can bring more attention to a project or increase its influence or perceived importance. Learning addresses the dynamic relationship that develops among a diverse group of individuals who commit time, energy and resources to carving out a shared understanding of a complex issue.

The disadvantages of coalitions may include:

- a loss of identity for your organization as it blends with others in the coalition
- difficulty demonstrating your independent educational impact
- a lack of appropriate recognition for your organization's contribution.

Also, working together on an educational task may require more time, more talent and more tact than working alone.

**Step 3:** Assess your own ability to work in a coalition.

Working in a partnership with others is not always easy, even for the most ardent believer in the collaborative process. Coalition building, like public issues education itself, will not appeal to everyone. If you find yourself answering "yes" to all or most of the following questions, you are likely to see the value of bringing a public issues education group together in your community. If you respond negatively to many of the questions, you may decide to limit your public issues education efforts to those activities you and your organization can do alone.

- Do you have a high tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to deal with uncertainty? (Changes in today's society have been described as "continual white water." In this treacherous environment, our traditional ways of knowing and doing may no longer keep us afloat. The "out-of-control" sensation may be stronger in a coalition.)
- Are you willing to share the limelight as well as the credit with others?
- Are you able to devote the necessary time to a coalition?
- Are you at a stage in your professional career where the risks involved in collaboration are acceptable to you?
- How quickly do you need to see the results of your efforts? (Coalitions seldom produce short-term impacts.)
- Do you really believe that collaboration is the way to go or do you see red flags when the word "coalition" is mentioned?
- Do you value the diverse perspectives that surround most contentious issues?

### **Benefits of working with the right organizational partner**

These are some of the benefits reported by partnerships that conducted educational programs about public issues:<sup>30</sup>

- Reached an expanded and more diverse audience.
- Experimented with a new educational format (e.g., roundtable discussions).
- Worked across disciplinary lines to develop project materials.
- Developed more balanced materials with respect to the policy alternatives presented.
- Incorporated both technical content and process assistance in project materials and events.
- Brought multiple, diverse players together in discussions of issues that required such involvement for issue resolution.
- Enhanced the credibility of the project through joint sponsorship.
- Enabled greater risk taking because risk was shared among several organizations.
- Catalyzed action rather than remaining satisfied with intellectual discussion.

**Step 4:** Consider the type of structure needed to accomplish your public issues education goals.

Coalitions or partnerships can vary widely in their degree of formality. The range includes (1) informal networks, primarily for exchanging information; (2) cooperation in specific short-term projects; (3) coordinating partnerships involving greater commitment of resources; and (4) collaborations characterized by formal structure and shared power. (See sidebar) Consider the simplest structure first (a public issues education network). If that will not meet the educational need, consider cooperation or the still more formal relationships inherent in a coordinating partnership or a truly collaborative public issues education effort. Remember that building and maintaining a complex organizational structure makes the coalition process more difficult, but increases the chance that your efforts will make a sustained educational impact.

**Step 5:** Understand the stages through which a public issues education partnership develops.

The collaborative process usually moves through three major phases: (1) problem-setting, (2) direction-setting, and (3) implementation<sup>32</sup>. Problem-setting is the phase in which participants identify problems and goals, contact potential coalition partners, and make initial commitments (including resources). Direction-setting refers to joint agreement on specifics of what the coalition will do and how it will be carried out. Steps in direction-setting include agreeing upon ground rules and operating procedures, organizing subgroups or task forces, gathering information and hammering out mutual agreements. Finally, the implementation phase calls for developing mechanisms that get the work done, cultivating and maintaining internal and external support from coalition members' own organizations, and monitoring progress.

### **Types of structures and their characteristics**<sup>31</sup>

<b>Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primarily for information exchange</li> <li>Easy to join and leave</li> <li>Informal structure and procedures</li> <li>Members maintain organizational autonomy</li> <li>Resources shared: ideas, news, and reports</li> </ul>
<b>Cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simple but specific purpose is involved</li> <li>Staffed by low or middle level personnel</li> <li>Project-specific: does not affect mission or organization</li> <li>Often a one-time effort</li> <li>Few resources are committed</li> </ul>
<b>Coordinating partnership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Requires establishment of shared, common goals</li> <li>Goals usually are project specific and not long-term</li> <li>More stable membership: joining or leaving makes a difference</li> <li>Structure and procedures more formalized</li> <li>Participation by senior level staff</li> <li>More real resources committed (staff time, funds, and materials)</li> <li>High payback and risk</li> </ul>
<b>Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complex and long-term purpose shared by all members</li> <li>Strong policy and program linkages among members</li> <li>Decision power (regarding resource allocations) shared</li> <li>Formalized structure and procedures (bylaws)</li> <li>Individual organizations' autonomy diminished</li> <li>Staff time and funds are shared</li> <li>Higher payback and risk</li> </ul>

Throughout these phases, coalitions need nurturing. Skill and knowledge of the process are critical. Projects funded by the Kellogg Foundation that involved coalitions adopted these nurturing techniques: (1) allocating time and energy for the coalition; (2) obtaining leadership from skilled facilitators who struck a balance between keeping things moving and making sure that all voices were heard; and (3) showing willingness to work behind the scenes (and between meetings) to make sure that each member's interests were understood and responded to.<sup>33</sup>

As some writers have stated, coalitions need to simultaneously address the issues of "identity development" and "doing productive work."<sup>34</sup> Participants should strive for balance between the development of common identity and the more action-oriented activities needed to make significant accomplishments.

### Teams and coalitions as learners

Partnerships to plan and deliver public issues education usually focus on educating other people; any self-education or mutual education that occurs is incidental, or viewed as a step toward reaching a larger audience. Sometimes, however, the most useful type of coalition is one in which the members' primary intention is to educate themselves. This may take the form of a study group or study circle, task force, problem solving group, or hybrid with a name like "Community Coalition to Address \_\_\_\_\_ [name of local problem or issue]."

"Political coalitions" comprise many of the coalitions designed primarily to influence public policy. What implications do political coalitions have for educators, and how should educators relate to them?

Political coalitions include "advocacy coalitions," which unite to promote a common interest, and "consensus-seeking coalitions," which bring diverse parties together to look for common ground on a contentious issue.<sup>35</sup> Advocacy coalitions are the most common type of political coalition, but as frustration increases over the inability to get decisions on controversial issues, consensus-seeking coalitions appear more frequently. A common goal is to develop policy positions or recommendations that stand a good chance of adoption because they have been discussed and approved by each of the conflicting parties.

Some types of coalitions may overlap; others may even evolve into something different. For example, a coalition created for mutual education—if successful—may evolve into a consensus-seeking coalition. The new coalition would begin to use a process of collaborative, interest-based problem solving. It might identify a preferred alternative (course of action) which it would promote to policy makers or the broader public. At this stage, the group would have evolved into an advocacy coalition.

In almost all cases, public issues educators will want to avoid association with narrowly-focused advocacy coalitions, since they most likely will not be interested in a balanced treatment of issues. A consensus-seeking coalition, on the other hand, offers important possibilities for educators. In this setting, dialogue can lead to increased mutual understanding. The development of such alliances may be an appropriate long-term goal for a public issues education program. Coalitions that develop educational programs for others may be able to accomplish their objectives more quickly. But coalitions working on the mutual education of members representing all sides of an issue hold greater promise of significant impact on the issues. Their work is more difficult, but the payoff is often greater.<sup>36</sup>

The role of the public issues educator with respect to educational or consensus-seeking coalitions may need to be chosen carefully. Depending on the coalition's degree of balance, an educator may need to decide whether to be a member of or simply a resource for the coalition. Moreover, since educational coalitions can evolve into either consensus-seeking or advocacy coalitions, an educator needs to keep in mind that his or her relationship with a coalition may need to be reassessed any time such a shift occurs.<sup>37</sup>

Keep in mind six rules of thumb for building a successful coalition.

- Think "win-win": Believe in and communicate the benefits of working together.
- Do your homework. Know the history and the current context of the issue and the relationships of the various players.
- Be open to new ideas and people.
- Think hard about your coalition's purpose and choose an appropriate structure to achieve it.
- Be honest. Help build a shared vision and trust. Share credit.
- Seek objective, ongoing feedback about how things are going and use that information to make needed changes.

## **Science and dialogue: Blending technical information and process assistance**

**B**ringing relevant and credible scientific information to public discourse on issues is one of the most valuable contributions that public issues education makes. Contributing the information, however, can sometimes be complicated by a number of factors, such as:

- the public attitude toward science and scientists
- competing viewpoints about acceptable risks and ways to manage them
- the extent of cooperation between scientists and process facilitators.

Several ways exist for you as a public issues educator to ensure that your project includes good information inputs.

- Select appropriate experts (and print and electronic materials).
- Brief information presenters, drawing attention to the concerns raised in this section.
- Guide the process toward a shared, credible information base that combines multi-disciplinary scientific knowledge, local knowledge and procedural information.

The sections that follow describe some of the challenges of delivering substantive information and specific ways to address them.

## **Content and process assistance**

Public issues education requires a blend of what is often referred to as "content" and "process." Content—substantive information about issues—helps participants in an educational program decide on an issue's importance and possible courses of action to address the topic. Substantive information may cover existing conditions and trends, causes of problems, different groups' positions and strategies, alternative solutions, evidence about the likely consequences of different alternatives, or case studies of solutions that have worked in other settings.

Process assistance, on the other hand, is help in communicating, learning, understanding the policy making process, and taking effective action. Process assistance enables or facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and the translation of knowledge into action. It includes the facilitation of dialogue about public issues, help in understanding the policy making process and in identifying opportunities to become involved, and guidance in taking the steps necessary to translate learning into action.

Simply providing information about an issue may be sufficient for some audiences. High-level policy makers, for example, may need technical information, not process assistance, about an issue. Once they receive the needed information, they know perfectly well how to use it. Many other participants, however, need more than "just the facts." They may need an opportunity to sort through the facts, discuss them, hear what others think, try out their own ideas on others, learn about the policy making process, or get help or encouragement in translating what they've learned into action. Even high-level policy makers may need assistance in conflict resolution. However, help on the process side is rarely sufficient by itself. Sometimes, a good facilitator who knows

nothing about an issue can be helpful. But good information is often in short supply, and the policy making process bogs down because of its absence. Facts alone seldom resolve a conflict, but the absence of credible, trusted information sometimes makes resolution impossible. Finding the best way to blend these two types of assistance is a constant challenge for public issues educators.

## **Science and the public**

The challenge of blending process assistance and information about issues is complicated by communication barriers between experts and non-experts. Science-based information has long held a favored position in public policy making, as policy makers have turned to experts for advice about increasingly complex public issues.

But levels of trust and confidence in scientific information have eroded in recent decades. In general, trust in scientific information remains high, but exceptions occur with increasing frequency—especially at times of controversy over scientific issues.<sup>38</sup> Such controversies often expose conflicting viewpoints between different experts or scientific disciplines. They have also called attention to problems, such as health and environmental risks, that appear to be the result of events previously billed as scientific advances. Under such conditions, citizen groups increasingly insist on an independent voice in policy making.

The need to establish an acceptable database for multi-stakeholder issue analysis has led groups to accept certain sets of information as credible and others as "not credible." Even if both sets are provided by competent scientists, one interest group may be unwilling to accept another's data. In such a situation, facilitation and guidance may be needed in order for the differing interest groups to agree on a single set of information with which to work.

## Risk assessment

Controversies over the seriousness of a risk (for example, food safety, hazardous waste management) bring these citizen-scientist tensions to the fore. Assessing risk is a complex discipline not fully understood by experts, much less by the public.<sup>39</sup> Many studies of risk assessment reveal that citizens and scientists often fail to see eye to eye on the questions that ought to be investigated. Risk assessment

***In many cases, citizens are not disagreeing with the experts' "facts," but rather are simply interested in different questions than the ones the experts investigated.***

experts typically focus on "hazard"—a combination of how bad a risk is and how likely it is to happen. Such experts often criticize citizens for focusing on "subjective," "emotional" judgments of risk, but a number of studies have suggested that what is more likely happening is that citizens look at risk through a completely different set of criteria.

Closer attention to citizens' arguments reveals that, in many cases, citizens are not disagreeing with the experts' "facts," but rather are simply interested in different questions than the ones the experts investigated.<sup>40</sup> While experts focus on "hazard," citizens are motivated by "outrage." Citizens may believe, for example, that decisions should be based not simply on how big and how likely a risk is, but also on whether the anticipated benefits are worth even a small risk; whether the risks are unfairly borne by some people for the benefit of others; or how catastrophic an outcome would be if it did occur, even if the actual likelihood is small. Such concerns go beyond the questions addressed by the experts, yet they are not necessarily "irrational" or "foolish."

Public issues educators often get caught in the middle of such controversies. This is especially true with complex issues in which scientific expert advice is critical, and citizens simultaneously have strong concerns and doubts that science is on their side. You may find it difficult to remain neutral, or be perceived as neutral, in the face of such circumstances because you will be viewed as the purveyor of the information. Also, of course, public issues educators are often identified in the public mind with the scientific or expert community.

## Merging scientific and "local" knowledge

Often, issues are resolved by setting policies based on policy makers' judgments and experts' recommendations; then the policies are announced and defended against public attack. Recently, such exclusion of the broader public has come under increasing criticism. On many controversial issues, decision making needs to be open to a greater diversity of viewpoints (the public's, as well as experts') and to a wider range of what are regarded as "facts."<sup>41</sup> This is partly a question of who will be involved, but it is also a matter of integrating different types of knowledge: scientific facts (from various disciplines), people's values and opinions and "local knowledge" based on personal experience.

As a public issues educator, you can help by:

- identifying experts who acknowledge the value of other inputs;
- briefing experts about the broader picture;
- facilitating more constructive communication among experts, citizens, and policy makers.

Educational programs in which citizens can gain a more realistic understanding of both the worth and the limitations of research-based knowledge are needed. Experts need help fitting their contributions into a larger context in which a multitude of factors, including but not limited to scientific facts, play a role in public decision making.

## Providing information

The starting point in deciding what information to include in an educational program is to ask, "What information is needed?" (not, "What information is available?"). Traditional approaches often begin by collecting and analyzing data to identify problems and bring them to the attention of policy makers. This is true, for example, in the case of nutrition monitoring.<sup>42</sup> Such approaches often fail to have much impact on decision making. An alternative approach is to begin by identifying issues and the decisions that will need to be made to address them. The information needs of decision makers and other stakeholders can then be anticipated and used to guide the collection, analysis and interpretation of data.<sup>43</sup>

Information needs will be different at different stages in the policy making process. In the beginning, information may be required about current conditions, trends, causes of problems, or effects on different individuals and groups. Later in the process, information needs may shift to alternative solutions, evidence predicting the consequences of various alternatives, or, still later, evaluation results.

Different audiences may also call for different information. Before providing information or seeking experts to participate in an educational program, you should think carefully about what the intended participants need to know to move ahead in the process. It is often worthwhile to involve program participants in seeking out relevant expertise.

Another consideration is the format for presenting information. Oral presentations by experts are standard, but many other possibilities exist, including:

- panels of experts with different viewpoints
- issue books, such as those prepared as background for National Issues Forum discussions
- compilation of relevant demographic data
- synthesis of library research
- study circles to investigate an issue
- Delphi techniques to identify the information upon which the experts can agree
- participatory research, in which program participants collect and analyze their own data.

***Scientific facts are often boring and meaningless in the absence of appropriate interpretation.***

Ideally, experts will be available throughout an educational or policy making process that may extend over many months. But many experts are not willing or able to make such an extensive commitment. One solution is for an educator in the local setting to provide continuity between visits or other forms of input from the experts. Another solution is to carefully select media for the specialists' communications, including fact sheets, videotape and electronic mail. Channels should also be open for the public to interact with information providers through some form of media.<sup>44</sup>

### **Facilitating communication between experts and non-experts**

The most effective communication between experts and non-experts occurs when the experts:

- know, respect, and respond to the concerns of their audience
- clarify what is fact and what is interpretation
- find ways to help program participants understand the methods they use to gather and interpret data
- avoid repetition unless it clarifies something.

Even though factual information is generally the expert's strong suit, it is important to keep in mind that facts are seldom the main thing in which program participants are interested. Scientific facts

are often boring and meaningless in the absence of appropriate interpretation.

A soil scientist, for example, in studying the application of solid waste compost to agricultural land, extrapolates many facts about the "milligrams per kilogram" of chemicals in the tissues of corn plants. Residents in the area where the study is being conducted are highly interested in these findings. But simply reporting data does not tell the residents what they want to know. What most residents want instead is interpretation—not how many milligrams per kilogram of this or that chemical, but rather, are those levels safe? Moreover, they want to be able to trust the interpretation.

### **Trusting the scientific expert**

Think about what would satisfy residents' concerns about a scientist's trustworthiness.

#### ***Distinguish fact, interpretation***

First of all, people looking for information they can trust are not likely to be satisfied with information providers who blur the boundary between fact and interpretation. Therefore, the scientist should clearly distinguish between the two. Ideally, data interpretation might be a collaborative process in which experts and interested citizens participate together.

#### ***The expert's methods***

Another way to help build public trust in scientific information is to provide the public with an opportunity to understand something of the expert's methods. (This does not mean that the public is expected to make qualified judgments about the methods' adequacy, but simply that getting a glimpse of how scientists do their work is part of what judgments of trustworthiness are based upon). Most important to the public is seeing something of the methods used in making interpretations (in other words, not just the methods used in collecting and analyzing data). Explaining methods in understandable and interesting terms is not easy (and is something experts are not often called upon to do).

### Concern and understanding

A third element in building trustworthiness is evidence that information providers actually care about program participants and understand their situations and values. That's why it is important for information providers to know their audience. The soil scientist mentioned earlier needs to understand what participants in the educational programs want to know, and why. He needs to respect their concerns (even if he doesn't agree with them), and to address those concerns explicitly with the information he provides.

Taking steps to enhance the trustworthiness of information is relatively easy when information providers are working with familiar audiences. The soil scientist, for example, might quite naturally care about agricultural producers, respect their concerns, and present his information in ways that address them. The harder, but highly stimulating, challenge that public issues education presents for him is to practice the same level of caring, respect and responsiveness with nonfarm residents, environmentalists, and other participants who have interests potentially at odds with those of the producers.

### Challenges for information providers

In the context of public issues, experts need to realize that information is never neutral. It doesn't help to say, "This is neutral, objective, pure, unadulterated science, devoid of any personal values or opinions." Every piece of information will be good news for people on some sides of an issue and bad news for others. The best information in the world won't make a conflict go away. Value differences as well as factual ones need to be resolved if parties are to reach a mutually acceptable decision.

Clarifying alternatives and consequences can help in coping with these realities. Communication from experts to program participants on conflicting sides of public issues is more likely to be effective if the experts present a range of alternatives and avoid describing the likely consequences as "pros" or "cons," "advantages" or "disadvantages." (Advantages from one side's perspective are likely to be disadvantages to others.) Experts can also improve the effectiveness of their communications by showing concern for people on sides of the issues that will be hurt by their information. It can also help if experts let people know they are aware that information is only part of the answer—that other considerations, including the reactions and value judgments of the participants themselves, will influence the ultimate outcome.

Some experts have a hard time understanding or accepting these characteristics of public policy making. In many cases, they have studied an issue intensively and have strong opinions about how to resolve it. Their opinions are usually based on assumptions about the common good and how to maintain it, so they are often annoyed and surprised when program participants object to their presentations or perceive them as biased. Experts sometimes also have a hard time

***Every piece of information will be good news for people on some sides of an issue and bad news for others.***

understanding or accepting the fact that public decisions are allowed to be influenced by so many other factors beside "good information."

When the planners of an educational program discover that the best available experts are unable or unwilling to adhere to the model of balanced education, one possible solution is to pursue balance by including specialists advocating a range of solutions.<sup>45</sup> The most effective educational programs of this type are not debates between experts, but presentations that enable program participants to see where the experts agree and where they disagree. (It often turns out that the differences are mainly conflicting interpretations rather than disagreements about the facts.)

Despite the challenges described above, many specialists find that they derive substantial benefits from being involved with public issues education. Among them are identifying new research areas, forming new interdisciplinary connections, and seeing their knowledge applied to the solution of practical problems.<sup>46</sup>

## Collaborative conflict resolution with polarized groups

**O**ur political culture is not “good” at handling conflict. Most of us find conflict distasteful and possess a corresponding lack of skill in dealing with it. Discomfort in dealing with conflict is one of the biggest barriers to effective policy making, and is also a major obstacle for public issues educators.

Public issues persist *because* they are controversial, so the knowledge that there are systematic ways to handle conflict is important assurance for the educator. This section includes guidelines and techniques for Interest-based Problem Solving (IBPS), the one approach from Chapter 2 that addresses conflict most directly.

Even if the level of conflict is low, the following section should prove useful. IBPS is also one of the most complete approaches to dealing with any issue, even when conflict has not yet erupted. The presentation here includes advice on identifying interested parties, defining the problem, generating alternatives, and other steps which are relevant whatever the level of conflict.

**Public issues persist because they are controversial.**

## Problems in handling conflict

Especially in the realm of public affairs, we tend to ignore or repress our disagreements with others, hoping they will either go away, “work themselves out,” or disappear with a technical fix. The consequence, however, is not an absence of conflict. On the contrary, we are surrounded by ever more of it. And when conflict does occur, it tends to be explosive, antagonistic and emotional. Not knowing how to deal with it in easy, comfortable ways, we tend to keep it in check until we realize that a decision we won’t be able to live with is about to be made. Then we blow up. Lacking the necessary experience and skill to register objections coolly and effectively, we end up triggering equal and opposite reactions from those who disagree with our point of view.

In the typical pattern of conflict escalation in public policy making, people on different sides of contentious issues “concern themselves with their own needs without giving serious attention to satisfying the needs of the other stakeholders.”<sup>47</sup> Communication is designed to influence decision makers. Conflicting parties fail to genuinely listen to and try to understand each other. Information is one-sided, and communications are full of misunderstandings. “The use of information becomes

strategic rather than educational...” as each side tries to discredit the other’s data, methods and experts. If the news media become involved, the opponents “use interviews, press releases and staged events to attract additional support.” Authorities are asked to decide which side is right, so that the range of choices is limited to a yes or no vote on one side’s proposal or the other.

Success in finding ways to get conflicts on the table in a more constructive manner was a major difference between Community 1 and Community 2 as described in Chapter 1. To help in the policy making process, you should personally strive to feel more comfortable with conflict. With that goal in mind, the following pages revisit the Interest-based Problem Solving Model.

## Dispute resolution in the public arena

Over the past decade, dispute resolution processes, such as mediation, negotiated rule making, and policy dialogues, have become more common features on the public policy landscape at every level of government. These processes, sometimes referred to by catch-all titles such as alternative dispute resolution or collaborative problem solving, have been most commonly used for the purpose of resolving intense controversies when decisions are needed promptly.<sup>48</sup> Issues regarding facility siting, non-point source pollution, and endangered species are common examples.

### Negotiation, mediation, arbitration

Dispute resolution processes include negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. All are methods of reaching a decision.

*Negotiation* commonly refers to consensual agreements worked out among the disputing parties themselves.

*Mediation* refers to assistance provided by third parties who are more or less neutral.

*Arbitration* refers to decision making that is imposed by third parties who resolve the issues unilaterally after hearing and weighing arguments made by each of the disputing parties.

Dispute resolution emphasizes resolving public issues through citizen participation processes, interest-based problem solving, and consensus building.

- Citizen participation processes are planned procedures designed to bring citizens together with representatives of public and private organizations to make public choices.
- Interest-based negotiation emphasizes the awareness of one's own and other parties' "interests," rather than "positions" or "proposed solutions."
- Consensus building is a method for making decisions that all members of a group can support. The method encourages mutual education, the creation of joint knowledge, the generation of multiple options, and the selection of an option that satisfies mutual interests.

Dispute resolution methods have been developed primarily for the purpose of getting decisions made, but mediation in particular can be a useful tool for educators as well. When issues heat up, the "teachable moment" may be lost because participants are unwilling to listen to the other side. Dispute resolution methods can help "extend" the teachable moment by providing an atmosphere for more constructive exploration of differing viewpoints and possible solutions.<sup>49</sup> Similar methods can also help when issues are less heated or urgent, to "head off" situations that might become explosive.

### Focus on interests, not positions

The difference between interests and positions is crucial in attempting to negotiate solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved in a dispute. The central principle underlying dispute resolution approaches is that we resolve issues by satisfying interests. Understanding why interests are important and how they can be used in conflict situations requires seeing a fundamental distinction between issues, interests and positions.

- *Issues* are the "what" of negotiations—what the parties disagree about
- *Interests* are the "why" of negotiations—why each party wants what it wants and feels strongly about it
- *Positions* are the "how" of negotiations—statements about how an issue might be addressed.

The following story provides an example:<sup>50</sup>

Two men were quarreling in a library. One wanted the window open, the other wanted it closed. They bickered back and forth over how much to leave it open: just a crack, halfway, three-quarters. They were arguing so loudly the librarian came over to find out what was the matter. She asked one man why he wanted the window open. He replied: "To get some fresh air." She asked the other why he wanted it closed. He said, "To avoid a draft." After thinking a moment, the librarian left, went into the next room, and threw open the window, bringing in fresh air without a draft.

The two men viewed their problem as a conflict over positions and limited their discussion to those positions. If the librarian also had focused only on the two men's stated positions, the dispute would not have been resolved with both men receiving benefits. By looking instead at the men's underlying interests, the librarian invented a mutually acceptable solution.

### ***We resolve issues by satisfying interests.***

Focusing on interests helps the parties in a dispute to:

- get beyond a win-lose approach centered on arguments over positions
- develop a collaborative approach, searching for common interests or interests that do not conflict
- respond more effectively to emotional outbursts by acknowledging and validating the underlying interests
- stay in touch with their motivation to reach agreement
- develop agreements that are more durable because they meet the interests of all parties.<sup>51</sup>

### PRE-NEGOTIATION PHASE

1. Getting started
2. Representation
3. Ground rules and agenda
4. Problem definition
5. Joint fact-finding

### NEGOTIATION PHASE

8. Criteria development
7. Generating alternatives
8. Evaluation and creating agreements
9. Binding the parties to the agreements
10. Producing a written agreement
11. Ratification

### IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

12. Linking information agreements to formal decision making
13. Monitoring implementation

### Steps in the process

Collaborative conflict resolution processes generally involve three phases:

- pre-negotiation, when stakeholders set the conditions for collaborative problem-solving
- negotiation, when the stakeholders work together to create, choose and document solutions
- implementation, when public authorities adopt, implement, evaluate and possibly re-negotiate the solutions reached by stakeholders.

Within each phase, the parties work through several steps or activities as they try to build consensus for a final agreement. The steps are not mandatory, however; the collaborative conflict resolution process must remain flexible to be adapted quickly to a particular situation. The following section describes the steps in the process<sup>52</sup> and suggest a number of techniques that educators and mediators have found useful in key stages.

### Pre-negotiation

**1 Getting started.** Someone has to raise the possibility of dispute resolution and initiate the process. If no stakeholder is willing to approach the others to suggest that they attempt to reach agreement, a trusted outsider ("convener") might be able to make this suggestion. One way to help parties decide if collaboration is in their best interest is to help them determine their BATNA, or Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement. Identifying the expected results of the process can help participants think about potential positive outcomes of the problem solving process. In addition, as participants learn how other disputants expect to use the agreement, a sense of trust in the process and in the other participants can begin to develop.

Techniques you can use to identify how participants will use the outcome of the process:

- Define the potential products. "If we come to an agreement, what form would the agreement be in?"
- How might we use the agreement when it is developed?
- How might each party use the agreement?

**2 Representation.** Answers must be found to the following questions: Can the key players be identified? Are they willing and able to collaborate with the other parties? Can legitimate spokespersons be found for stakeholder groups? Do reasonable deadlines exist? Which issues are negotiable? Do sufficient resources exist to support the effort? Identify parties who have an interest in the outcome. Include interests which could be affected, as well as parties who might prevent any agreement from being implemented.

Techniques for identifying all affected parties:

List the individuals and groups who:

- could claim legal standing
- have political clout to draw elected and appointed officials into the dispute
- could block implementation of an agreement
- have sufficient "moral claim" to gain the public's sympathy.

**3 Establishing ground rules and setting the agenda.** Before parties begin substantive negotiations, they should agree on ground rules for communicating, decision making, and organizing the process. They also need to agree on objectives for the process and on the issue agenda. Agreeing on these matters provides the first opportunity for participants to have a positive experience in the problem solving process. The procedural agreements lay the groundwork for achieving fairness for all parties.

Purposes of procedural agreements:

- identifying the process to be used in addressing conflict
- articulating specific behaviors that will and will not be tolerated within the group
- determining the steps to take in the problem solving process
- providing acceptable procedures to use when disputants begin to argue over substantive issues.

Examples of possible ground rules:

- not speaking all at once
- stating something only once
- recording a group memory
- sharing information with interest groups
- creating the agenda
- sharing leadership opportunities
- agreeing on the need for a facilitator and recorder
- agreeing on how the group will make decisions—consensus or majority vote.

**4 Defining the problem.** Often each party has a different perception of exactly what the problem really is. How we define the problem often leads us down a road toward one type of solution. It is important in this stage to clarify the problem from each party's point of view. History, present status, and need for change are important elements in defining the issue. It is also important to legitimize all perceptions, understanding that each definition of the problem could be "right" and that each definition of the problem might yield a different "right answer." If any of the participants believes that his or her point of view is not being treated as legitimate, the process is very likely to break down.

Techniques for defining the problem:

- Legitimize the issue: "What do you see as the problem?" Accept the fact that each person may see the problem differently. Write down each definition of the problem so all can see.
- Find out how your definition of the problem makes you feel.
- Identify the real problem.
- Whose problem is this? Can/should we deal with it?
- Best/worst/most probable: What is the best and worst possible thing that might happen if we solve this problem?
- Define the problem in terms of a question: "How can we address this issue? How can we solve this problem?"
- Clarify definitions of the words used. It is very important that each person understand what is meant.
- Is/is not: What is and is not part of the problem?
- Ask the group to draw a picture of the problem, including who is affected.

# 5

**Joint fact-finding.** The parties must agree on what technical background information is pertinent to the dispute, what is known and not known about the technical issues, and on the methods to be used for generating answers to relevant technical questions. It is important to identify what is known about why the problem exists and how different parties are affected. This step involves the parties completing the following tasks: determining what information they have regarding the issue; identifying the portion of the information that is accepted as accurate by all the parties; and determining what additional information, if any, they need to negotiate effectively. Filling gaps might involve input from experts or the sharing of information known or collected by the parties themselves. This step is ongoing.

Techniques to identify and clarify knowledge gaps:

- Break down the problem into manageable parts.
- What are all the forces keeping it from getting worse? Who wants to perpetuate the problem? Who wants it to change?

In these pre-negotiation stages, public issues educators might use needs assessment techniques, including telephone contacts and informal meetings, to identify parties and determine if they have an interest in the issue. Discussion of how the process will be conducted and what the educator's role will be is critical. Clarifying the problem from each party's point of view, legitimizing the various viewpoints, defining the problem, the history of the issue, and the need for change can be done through an expanded needs assessment or applied research project. Each stakeholder group's knowledge of the issue, objectives, willingness to participate, and thoughts on possible outcomes of the negotiation process can be assessed through group or individual interviews by telephone or face-to-face. (In general, in-person interviews are preferable for establishing trust and a good working relationship.) Interview results can be analyzed and used to educate stakeholder groups on each other's perspectives. A summary paper can be mailed to the parties. An overview of stakeholder perspectives can be an effective part of the introduction when stakeholder groups convene for negotiation.<sup>53</sup>

## Negotiation

# 6

**Developing criteria.** To invent options for mutual gain, the parties must clearly state their interests to each other. Rather than asserting "positions"—what they want as a solution—stakeholders seeking a resolution to a policy dispute need to be able to discuss their "interests"—the reasons, needs, concerns and motivations underlying their positions. What are the major needs or interests that must be satisfied for everyone to agree on any solution? Interests constitute the reason "why" something is important. For example, lack of noise in the evening hours may be an interest or criterion; land use decisions might be the solution or position which determines how that particular interest is satisfied. Satisfying one another's interests should be the common goal of the parties' dispute resolution efforts.

Techniques to identify interests:

- Bottom-line: What is most important about this issue for you? What would it be like if the problem were solved? What do you want? Why do you want it? Continually ask, "Why is this important?" Each person in the group must have a chance to add his or her needs or interests to the list. The list becomes a set of criteria against which the alternative solutions are judged.
- Possible questions to draw out the interests of the parties: What does it mean to you that...? What would happen if...? What are the most important things about...? What do you want [the other party] to understand about...? How do you feel when...?
- Consensus: It is important that everyone be able to live with the list of criteria. "This does not mean that each criterion is important to you, but it does mean that you will respect each of the needs or interests incorporated in the agreement and work toward their accomplishment."

**7 Generating alternatives.** After the necessary information has been obtained and accepted and everyone's interests have been stated, the parties can agree to a period of "inventing without deciding." Brainstorming can be used to produce as many ideas as possible for solving the problem. It is important that all parties be able to suggest ideas and solutions. The ideas put forth at this time can include the parties' "positions." During this step, all must agree that they will not judge ideas or hold someone to any of the options. Creativity, not commitment, is encouraged at this stage.

Techniques for generating alternatives:

- **Brainstorming:** Share ideas, but don't evaluate them. Record the ideas where everyone can view them.
- **Braindrain:** brainstorming with a time limit of 2-3 minutes. Groups compete with each other to generate the most ideas in a short time.
- **"What I like about ..."** After brainstorming, give positive feedback on each idea.
- **Generate ideas using 5 x 7 cards** posted on the wall. Each person is asked to answer "what if" or future-oriented questions and post their answers. Example: "In two years, residents and environmentalists agreed that these ideas worked best to.... What are the three ideas?"
- **Form small groups, mixing participants** representing opposing interests. Give them the job of designing a solution based upon the criteria.

**8 Evaluating and creating agreements.** Once the parties feel they have invented enough options, they must decide which ones to include in a proposed agreement. To do this, they might develop joint criteria for ranking the ideas, make trades across different issues, and/or combine different options to form "packages" of agreements. The educator or mediator might re-emphasize that interests become criteria for evaluating alternatives and then suggest possible agreement packages for the group to consider. Sometimes, an agreement can be divided into parts, and subcommittees can be asked to prepare each part. The key is that the major interests or needs have been satisfied.

Techniques for conducting evaluations and creating agreements:

- **Consensus:** Consensus is based on the term "to consent" or "to grant permission." The solution may not be "my first choice," but I will "live with" the decision. Consensus means there is some level of commitment to implement the agreement.
- **Both/and:** Perhaps we don't have to choose between alternatives; there might be a way to build a solution from several ideas.
- **Straw voting:** Get a sense of how the participants feel.
- **Survey:** Ask, "What would it take for you to live with the decision?" Do not ask, "Why don't you like it?"
- **Negative voting:** Is there any suggestion that would be unacceptable under any circumstances?
- **Focus on agreements first:** What have we agreed on? Agreements ensure fairness by involving participants and establishing a sense of ownership and equity.

**9 Binding the parties to their agreements.** An important part of creating an effective agreement to resolve a dispute is developing provisions to ensure that the parties will honor the terms of that agreement. Every party must be assured that the others will carry out their part. This generally requires carefully sequencing the required actions and performance measures. Parties must discuss and agree upon methods for making such assurances tangible. It may help to include contingencies in the agreement to cover unforeseen circumstances or one party's failure to uphold the agreement.

**10 Producing a written agreement.** The parties should document areas of agreement to ensure a common understanding of their accord, and to make certain that the terms can be remembered and communicated unambiguously. This step is crucial, for it ensures that the parties will not leave the negotiations with different interpretations of the agreement. Rather than each party drafting his or her version of what was agreed upon, it usually is best to use a "single-text procedure." This means that one negotiator (or a small subcommittee of the participants working with the facilitator) is designated to write a draft of the agreement. The draft is then circulated among the participants for comments and changes until all have approved it.

**11 Ratification.** The parties must get support for the agreement from organizations that have a role to play in carrying out the accord. These organizations should have been identified at the outset of the process and involved either directly or through adequate representation in the previous steps. When a negotiator represents a group of constituents, he or she must submit the written agreement for their approval. Although each organization will follow its own internal procedures as it reviews and adopts the settlement, the negotiating group should agree on the form of ratification that is necessary from each party.

The various negotiation stages are often combined in one or more meetings where representatives of groups with a stake in the issue convene. These meetings may include discussion of interview results, educating stakeholders on the various perspectives, and stakeholder representatives discussing their concerns, pertinent facts, criteria for evaluating decision and outcomes, alternative courses of action, and then selecting one or more courses of action. Group facilitation and conflict resolution techniques are important educational tools. Your role as the educator is to create a situation in which stakeholder groups educate each other and jointly work through these stages. You must take care to use neutral language. If parties are stymied in generating ideas, you may suggest some yourself, but refrain from suggesting only one. Results interviews conducted in the pre-negotiation phase can help you keep everyone on track. In addition, you can pay careful attention to the criteria the parties select to design an evaluation for the educational program.<sup>54</sup>

## Implementation

**12 Linking informal agreements to formal decision making.** A ratified agreement must be linked to the decision making procedures mandated by state statutes and local ordinances. How this takes place depends on the substance of the agreement and at what point in the required decision making process negotiation occurred. Decision makers should have been involved, or at least well-informed, all along in the process. If a decision maker is assured that all parties affected by an issue have agreed to a solution, and if the solution accords with the criteria the decision maker must use to make the decision, the agreement is likely to be approved.

**13 Monitoring implementation.** The parties must determine how they will keep track of the success of their solution. They must agree to standards for measuring compliance and a schedule for carrying out the monitoring process. Subcommittees can be charged with responsibility for monitoring and calling the parties back together if "troubleshooting" becomes necessary. A procedure to reconvene the parties to affirm outcomes, resolve problems, renegotiate terms, or celebrate success should be spelled out in the written agreement. Communication and collaboration should continue as the agreement is carried out.

For you, the public issues educator, the implementation stages may include additional applied research and educational programs. For example, implementing an agreement on a nonpoint source pollution control program may involve educators working with stakeholders to develop an educational program, prepare materials, and teach about "best management" plans. You might also assist in monitoring implementation through a for-

mal survey, follow-up interviews, discussion with participants, or other evaluation techniques.<sup>55</sup>

## Implications for educators' roles

In comparison with traditional approaches to public issues education, interest-based problem solving expands the roles available to educators.<sup>56</sup> Educators' traditional tools, such as needs assessment, applied research, community-based education, and program evaluation, remain relevant. The Information Provider and Technical Advisor roles, described in Chapter 1, continue to be appropriate, while the Facilitator role would be expanded from emphasis on small-group facilitation to "issue facilitation," including assistance in collaboration and conflict resolution, citizen participation, and consensus building. Issue facilitation is clearly a legitimate role for educators, since it promotes the mutual education of involved parties as well as an opportunity to learn a new approach to the resolution of community conflict—different from litigation or arbitration.

In addition, two new roles would be added:<sup>57</sup>

- Promoter of dispute resolution—one who suggests that the parties consider facilitated collaboration (and may also recommend competent facilitators)
- Mediator—one who actually performs the third-party role in dispute resolution, intervening, interposing, helping to reconcile differences, and working individually or collectively with the disputing parties to increase their skills in collaborative problem solving. Although not all public issues educators will have the ability or desire to actually become mediators, anyone can add the Promoter of Dispute Resolution role to their professional repertoire.

## Public issues educators and the news media

**T**he news media are most people's primary source of information about public issues. Because the media reach large and diverse audiences, they are an important resource and potential ally for public issues educators. As with other types of educational programs, news stories can help generate an audience. And the media offer opportunities for significant strides—or distortions—in people's understanding of public issues. Under favorable circumstances, the media can also be a vehicle for communicating a richer and more complex understanding of public issues to far more people than educators normally reach with face-to-face programs.

### Criticisms of the news media

The news media do a good job of creating awareness of public issues, but are much less effective at helping citizens work through the issues. "Working through," according to Daniel Yankelovich, "...is necessary to transform relatively shallow, poorly informed public opinion into more fully considered and firmly held public judgment." He defines public judgment as "the state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they have made."<sup>58</sup>

When citizens reach such a judgment, their opinions tend to be "stable" in the sense that they do not fluctuate from time to time or when poll takers change the wording of their questions. By contrast, on issues where a public judgment has not yet been reached, people's opinions are likely to change each time they are reminded of another possible consequence. (On protectionism, for instance, they tend to favor it if reminded about American workers' jobs, but to oppose it when ques-

tioned in the context of consumer prices.)<sup>59</sup> According to Yankelovich<sup>60</sup> "working through" to reach a public judgment requires information beyond what is normally available through the mass media, including:

- identifying an array of alternative choices
- clarifying the consequences of different choices
- maintaining attention to an issue until people have a chance to come to grips with it
- helping to interpret contradictory information and disagreements among the experts
- clarifying jargon, code words, and other language used in confusing ways
- conveying evidence that attention will be paid to citizens' views.

Interviews with the public indicate a similar desire for more help from the media. Studies relying on focus groups and in-depth interviews with ordinary citizens<sup>61</sup> indicate that people want more help in knowing how important issues differ, how they affect "me and my family," how they affect others, and what causes the problems. They resent it when the media seem to drop a story before it's resolved. They want information that's credible—that rings true (and resent it when they feel that they're getting only part of the story), and they want balanced treatment of all sides. They know that issues are complicated, and they're suspicious of simplistic solutions. Finally, they want evidence of progress—a "sense of possibility." They complain about getting little guidance on what they can do and little evidence that anything they might do would make any difference.

## Responding to media inquiries

To work effectively with the news media, the first skill that public issues educators need is the ability to respond effectively when reporters come to them for interviews, as may happen in connection with controversial issues. Preparation is the key to communicating effectively in these situations.

- If possible, think in advance about the points you want to make. Figure out how to make them concisely.
- Avoid making your points in the abstract. Use human examples.
- Write down your points concisely, so the reporter can take them back to the office.
- If you're surprised by the media on an issue, ask for a few minutes to compose your thoughts. Reporters face unrelenting deadlines, but, if you don't feel prepared, say so politely. Don't try to fake your way through an interview; it usually doesn't work.

In addition, public issues education calls for another important guideline. Any hope for effectively resolving public issues requires a fair and balanced understanding of multiple points of view. The media often fail to communicate that message clearly enough—portraying issues, instead, as two-sided conflicts. If you are contacted by news reporters, try to use the opportunity to promote the understanding of different perspectives—or at least to get across the idea that such understanding should be sought.

Responding to attacks against you or your program by a letter to the editor or other means is a special case. Often, the complainer will not be satisfied by *any* response, no matter how sensible or rational. Best advice: Wait a while; most people will forget the negative comments. The success of your program will speak for itself.

## Initiating media strategies

In addition to reacting effectively when news reporters initiate contacts, you can also develop proactive communication strategies. Communication strategies often focus on either (1) persuading people to adopt a certain behavior; or (2) providing them with information considered important by the message sender, but not necessarily by the receivers.<sup>62</sup> A strategy that is more likely to be appropriate in public

**"Who am I trying to reach and why?  
 What will their interest or reaction be?"**

issues education is the "two-way equity model," which assumes that all involved parties have significant and important points of view that need to be included in the discussions.<sup>63</sup>

Implementing the two-way equity model calls for the following steps:<sup>64</sup>

- **Select the important audiences.** Marketers call this segmenting the audience. For example, if the objective is to stimulate discussion of a county-wide land use plan, audience segments might include local elected officials, land developers, landowners and environmentalists.
- **Determine objectives for each audience segment.** When a communication strategy is designed for persuasion, the objective might be to get an audience segment to buy a particular product; when the communication is for information transfer, the objective is for the audience to acquire certain facts. In public issues education, other objectives may be more appropriate: increased awareness or knowledge of problems, proposed solutions, or consequences of different alternatives; more active participation in discussions; greater appreciation of different perspectives on the issues; or identification of solutions likely to satisfy a wide range of interests.

■ **Decide on the messages to be communicated.** Messages should be clear and focused. Although a goal of the two-way equity model is that there be "no secrets"—in other words, full information for everyone—it will still be necessary to tailor messages to the interests, goals and starting points of each audience segment.

### ■ Examine delivery alternatives.

Although the news media may be the best way to reach some

audience segments, others will need more complex, detailed information than the news media can be expected to provide.

### **Newsworkers are rarely educators; they are reporters**

The news media may be an appropriate delivery alternative when you want to:

- recruit individuals or groups to participate in an educational program focused on a public issue
- tell the public how to get educational materials related to an issue
- alert as many people as possible to an issue in the making
- offer an even-handed overview of an issue or correct a misunderstanding.

The news media are not in the education business. Most reporters and editors believe their primary job is to inform. This means they don't look at public issues in the same way an educator would. To connect with newsworkers, you need to think like a person whose job is delivering news or opinion to the public. Whether or not information provided to the media actually gets used depends largely on whether an editor or reporter sees it as newsworthy. And deciding whether something is newsworthy is entirely up to editors or reporters.

Defining "news" is tricky, but it usually refers to topics that are timely, have local interest, carry a sense of importance, involve conflict, are unusual, or carry a human interest appeal. Whether an educator's story is considered newsworthy may depend on other events that day, how much competition there is for news time or space, how much interest there is likely to be in the educator's story or topic, and how it is presented to the reporter or editor. The likelihood of success can be enhanced by applying a standard rule to a potential story or topic. First, ask, "Who am I trying to reach and why?" Second, ask, "What will their interest or reaction be?" If the reader/viewer/listener is likely to say "So what?" to a story, it isn't likely to make the news. The best story topics will be those that meet the needs and interests of the audience. Weak stories are often more focused on meeting the needs of the organization providing the story.

### **Going beyond the news media**

For many audiences and many objectives, "limited-audience media," such as fact sheets, newsletters, lectures, briefings, and workshops, may be more effective delivery alternatives than the news media.<sup>65</sup> These are especially important in regard to issues not covered by the media and for audience segments that need more detailed information, or information tailored to their interests and concerns.

For purposes of public issues education, "dialogue formats"—in which people on different sides of an issue confront and learn from one another—are especially appropriate. Examples include community forums, study circles, roundtables, and "town meetings."<sup>66</sup>

Dialogue formats are ideal ways to correct many of the deficiencies in the news media's depiction of public issues.

Through dialogue:

- People are able to learn more completely and accurately how they and others are affected by an issue.
- Connections among related issues are more likely to be identified and discussed.
- Balanced treatment of all sides of an issue is more likely.
- Exploration of necessary tradeoffs is more likely to occur.
- A larger array of alternatives is likely to be identified and addressed
- Consequences for people in different situations and with different values are more likely to be correctly identified.
- Contradictory information is more likely to be noted and addressed.
- Feasible solutions and realistic strategies are more likely to be identified, and obstacles to simplistic solutions are less likely to be ignored.

### **News organizations as potential partners in public issues education**

There are ample reasons for closer and more frequent collaboration between public issues educators and the news media. Each has advantages that could enhance the other's work.

In recent years, the news media have been widely criticized for sensational, polarized or simplistic coverage of public issues. By contrast, public issues education—relying on limited-audience media and dialogue formats as well as the mass media—has the potential to develop richer and more complete understandings of public issues than the news media normally provide. Journalists concerned about criticism of the news media might

well be receptive to educators' ideas for improving public understanding of important issues.

The educator's problem, on the other hand, is that educational programs on public issues inevitably involve only a small portion of the population. The news media reach a much larger audience. Improved relationships between public issues educators and the news media can be a useful way to communicate the richer and more complex understanding of issues that develops among participants in educational programs to larger audiences.

If you can find ways to enhance the news media's reporting of educational programs and their outcomes, the result could be the double advantage of (1) improved reporting of public issues by the media; and (2) a greatly expanded audience for public issues education.

### **Building partnerships with the media**

As an aid in creating links between educators and the media, advice from the Kettering Foundation to conveners of National Issues Forums<sup>67</sup> applies equally well to public issues educators in general.

- Communicate to newswriters what's different about public issues education—how it differs from policy making as either a polarized debate or the application of expert solutions.
- Explain the goals and methods of public issues education (or have newswriters attend an educational event) and then ask what role they can envision for their medium.
- Suggest possible mutual benefits, such as: "hearing 'real people' talk substantively on a subject" "a different framing for a familiar issue besides 'experts as usual,'" "a great visual opportunity—a mix of citizens interacting together;" "a time-efficient way to synthesize different citizen voices;" or "narratives as well as numbers on public attitude."<sup>68</sup>
- Include representatives of media organizations on your steering committee. Ask a local newspaper or TV station to cosponsor an educational program.
- Get the right contact at each media organization, such as the assignments editor, public service director, public affairs program producer, or a reporter or commentator who is passionate about the topic of a particular educational program.
- Suggest features or personality stories on steering committee members, facilitators, or others active in promoting new ways to address public issues.
- Suggest stories on how your community is dealing with the issues. What are the voices of opposition? Why is there disagreement? What is being done to foster a constructive search for workable solutions?
- Invite a reporter to attend an educational program and write about the type of discussion that takes place. Be sure to explain the objective of promoting mutual understanding across conflicting perspectives.
- Respect the news media's need for drama, but emphasize that "too much emphasis on easily dramatized elements of a story can obscure the public's need to consider all sides of the issue."<sup>69</sup> The goal—ideally one that is shared between educators and the media—should be to find ways to "use the drama of each issue to underscore the public's need to understand the multifaceted and complex nature of the problems."<sup>70</sup>

## Evaluating public issues education

**E**arly in the planning of any public issues education effort, it is important to consider:

- What you hope to accomplish overall.
- The desired outcomes for each meeting or phase.
- How to know along the way whether you are on the right track.
- How you will know when you've "arrived."
- Who else will need or want to know what you've done.
- What you will want to be able to tell people about the project.

These considerations provide a framework for evaluating the process which can help you:

- keep track of progress and make needed adjustments in individual educational programs
- provide occasions and vehicles for reflection and dialogue on the practice of public issues education
- meet the demand for accountability to administrators and funders
- document lessons to help in your own future work or in the work of other educators.

### Benefits of evaluation

- **Mid-course adjustments:** A mid-course evaluation of one project showed that the project's materials were not being disseminated or used by participating organizations as planned. Changes were made to provide more assistance to the organizations' communications or education specialists.
- **Identifying project impacts:** Evaluators of another project learned that national legislation to provide R&D funding and other measures expected to help the state's economy could be traced back to an offshoot of their earlier project (specifically, to a presentation of research findings that came to the attention of a member of Congress).
- **Lessons for future work:** Participant interviews revealed that one project's small-group discussions were evaluated more favorably when the groups were given a specific assignment, such as "Come up with three policy recommendations."
- **Occasions for reflection:** Broadly representative local coalitions were harder to maintain than more narrowly based state-level ones, but members of the local coalitions had higher levels of satisfaction with their accomplishments and were more optimistic about long-run impacts.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, evaluation results offer policy makers and the public a richer understanding of what public issues education is and what it can accomplish. Public issues education is a necessary activity in a democratic political system and is therefore a valid purpose for community organizations such as Cooperative Extension. But its practice is often limited by the fact that its potential contributions are poorly understood. To promote such understanding, public issues education needs to be described clearly in statements of purpose such as those adopted by Extension in several states.

But words are not enough. Policy makers and citizens also need to see actions consistent with the words. Evaluation can help communicate the purposes, reality and accomplishments of public issues education to policy makers and citizens.

### Evaluating implementation and end results

Evaluation should not be something tacked on at the end of an educational program just to meet accountability requirements. Ultimate impacts are not the only things to evaluate—and may not even be the most important things. The process of stepping back—preferably with help from someone with an independent perspective—to reflect on what you've done and where you're going is useful throughout an educational program. Goals, strategies and implementation, as well as impacts, can all be evaluated.

### Sample "program theory"

- **What do you hope to accomplish?** Progress toward resolving contentious environmental issues (wetlands, endangered species, etc.).
- **What methods or activities do you plan to use?** (1) Leadership institute for emerging leaders from government, industry, environmentalist groups, and natural resource agencies; (2) dispute resolution methods (presented at the institute); (3) year-long practicum for each participant.
- **Expected connections?** Participants will gain experience with people on different sides of issues and will learn dispute resolution techniques. They will apply what they learn to issues "back home" during their practicums. Some success in resolving contentious issues will become apparent. Experience and observation of successful work will promote application of similar methods to additional issues.
- **Questions to ask along the way:** Do the institute participants represent a mix of perspectives on the issues? Do they actually learn dispute resolution techniques and gain confidence in their ability to communicate across diverse perspectives? Do they work on contentious issues during their practicums? What happens? Do they experience success? Is there evidence that they will use similar approaches on other issues?<sup>72</sup>

What you need is a "program theory" that you can articulate—not a theory in the abstract, scientific sense, but a statement of what you hope to accomplish, the activities you will carry out, and the effect you expect your activities to have on your goals. Note that this is different from simply stating your objectives and then evaluating to see whether they have been accomplished. Articulating a program theory suggests questions to ask along the way that will help you and others decide whether your theory is sound, whether you're still on track, and whether adjustments need to be made.

### Evaluation choices

Whether the focus is on a program's ultimate impacts, or on progress made along the way, educators need some measures of outcomes. A few key choices will help to focus the evaluation:

- For what potential outcomes will you look? Will the focus be on benefits for individual participants (what they have learned) or changes in the policy issues (especially, progress toward resolution)?
- Will the evaluation focus on pre-determined outcomes, or will it be designed to pick up whatever impacts may emerge? (The former may be better for testing and refining theories about good educational practice; the latter may be better at capturing the significance and meaning of program experiences for participants.)

- Will the outcomes to be looked for represent acceptance of existing policy-making processes or a change-oriented critique? If the former is chosen, evaluators might look, for example, only for evidence of a more informed and actively participating citizenry. The change-oriented technique might lead them to look for more equitable participation or for participation that includes determining which issues get on the agenda.

These choices are not simple matters of "right" or "wrong," and they are not mutually exclusive, but they do represent fundamental choices that have implications for evaluation strategies and the choice of questions to ask.

### Impacts on individual learners

Evaluations of educational programs typically focus on what happens to individual learners. In the case of public issues education, outcomes that might be looked for include changes in:

- knowledge (about government, the political process, or the issues)
- attitudes or opinions (regarding government and politics in general or the specific issues addressed in an educational program)
- skills (including skills in leadership, policy research, moral deliberation, communication, conflict resolution and political strategy)
- behavior or behavioral dispositions (such as voting or participation in political campaigns or the policy making process).<sup>73</sup>

### **Sample benefits to individuals**

Evaluation studies of a variety of public issues education programs have documented these effects:

- 72% of participants in satellite town meetings reported that they had learned something new about the issues.
- 44% reported increased understanding of how to influence the policy making process.
- 69% reported that participation affected their perspectives on the issues.
- 79% of the roundtable participants reported that the discussions revealed some points of view of which they were not aware.<sup>74</sup>

For the most part, measuring impacts on individual learners is no different in public issues education than it is in other educational programs. Two exceptions concern the importance of questions about equality and consensus.<sup>75</sup>

#### **Equality**

If public issues education leads to increased participation, is participation becoming more equal? Or are people who have already been influential becoming more involved (and the weak no better off than they were)? If knowledge or skill is increasing as a result of educational programs, is the gap between more and less knowledgeable (or skillful) individuals growing or shrinking?

#### **Consensus:**

If public issues education leads to changes in attitudes, are attitudes coming closer together or moving farther apart? An educational program that produces major shifts in the attitudes of individual participants may actually move people farther apart, making issue resolution more difficult, while another program that stimulates only minor changes in attitudes may nonetheless increase the likelihood of finding common ground.

### **Sample impacts on issue resolution**

- During a governor's rural health strategy meeting, references were made to material learned during the project's educational program.
- Antagonism existed between two school districts before they participated in a public issues education program. After the program, the districts agreed to cooperate in a new program.
- A county zoning plan included protection of groundwater resources, as recommended by project participants.
- A state rural development commission was created as a direct result of one project's statewide workshop.<sup>76</sup>

### **Impacts on issue resolution**

Although evaluating impacts at the individual level is important, impacts on issue resolution are at least equally important. To date, such impacts have seldom been evaluated systematically, although anecdotal evidence is not hard to find.

Systematically collecting such evidence is not difficult. Participants in the policy making process (and observers of it) frequently talk about changes in the issues. They may note, for example, that an issue has become more prominent, more (or less) contentious, more (or less) likely to be resolved. Can such changes be attributed to specific educational interventions? Of course they can. The connections can't be proven, but reasonable arguments—persuasive to reasonable people—can certainly be presented.

The most obvious way to detect such changes is to tap the observations of people who (1) are involved in public decision making on issues (or are otherwise in a good position to observe the process); and (2) can be expected to make judgments about the impact of specific educational interventions. Such individuals can provide interesting and informative answers to such questions as:

- What happened as a result of the educational activities?
- What was it about the educational activities that led to these results?
- What would have happened if the educational activities had not taken place?

An alternative approach is to talk about an issue and to trace the influences on its evolution to see what, if any, effect an educational program appears to have had.

## **Sources of evaluation data**

### **Who can help answer such questions?**

#### **Public issues educators**

Public issues educators themselves can observe changes in the issues and plausible connections to these changes linked to their educational efforts. You must resist the temptation to see favorable connections that don't really exist, so you might want to ask others for "reality checks." Keeping a journal can be a good idea—take time on a regular basis to describe the issue, note changes and record specific evidence of impacts that can be traced to educational interventions.

#### **Advisory committee members**

Advisory committees often help plan and implement public education programs. Members are likely to be knowledgeable about the issues and to approach them from diverse perspectives. Providing assistance in evaluating the program and its impacts is a logical responsibility of such a committee.

#### **Program participants**

Participants in educational programs (the learners) are not necessarily knowledgeable observers of the policy making process. But, if a program is one that brings together key players on all sides of an issue, it makes sense to ask the audience itself, at periodic intervals, to describe the issue (so that changes over time can be detected) and to make judgments about the educational program's impact.

#### **Media people**

Newspaper, radio, or TV reporters are close and reasonably objective observers of public policy making. If the media cover an issue addressed by an educational program, you may try to interview news reporters (turning the tables!) at appropriate intervals to get their observations of changes in the issue and of plausible impacts of educational interventions.

#### **News accounts**

If an issue receives sufficient coverage by the news media, news accounts themselves can be a source of useful evaluation data. How is the issue described or discussed in news stories and how do the descriptions and discussion change over time? Do news stories contain evidence of impact by the educational interventions, or does the timing of changes in news accounts of the issue suggest such impacts?

#### **Policy makers**

Policy makers are likely to have a broad view of issues as well as sufficient interest in them to be knowledgeable about how they are discussed and understood by various parties. They, too, can be interviewed at appropriate intervals.

## **Evaluating progress in resolving issues**

One of the biggest frustrations in evaluating impacts on issue resolution stems from the fact that (1) public decision making often takes a very long time; and (2) educational programs are only one influence among multitudes that affect decision making. Fortunately, creative use of process models, such as the ones described in Chapter 2, helps overcome these obstacles. The basic assumption of process models consists of the idea that an educator determines the stage an issue is in, and then designs appropriate educational interventions. A further assumption is that the interventions should help move the issue to the next stage. It should be possible, then, to evaluate public issues education, not according to its impact on an issue's final resolution, but according to its success in moving an issue from one stage to the next. Outcome indicators for each stage can help educators know whether they are making progress toward issue resolution and decide when to shift gears and move on to educational interventions appropriate for the next stage.

For example, if you use the issue evolution model, you could ask the following questions at each stage of the process.

**Stage 1—Concern:** How is the problem or situation defined? Has the way the problem is defined changed, and, if so, how?

**Stage 2—Involvement:** Who is involved in the policy making process? Has involvement changed, and, if so, how?

**Stage 3—Issue:** How is the issue—the various parties' goals and points of disagreement—defined? Have the goals and points of disagreement changed, and, if so, how?

**Stage 4—Alternatives:** What alternatives are being considered? Has the menu of alternatives under consideration changed, and, if so, how?

**Stage 5—Consequences:** What potential consequences of the different alternatives are being considered? Have expectations or concerns about consequences changed, and, if so, how?

**Stage 6—Choice:** What are policy makers considering as they approach a decision? Have influences on the policy makers changed, and, if so, how? What decision was made? How do the various parties feel about the decision?

**Stage 7—Implementation:** How is the new policy being implemented? Have changes occurred in its implementation, and, if so, what are they?

**Stage 8—Evaluation:** How well is the new policy working? Is there agreement about that? Has opinion about implementation of the policy changed, and, if so, how?

In each stage, you can also ask, "What would be different if the educational program had not taken place?"

## Evaluation challenges

Some of the challenges in evaluating public issues education include:

- the complexity of public issues and by necessity, of educational programs that address them
- the fact that educational programs typically evolve and change during the course of their implementation
- difficulties in identifying and adequately sampling all of the audiences educators hope to affect
- the absence of "tried and true" measurement techniques for most outcomes of interest
- the need to provide support for the validity of inferences drawn from measurement efforts, so they will hold up under reasonable scrutiny.

To cope with these challenges, evaluation experts advise (1) maintaining a skeptical attitude toward one's data; (2) employing multiple philosophical and value frameworks, methods, measures, and analyses; and (3) developing rigorous procedures for monitoring and assuring the quality of data.<sup>77</sup>

Another important concern goes beyond the question of whether the inferences drawn in an evaluation are valid. Evaluators are also challenged to consider whether their work is designed to lead to valid uses or actions. A paper-and-pencil knowledge test that excludes illiterate or less verbal participants might fail to yield valid inferences. But a critique of an existing policy process derived from open-ended interviews of multiple participants but disseminated to only a few might represent invalidity in terms of use or action.

In short, public issues education is enmeshed in the political fray of public policy making with the intent of somehow improving it. This "somehow" will vary from program to program, reflecting the inevitable diversity of situations and viewpoints in a complex democratic society. Evaluating programs and their outcomes calls for a thoughtful, politically conscious, and ethically responsible contribution to the policy making process.