Meaningful

PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

Essential Principles and Practices
for Strengthening Collaboration
in our Communities

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Introduction

The cost of traditional approaches to public participation in civic decision-making is steep, far-reaching and long-lasting. The costs are the real dollars for the public process, the opportunities lost in stalemate and/or litigation, the decrease in civility in communities, and the suboptimal decisions that result from them.

By the end of many, if not most public input periods, people's positions have hardened; they are more polarized; and people are no more able to constructively help solve the next round of issues than they were before they started. Traditional approaches to public conversations are simply not equal to the task of helping people tackle the difficult-to-define, inter-related, complex issues facing most communities.

A number of innovative approaches are revitalizing public processes in communities (states, provinces, regions, counties, cities, towns, and neighborhoods) around the world. Such approaches afford people the opportunity to better understand and define issues, develop and evaluate solutions, and make tough decisions in order to create their desired futures. These approaches also enable people to work more skillfully across political, economic, and social divides to find common ground.

These newer methods have many guiding principles and elements in common. When effectively combined, they help community leaders and members conduct more thoughtful, collaborative, wise, and productive conversations.

Public conversations are infinitely more complex than they are in organizations where a number of factors bind people together. The glue that connects people in work settings is rarely present in public processes. These include an agreed-on purpose and vision for the future, clearly defined boundaries of the organization, common approaches to getting things done (for example, planning, problem solving, communicating), explicit decision-making processes, and clear responsibilities.

And yet, the policy decisions we make through our public processes and elected representatives will affect our communities more significantly for far longer than most decisions made in any given organization. We create our future in the thousands of decisions—large and small—that we make every day in our public processes. It seems increasingly clear that learning to listen and talk with one another in more effective ways will strengthen the glue among us and increase our ability to make more timely, informed, considered, and wiser choices.

Because the quality of our public participation processes is central to the life and meaning of our communities and our democracy, we offer this paper in the hope that it will provide a starting point

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for all of us to consider how we might improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our public participation processes.

In this paper we will integrate what we know from our work in large organizations and what we are learning about public processes, with what others around the world are learning about how to more effectively think and learn together while deliberating on tough issues. We will (1) characterize traditional approaches to public participation; (2) describe the costs and impact of these approaches; (3) make a case for changing the nature of public processes; (4) present a synthesis of the principles and elements of new approaches to public participation; (5) describe the potential hurdles to changing public processes; and (6) identify potential next steps.

Characteristics of Traditional Approaches to Public Participation

Traditional approaches to public participation are not equal to the task of defining and solving the complex issues facing most communities. Traditional approaches have the following characteristics in common.

They are one-way. In most public processes, people traditionally testify for or against the options on the table before a body of elected officials, commissioners, and governmental staff. Rarely do they have the opportunity to shape the options on which they are being asked to comment. One possible exception to this is Town Hall meetings, informal public meetings derived from the traditional town meetings of New England.

They are primarily serial. Citizens dutifully line up, walk to a microphone or stand up to air their concerns one at a time. They are rarely invited to think through the costs, benefits, and "tradeoffs" of the options on the table or come up with different ones.

They frequently only draw the self-selected "usual suspects" who show up to make their case, often against whatever option(s) are on the table. People "in the middle" tire of the battle between the sides and choose not to participate. Thus, what decision makers often hear is an incomplete and unbalanced picture of the public's opinion.

They are often held to meet a legal requirement. Often, it is questionable whether those who have called a hearing really want to "hear" what people think or they are simply going through the legally required motions. "Public hearing" in this case risks becoming an oxymoron.

They rely on simple exchanges of information and opinions with little if any learning or creative problem solving. Government staff, content experts, and residents provide information and proposals as well as personal or anecdotal "evidence" to support their points of view. It can easily slip into a war of solutions.

They discourage meaningful interaction in the way they are usually arranged. Decision makers frequently sit behind a row of microphones on a dais or stage while citizens sit in fixed rows, lining up to speak into a microphone positioned across from and below the decision makers. Thus, citizens speak across a considerable distance from those to whom they are speaking.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, **public processes are often a part of a political, win/lose decision-making process.** Able to work collaboratively in a variety of other settings, people become more combative in a public one. The natural assumption is that in addition to the official decision makers, citizens are also in a win/lose battle. And, yet, it is during the public process that there should be time and space for new approaches or solutions to emerge that could combine the best ideas from those who may have unfortunately already drawn their lines in the sand. This win/lose assumption shapes people's behavior. They come to public hearings ready to defend their position and attack someone else's. Thus, the assumption that the public process is an integral part of a win/lose political process makes creative problem solving very difficult if not impossible.

The Costs of Traditional Approaches to Public Participation

There are two types of costs: financial ones and loss of "social capital."

The primary *financial* costs of public participation include staff and consultant time, and in many cases, the cost of the time of the elected or appointed officials. It can also include a variety of other costs including legal notices, governmental fees, and facilities.

For example, one rural California county of 125,000 people spends at least a million and a half dollars a year on public meetings. Governmental staff members spend at least 35,000 hours a year planning for, attending, and following up on well over 1,000 public meetings held each year. These account for at least 2,500 hours of public meetings annually.[1] These are precious and expensive meetings that could most likely be used more effectively and efficiently.

The costs add up when processes end in a stalemate and the financial investment is for naught. For example, in two relatively recent public processes in the same rural county noted previously, one related to homelessness and the other to infrastructure, both ended in a standoff. These processes cost over $700,000 along with several opportunities for multiple millions in state and federal monies.

Equally high were the *social capital* costs of these failed public processes. "Social capital refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness."[2] Robert D. Putnam, Harvard Public Policy professor and author of the best selling "Bowling Alone," believes there are two different types of social capital: bonding and bridging. "Bonding" social capital links people who are similar in ways important to them and who are more inward looking and exclusive. For example, advocacy groups who show up at public hearings may be bonded in this way and use it as

an influential tool in public processes. "Bridging" social capital involves developing links across divides, for example, ethnic, religious, economic, social, political, or ideological. "Bridging" social capital is harder to foster because it is less likely to develop automatically without conscious and special attention being paid to developing it.[3]

Traditional approaches to public participation tend to increase "bonding social capital" and decrease "bridging social capital." This is the exact opposite of what public processes need to do to be more effective. For example, in the two "failed" public processes noted earlier, those who led these projects think that the social capital costs included:

◗ Decreased confidence in the governmental agencies involved

◗ Decreased confidence in the elected officials and in public participation in general

◗ Distrust between governmental staff and elected officials

◗ Decreased respect for governmental staff in the eyes of the public

◗ Decreased enthusiasm and productivity among staff

◗ Increased fear of the public among staff

◗ Lowered capacity for civil discourse.

The Impact of Traditional Approaches to Public Participation

In addition to their cost, the quality of our public processes profoundly affects the quality of our decisions, while at the same time undermining our desire and ability to work together.

Traditional approaches to public process make it very difficult for people to bring the best of who they are and what they have to offer to the process. They corrode a sense of connection among people and trigger physiological distress among those present. Consider for example, the impact on individuals, unused to speaking in public, of walking to a podium and talking into a microphone in order to make their case. Such room arrangements alone can make speakers very anxious, diminishing their ability to think and speak rationally. Such stress narrows people's focus to the perceived threat of the situation and diminishes their ability to pay attention to the larger picture. According to Daniel Goleman: "The greater anxiety we feel, the more impaired is the brain's cognitive efficiency…Near panic is the enemy of learning and creativity."[4]

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Traditional approaches also work against people developing a shared understanding of the issue at hand, along with its relation to other issues. For example, making land-use decisions involves consideration of one's sense of the public good, private property rights, infrastructure, economic development, environmental and individual health, quality of life, housing and community well being. However, because traditional approaches work against citizens fully appreciating the spectrum of factors involved in tackling any one issue, the breadth and depth of their thinking and input is narrow. The process actually encourages them to talk *about* the pieces of an issue that most concern them without being able to talk *through* how all the pieces relate. As a result people end up arguing over the "issue de jour" separately from a larger objective or vision for their community.

In addition to not allowing or enabling people to talk through issues, traditional processes and room arrangements encourage people to talk *at* one another vs. *with* one another. They work against people understanding one another, undermining our humanity and nudging us inexorably towards seeing people as objects, rather than fellow human beings. Ultimately this leads people to vilify one another either during or outside of public meetings, making it extremely difficult for people to work together again.

Perhaps the most insidious of the negative consequences of traditional approaches to public participation is the hardening of people's positions, the reinforcing of stereotypes, and the increased polarization in the community. Since people are not usually asked to understand the points of view of others, all they "hear" is their own perspective and how others attack it. Hurling positions at one another, they quickly lose track of one another's humanity and neglect to ask why the other person's position is important to him or her. What does this other human being want or need? What is important to him or her? People are often more polarized at the end of a process then they were at the start. As captured by the playwright David Mamet: "Bad drama reinforces our prejudices."[5]

Taken as whole, traditional approaches to public participation do not develop citizens' ability to engage with one another or decision makers in constructive ways, engendering a less thoughtful, more combative conversational culture in communities. These winner-take-all processes bring out the worst in people. They are lost opportunities to develop people's collective capacity to make wiser choices collaboratively.

Given the increasing number and complexity of issues facing all communities, rural or urban, it is critical that communities understand the long-range impact of how people talk to one another. The impacts of name-calling, yelling, punishing accusations and character assassinations do not disappear when a hearing or meeting is over. The longer we assume negative intent on the part of others, focus on winning debates regardless of the cost and wearing down those we define as adversaries, the more we continue to deplete and weaken our collective will and ability to effectively handle our challenges and create a desired future together.

Traditional approaches are also missed opportunities for citizens to share in the responsibility for change. As people testify, there is a subtle or not so subtle shift of responsibility from the speaker to the decision maker (*What are **you** going to do about this?*). Implicit is the speaker's responsibility has ended and that decision makers now must find their way to something that makes sense and garner enough support for it to be implemented.

This for-or-against manner of participation fails to tap the creative problem-solving skills of people, and perhaps more significantly, it often demoralizes the very people—elected officials and government staff—whom we expect to make good decisions and take action. The majority of public agency staff

members with whom we have worked in a variety of places over many years care deeply about their work and the impact of decisions on citizens. It is challenging for them to keep caring when they are vilified in public. It is also a challenge for elected officials (who simultaneously want to do what is best for the community and stay in office) when

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advocacy groups show up and vociferously present singular positions about what is being proposed.

When citizens, out of frustration, start insulting, threatening, or, (as in February of 2008 at the Kirkwood City Council in Missouri[6]), shooting elected officials in public settings, we must conclude that there is something wrong with the process.

Although these traditional approaches might feel as comfortable as an old shoe to some, the truth is that they often lead to solutions that are less than satisfactory compromises. These approaches are not equal to solving complex issues. They do not help bring the full force of the intelligent and caring people in our communities to bear on opportunities and complex challenges—issues that are difficult to grasp, inter-related and "messy."

Difficult to grasp. For example, can you come up with useful and acceptable definitions of the following issues that adequately capture their complexity? Try your hand at poverty, homelessness, inadequate healthcare, unemployment, sustainable land and water use, affordable housing, adequate transportation, or poor air quality. Okay, now try doing this with hundreds of other citizens who have different life experiences, points of view, and values than you have.

Interrelated. Just when you think you understand the issue at hand, you realize it is related to many others. For example, land use is connected to economic development which is connected to environmental quality which is connected to private property rights which is connected to affordable housing which is connected to (fill in the blank)… and so on.

Messy. Issues are messy because people involved see them differently. Thus, tackling the challenges, especially through traditional approaches to public participation, can polarize people and overwhelm them. When they give up and check out, only the "usual suspects" remain, often with predetermined positions.

Challenges become even messier when they involve issues of identity and values. Issues involve questions of identity when people experience them as "threats or frustrations to people's collective need for dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy."[7]

For example, in developing standards for land use, what is at stake for ranchers who want to simultaneously protect their way of life along with their children's inheritance? What turmoil do they experience when they live and work on land that can realize more wealth for their children if they subdivide and develop it rather than keep it as working lands? What is at stake for a community who thinks of itself as a rural community with ample green pastures? What is at stake for people who believe in the sanctity of private property but also cherish the quality of life in sparsely populated area? What is at stake for developers who have huge investments in, well, development? These are significant questions that require processes more suited to the degree of difficulty involved in resolving them.

Perhaps the least understood result of traditional public process is the culture of a community. Just as meetings in organizations are a microcosm of its culture, public conversations reflect the culture of our communities. We affect the culture of our communities through how we design and conduct our public processes, through how we talk with one another. As passed on by scholar Joanna Macy: "We build the road and the road builds us."[8]

In public conversations we can either build or diminish the desired qualities of our communities. For example, we can engender respect and care through conversational guidelines for how people listen and speak to each other; through the questions we ask we can direct people's attention to solving problems (vs. to getting their way); and through how we design public processes we can include and value a variety of perspectives. How would you describe the culture of your community as reflected in current public participation processes?

Change the Nature of Public Conversations

Our enthusiasm and hope for newer approaches is based on four factors. First, there is a range of options. No need for one-size-fits-all. Second, we believe communities are rife with caring, smart people. They are discouraged from being involved and contributing their gifts by ineffective, time-wasting processes. Third, due to our ever-growing knowledge of how our brains function, we better understand why these newer approaches work and can continue to refine them accordingly. Fourth, we have seen how well-designed, well-implemented, inclusive, educative, and engaging processes can bring out the best in people and lead to sound solutions that are supported and implemented.

The cornucopia of newer conversational processes has a fifty-year history of effectiveness in organizations and a growing record of success in the public arena. (For a partial list of these approaches see Appendix A. For more detailed information about these and other approaches, visit Public Participation Toolbox of the International Association for Public Participation at **www.iap2.org** or **www.peopleand-participation.net**.) These more effective approaches can change the nature of public participation. They allow communities to engage citizens in talking *through* issues instead of just talking *about* them. They help change the role of citizens from polarized advocates or consumers of decisions to *responsible partners* in shaping public policies and programs.

These newer approaches help people both understand the issues and talk them through with one another. They provide opportunities for deeper understanding of how various constituencies sees issues and why. They engage average people in working with elected officials and administrators instead of taking the short-lived comfort of lobbying them or railing against them. These approaches can help transform torturous public processes into ones more worth people's time and effort.

As we look across the array of newer approaches to public participation and reflect on our own experiences with helping complex systems tackle complex challenges, we see that they are all aimed at creating more meaningful public conversations by making them more *thoughtful, collaborative, wise,* and *productive.*

"Thoughtful" has two meanings; both are relevant to public conversations. First, thoughtful means thinking. In public processes this includes exploring what an issue is, unearthing the causes for it, and its relationship with other issues. It means investigating possible ways to solve it, carefully weighing the cost and benefits of potential solutions, and more often than not, making tough tradeoffs, in order to reach a sound conclusion.

We are used to doing this in our personal and work lives. For example, imagine you have just received an offer of a terrific job in your field. As an added bonus, it is located near your aging parents who have been asking you to move closer. However, your husband just started a new job he likes and the location of your job offer is hundreds of miles away. To complicate matters, your oldest child is entering her last year in high school. What to do? How do you even begin to think about it?

Your career, your marriage, your children, and your parents are all valuable to you. But you still have to decide what to do as a family. Sadly, no one can give you the "right" answer, nor can you resolve the dilemma by pretending that this opportunity and these relationships are unimportant. You sit on the "horns of a dilemma" that can only be resolved by taking the time to think it through and consider what you and your family think is most important in the circumstances and which tradeoffs you are willing to make.

This is the same dilemma we face in tough decisions for our communities. If our public conversations were designed to be more thoughtful, citizens could be more creative problem solvers, better weigh the options, and more reasonably consider the tough tradeoffs.

For example, in what has been described as America's largest ongoing town hall meeting, the Mayor of Washington, D.C. convened three district-wide citizen summits over the course of six years in which more than 10,000 residents deliberated the city's spending priorities and made recommendations for change. As a result of their influence and involvement with the summits, citizens have accomplished significant changes in education, senior services, and youth-related services.[9]

"Thoughtful" also means being considerate of the feelings and circumstances of others and listening to understand their points of view. Honest curiosity and skillful inquiry are important elements of this aspect of thoughtfulness.

Such consideration also includes people being able to skillfully and authentically communicate their own needs and perspectives without vilifying others. There is a middle way between politeness that maintains the status quo and incivility that damages our desire and ability to collaborate.

"Collaborative" comes from the Latin word "collaborare" which means "to work together." When applied to public participation, it means working with a diverse group of people across economic, political, and social divides. It means listening thoughtfully to understand how others see or frame an issue and honestly considering their points of view and needs.

Being collaborative also means being able to see the tensions among the many things that are important to people. It means keeping a "we/us" frame of mind instead of a "you/them" or "those people" frame of mind. Finally, we think it means doing the hard work of maintaining a predisposition to find common ground and a shared direction among multiple purposes and agendas.

The essence of collaboration is well captured in a story told by Adam Kahane about his work in South Africa during the four-year transitional period between the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the country's first all-race election in 1994. Kahane writes "A popular joke at the time said that, faced with the country's daunting challenges, South Africans had two options: a practical option and a miraculous option. The practical option was that we would all get down on our knees and pray for a band of angels to come down from heaven and fix things for us. The miraculous option was that

Change the nature of public conversations so that they are more...

Thoughtful	Collaborative	Wise	Productive
◗ Thinking through the issues, investigating their causes, understanding the relationships among them ◗ Considering the feelings and circumstances of others and listening to understand their points of view ◗ Skillfully and authentically communicating one's needs and perspectives without vilifying others	◗ Working across economic, political, and social divides ◗ Listening thoughtfully to understand how others see or frame an issue ◗ Honestly considering the points of view and needs of others ◗ Keeping a "we/us" vs. a "you/them" frame of mind ◗ Maintaining a predisposition to find common ground	◗ Inviting people's deep questions, dreams, and longings ◗ Considering the long-range, potential impact of decisions on the future of a community ◗ Challenging preconceived ideas and positions ◗ Putting issues in a larger context ◗ Asking tough questions and creating innovative solutions	◗ Resulting in wise decisions that people understand and support ◗ Strengthening a sense of community and building social capital ◗ Increasing people's ability to collaboratively deliberate and resolve tough issues effectively

we would continue to talk with each other until we found a way forward together. In the end, South Africans, contrary to everybody's predictions, succeeded in implementing the miraculous option." Kahane refers to the many forums that went on there as "miracle-implementing processes."[10]

We hope that all communities can succeed with the miraculous option.

Perhaps the challenges facing our communities are not as daunting as those that faced South Africa in the early nineties. The challenges do, however, ask us to continue to converse in thoughtful, collaborative, wise and productive ways in order to collectively find a way forward. For example, although they may not have used these adjectives, it seems the citizens in Tupelo, Mississippi had these kind of conversations. Once the poorest town in the poorest county in the poorest state in the union, it is now a progressive community with a per capita income close to that of Atlanta. According to David Mathews, President of the National Issues Forum, they have ten times more people providing leadership there than other communities of comparable size.[11]

And, according to Vaughn Grisham, Jr., who has studied Tupelo for many years, they have a set of guiding principles that are the hallmarks of their civic life. These include "Never turn the work over to agencies that don't involve citizens"; "Build teams and use a team approach"; "See everyone as a resource."[12]

Conventional wisdom might suggest that Tupelo's strong economy is the reason for the town's actively engaged citizens. However, when Putnam investigated a town in northern Italy he found that the "quality of civic life rather than the economy made the difference…the area was not civil because it was rich but rich because it was civil…their economic strategies have been public making strategies."[13]

"Wise" often refers to an individual, as in the "Wisdom of Solomon."[14] It is possible, however, for a conversation to be wise and lead to wise decisions. Conversations are wise when they grow out of people's deep questions, dreams, and longings;

when the people in them sagaciously consider the long-range, potential impact of a decision on the future of a community; and when they explore what is possible. Conversations are wise when citizens challenge their preconceived ideas and positions, ask themselves tough questions and search for innovative solutions that they have not yet considered.

A good friend and colleague of ours once asked an interesting question. "If we are not talking about possibilities, what are we talking about?"[15] The awkward truth is that we are probably talking about what is not working, what we think about what is not working, telling our favorite stories about why it is not working, and who is to blame for it not working. Occasionally we toss in tidbits about our pet solutions for how to make it work. This often includes naming those whose heads should roll in order to make the situation just perfect according to our view of the world.

Such whining may occasionally be therapeutic. However, in the long run, it does not lead to wise decisions. When we are about to speak in public meetings, perhaps we should ask ourselves, as Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, once asked "Do you create? Or destroy? That's for your ordeal-by-fire to answer."[16]

For example, tired of low voter turnout for budget referendums and frustrated by the high number of complaints about rising taxes and increased spending, East Hampton, Connecticut's Board of Finance got more people involved in the budget process through a round of "study circles." The circles led to a dramatic increase in voter turnout for the referendum on the budget and an adoption of the town budget on the first ballot. The circles also helped define priorities for town services. East Hampton expanded its use of study circles to consider long-term financial planning issues.[17]

"Productive" conversations are ones that result in wise decisions that people understand and support and that avoid costly litigation. They are productive when they strengthen a sense of community and build "bridging social capital." They are productive when they increase everyone's ability to collaboratively and effectively deliberate tough issues.

As people become more adept, they can apply these conversational abilities to tackling the next challenge. As they are increasingly able to put issues in a larger context, they can approach policy questions more competently. As they become more confident in their ability to define and analyze problems and generate and evaluate solutions, they are able to make wise choices among difficult tradeoffs. Such engagement also builds a greater sense of responsibility and accountability for the whole community, not just to one's constituency or activist group.

As people from all sectors engage with one another in new ways, they are also able to see new possibilities for working together. Trust builds among citizens, decision makers, and governing institutions. Faith grows in what fair and effective processes can create. And, the icing on the cake is that interactions among diverse groups and sectors enhances a community's' ability to innovate, to create what entrepreneur Frans Johansson calls "intersectional ideas."[18]

For example in 2000, a class-action lawsuit was filed against the Cincinnati Police Department. It alleged that the department had treated African-American citizens differently than other racial groups for more than 30 years. A federal judge assigned to the case thought that litigation would further polarize people and not solve the issues underlying the conflict. The parties involved agreed to engage in collaborative problem solving and negotiation.

Approximately 3,500 people engaged in a productive process that led to the previously polarized stakeholder groups agreeing on a five-point blueprint for change called "Vision of the Future: A Collaborative Platform." This served as the foundation for a collaborative settlement agreement that started a new era of more constructive police-community relations.[19] The process helped people respond to the difficult issues on the table and opened the door for significant changes in the focus of the Police Department and its relationship with the community.

Twelve Guiding Principles for Meaningful Public Conversation

The newer approaches to public conversations follow many if not all of these twelve guiding principles. Each of these principles complements and builds on the others.

1. ***The change you want to create is the change you start with.***[20] In other words, the means and the ends are congruent. So, if you believe that the successful resolution of an issue depends upon people's collaborating with one another, the conversational process itself needs to be collaborative.

2. ***Public conversations reflect the character of a community. They also build community.*** This means that people can define and build their community through their interactions and decisions today. A community does not need to be defined primarily or exclusively by its history. Meaningful public conversations can create or strengthen people's sense of community.[21]

3. ***The very personal is universal.*** When people are able to talk from a deeper and more personal place than they do normally in public settings about what is at stake for them and why it matters so much, they are usually able to find their way to at least understand one another and at most find common ground.[22]

4. ***The process is as important as the product.*** In designing and implementing public participation processes, there are two critical elements to consider: emotional satisfaction (I like how I was treated during the process. I had a chance to contribute.); and procedural satisfaction (I liked the process. I thought it was efficient, effective and fair.). For people to experience a process as worthy of their involvement, people need to experience both types of satisfaction.

5. ***Balance advocacy and inquiry.*** Public conversations tend to be over-weighted with telling and asserting while starving for genuine curiosity and exploration (not interrogation). They are better balanced when people explain their point of view, why they see the situation as they do, and ask others what they think. People can open the door to more balanced and productive conversation by asking others, with genuine curiosity, what they

think about an issue, how they came to that view, and why it is important to them.

You might think that public process is more effective when people are "mixing it up" (i.e., fighting). Preliminary research strongly suggests that groups flourish and are more productive when they are at least as interested, curious and exploratory as they are argumentative, i.e., when they spend approximately 50 percent of their time advocating (arguing for a particular point of view) and the other half in inquiring (asking questions to exploring a position).[23]

12 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. **The change you want to create is the change you start with.**
2. **Public conversations reflect the character of a community. They also build community.**
3. **The very personal is universal.**
4. **The process is as important as the product.**
5. **Balance advocacy and inquiry.**
6. **You cannot solve problems with the same level of thinking that helped create those problems.**
7. **Positions differ from needs and interests.**
8. **Differentiation precedes integration and expansion.**
9. **Strategic questions open conversations to constructive inquiry and possibility thinking.**
10. **If you do not agree on the problem or vision, you will not agree on the solution(s).**
11. **It is difficult to find win/win solutions if you start with a win/lose mind set.**
12. **Reflection enables you to move beyond the stuck places.**

6. ***You cannot solve problems with the same level of thinking that helped create those problems.*** Analytical thinking on its own is not an effective approach to solving problems that are difficult to define, inter-related, and complex in nature. Public participation processes need to help everyone see the whole picture; see interdependencies and complex cause-and-effect relationships; understand how "mental models" shape our perspectives; maintain a long-term and a wide-angle view of the situation; and resist trying to resolve complex issues too quickly with seductive and illusory "silver-bullets".

7. ***Positions differ from needs and interests.*** Positions are what people have decided they want. In verbalizing their positions, people do not usually voice their underlying needs or interests or what they really want. This is particularly true in the early stages of a conversation. Thus, the real problem or need is often not clear at first. You can get to the needs or interests by asking "Why? Why is this important?" It is frequently in the needs or interests underlying a position that common ground can be found or developed. Public conversations that focus on positions and skip unearthing people's needs and interests lead to failure or unsatisfying solutions.[24]

8. ***Differentiation precedes integration and expansion.*** Focus on differences before commonalities? It seems counter-intuitive. And, yet it is through clearly understanding differing needs and interests that integrative solutions or what people desire in common can emerge. Driving towards commonalities and integration too quickly can heighten people's fears and deepen the belief that the differences are inexorable and insurmountable. Focusing on differences also helps illuminate the multiple facets of positions that might initially be perceived as monolithic.[25]

9. ***Strategic questions open conversations to constructive inquiry and possibility thinking.*** For example, questions such as "What's our highest dream for the process? What is the best possible outcome we could imagine?" or "What is the real problem we are trying to solve? What is the most important question we want to ask ourselves about this situation?" tend to open up the "space" and evoke more creative and big-picture thinking.

10. ***If you do not agree on the problem or vision, you will not agree on the solution(s).*** If people do not agree on the major issue(s) facing the community, or they do not agree on their desired future, they will most likely not agree on what needs to change to solve the issue or move the community forward.

11. I***t is difficult to find win/win solutions if you start with a win/lose mind set.*** As depicted in Figure 1, if you begin with the intention of making win/win decisions and that turns out to not be possible, you can back into win/lose options. If however, you assume from the start that there needs to be winners and losers, you can usually only back into lose/lose options. It is difficult to start with a "zero-sum" game and then switch to a "positive-sum" game. By then, people have become angry or hurt and their positions hardened. As you move from right to left, the space for creativity and possibility thinking gets more limited as those involved jockey to save face and get what they can.

Figure 1: Win/Win or Lose/Lose Continuum
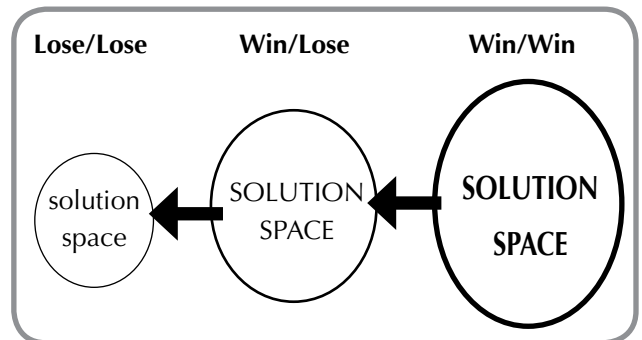
12. ***Reflection enables you to move beyond the stuck places.*** If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten. If you can inquire into the "conversation" beneath the conversation, meaning the assumptions, interpretations and conclusions that you are unconsciously bringing to the table; and if you can understand how these affect how you are framing and considering the issues, you will be better able to more realistically gauge how real the disagreements are and the degree of challenge in resolving them. You may also find your way out of seemingly intractable impasses.

Elements of Innovative Approaches to Public Conversation

The newer approaches to public participation combine a series of elements to varying degrees in various ways. By identifying what is common among a variety of approaches we hope that leaders, process design consultants, and facilitators can custom design processes for each situation and not get caught in the "I-know-how-to-use-a-hammer-this-must-be-a-nail" syndrome. The one-process-fits-all approach to public participation works against communities developing more process savvy or literacy for themselves. One-process-fits all also tends to leave the process more in the hands of the consultants than in the hands of the community. There are many paths to meaningful public conversations.

Although not all the approaches listed in Appendix A include all of these elements, here are what many of them have in common.

Create Conducive Conditions

Situation assessment. This is a critical step in determining whether a participatory public process makes sense. This step includes an initial assessment of

◗ The scope and complexity of the issue or opportunity at hand (i.e., what is the real problem?)

◗ The context within which the issue or opportunity lies [26]

◗ Who could best sponsor or convene the conversations

◗ A first cut at identifying the primary stakeholders, their interests in the issue or opportunity, and how committed they are to participating in a collaborative public process with other stakeholders

◗ The potential risks and benefits of taking on or ignoring the issue or opportunity

◗ The potential purpose and goals of the process, who to involve, how and when, including the questions you want the process to answer

◗ How the process at hand relates to other decision-making processes

◗ How the participatory process might be designed and implemented.

Process design consultants and content experts. Process designers can help save time, money and heartache by designing processes that achieve the desired outcomes for the content (for example, a decision or recommendation) and for the process (for example, increased problem solving know-how and sense of community). Usually, the consultants work with a steering committee or design team of

One way to ensure ownership of the process is to create a design team or steering committee of stakeholders.

stakeholders to help frame the issues, the questions, the outcomes, and an efficacious and fair process. Often the process design expert and the facilitator are the same person(s).

Content experts are invaluable, especially if you can hire ones that understand varying perspectives and are willing and adept at handling questions from citizens. No need to reinvent the wheel if other communities have other found solutions to the issues you want to solve. Often the content experts you need are the staff members of the governmental agencies who have convened the conversations.

Stakeholder Design Team or Steering Committee. Stakeholders are those who (1) will be impacted by the outcome of the process; (2) have decision making authority or influence over the topic at hand; or, (3) who could block the outcomes of the process.

One way to ensure ownership of the process is to create a design team or steering committee of stakeholders. Their role includes defining the purpose and desired outcomes of the process, framing the strategic questions they want the process to answer, working with a process design expert to plan the overall process, and determining who will participate.

For example, in Springfield, Massachusetts, a community-wide collaborative planning initiative regarding the well-being of children was initially led by a design team consisting of representatives of key diverse interests and perspectives. They eventually created a planning group of 50 to expand their reach and get others actively involved. During the year-long planning process they were able to (1) gather input from hundreds of stakeholders including non-profit and business leaders, elected officials, public school personnel, and local residents; and, (2) create a "blueprint" for action that has already resulted in a number of tangible successes and significant progress in a number of areas including oral health, early childhood education, and family support.[27]

Explicit process to determine participants.

Determining who will participate is a significant challenge for two reasons. First, the process needs to follow any laws pertaining to public processes. For example, in California the Ralph M. Brown Act guarantees the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of all local legislative bodies (e.g., boards, councils, commissions).[28] Second, there are a variety of ways to decide who will participate. The selection process is critical because when people self-select into public processes, it is very difficult to get an accurate understanding of what the "public's opinion" really is and avoid the advocacy groups wielding more influence than is appropriate.

Possible ways to select participants include:

(1) Announcing the process through public service announcements. Whoever shows up participates (This is the process used by most current, traditional approaches.)

(2) Identifying criteria and selecting individuals who meet that criteria

(3) Identifying stakeholders groups who in turn nominate participants

(4) Identifying a random sample of citizens to invite through public research methodology

(5) Creating a demographically representative group through both a random sample and asking stakeholder groups to nominate representatives

(6) Using voter roles to create a random selection of citizens while maintaining gender and racial balance

(7) A combination of the above options.

For example, voter rolls were used to create the Citizen Assemblies in British Columbia. A random selection process, just like a jury pool, chose the assembly's 160 members. First there was a draw of 100 men and 100 women from all of the province's 79 electoral districts, asking how many would agree to serve. Eventually, one man and one woman were selected from each of the 79 districts, and two more members were added to ensure representation of native Canadians for a total of 160 members.[29]

Inclusive participation in a "fair process."

Inclusiveness and fairness are essential qualities for public participation processes to be credible. Inclusive means you involve people in decisions that affect them. People are more inclined to deem a process fair if they have a chance to provide input to decisions that affect them along with an opportunity to make their case for or against the merits of other people's ideas and assumptions.[30] They also see the process as fair if they understand the rationale underlying decisions and are clear about expectations of them after the decisions are made. The process is as important as its outcome. People are more likely to support the outcomes of a process if they believe it was fair.

This does not mean that everyone should be involved in every decision. It is important to be strategic about which issues an agency or community wants to use more inclusive and collaborative approaches to engaging people. Although it may sound counter-intuitive, the more contentious the issue, the more polarized the citizenry, and the more support that will be required for successful implementation, the more collaborative and inclusive the process needs to be. And if the issue is particularly complex, then the process will no doubt benefit from the application of multiple minds and viewpoints to solve it.

Clear and explicit decision-making process.

In public forums it is rare for the group to have final decision-making authority. The closest a group of people usually gets to decision making is preparing recommendations for an elected or appointed body that makes them. However, even in developing recommendations, a group needs to be clear how they will decide on the recommendations they want to make.[31]

It is the responsibility of the leader or the body that initiates a public process to determine the degree or level of involvement they want or need from people. The potential degrees of involvement are (1) keep *informed* (communicate the issues and options); (2) *feedback* (ask for feedback on potential options or directions); (3) *input* (ask for input prior to developing options); (4) *develop recommendation*; (collaborate with citizens and experts to develop and/or evaluate options as well as determining preferred solutions); (5) *delegate* (place final decision-making in hands of citizens through ballots, citizen juries). The degree of involvement increases from numbers one to five.

Links to official decision makers. Creating links is usually the responsibility of a stakeholder design team or steering committee. The entire process has greater impact if the policy makers or decision makers actively engage in the process and commit to seriously consider its results in their decision-making. In other words, when leaders engage citizens in a collaborative, public process, they "gotta really mean it." For example, the Citizens Assembly in British Columbia on electoral reform was established by the Legislature. The Assembly's proposal was automatically submitted by the Legislature directly to the voters in a referendum in May, 2005.[32]
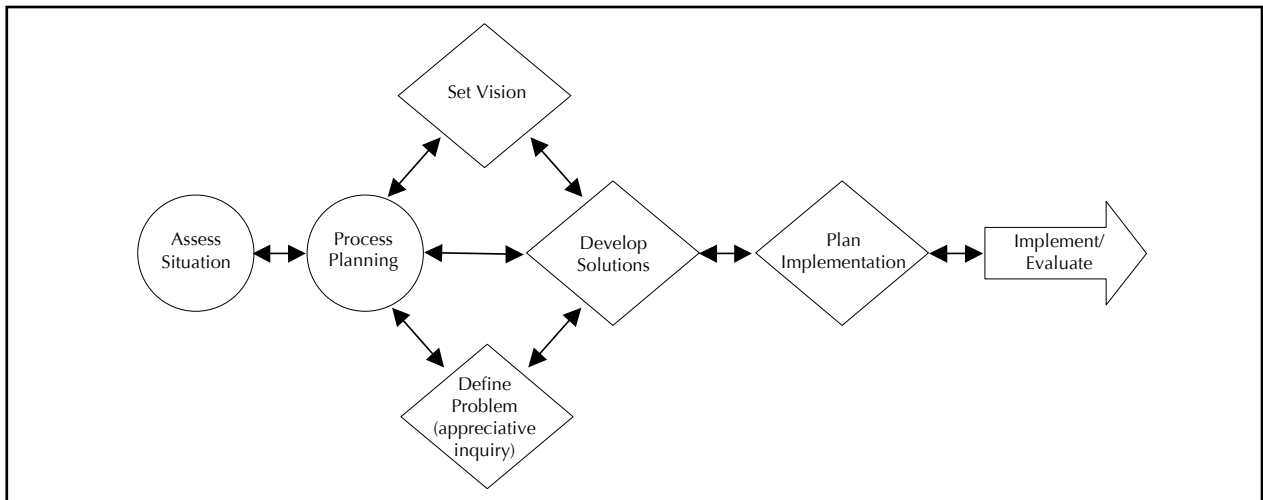
Informal, parallel conversations among stakeholders. Parallel conversations in a community can be very helpful either prior to or in parallel with a formal public hearing and decision-making processes. This is only true if the conversations are held in order to better understand the issues, people's perspectives, and improve communication among the various stakeholder groups (in other words, build "bridging" social capital). They can escalate the polarities if a select group of stakeholders hold separate conversations to solidify their position and constituency (in other words, build "bonding" social capital).

Clear purpose, specific desired outcomes, explicit process and defined time frames. The more people understand the process, the more they will trust it and support what comes out of it. Communicate the process verbally and graphically. Figure 2 is an example of possible phases in a generic, participatory process.

Elements of Innovative Approaches to Public Conversations

Create conducive conditions

◗ Situation assessment
◗ Process design consultants and content experts
◗ Stakeholder Design Team or Steering Committee
◗ Explicit process to determine participants
◗ Inclusive participation in a "fair process"
◗ Clear and explicit decision-making process
◗ Links to official decision makers
◗ Informal, parallel conversations among stakeholders
◗ Clear purpose, specific desired outcomes, explicit process and defined time frames
◗ Detailed process design
◗ Neutral education about issues and options

Generate thoughtful, collaborative, wise, and productive conversations

◗ Individual preparation and "presence"
◗ Neutral, skilled facilitators or moderators
◗ Ground rules, guidelines, or "rules of engagement"
◗ Small groups
◗ Large forums
◗ Processes to synthesize and prioritize information
◗ Technology augmentation

Translate decisions into action

◗ Track progress
◗ Manage transitions

Figure 2. Potential Phases of a Public Participation Process [33]

Detailed process design. Developing the story line or flow of conversations in small groups and large forums is similar to creating a play. What will capture people's attention and help them care about the perspectives of the other participants, bring their creativity and wisdom to the table, stay engaged and steady during the tense or uncomfortable moments? What will help them collectively reach a positive outcome at the end? Detailed agenda planning is an essential component of effective processes, even if the detailed agenda is only a carefully sequenced series of questions with clear time frames within which to consider them.

Neutral education about issues and options. People cannot effectively deliberate about issues they do not understand. Ideally, this understanding occurs through unbiased and balanced background materials, interactions with subject-matter experts, field trips, and/or conversations with various stakeholders. Background materials need to be written from the point of view of the participants, not that of content experts. Ideally, they are written and presented to help people understand the relationships among the issues.

About Decision Making

When a leader convenes a group, the leader is responsible to let people know whether they are being asked to provide input, provide feedback on proposals, develop recommendations or make the decision (This would be rare in the public arena.). Assuming it is one of the first three (input, feedback, or recommendation), the group would need to decide how they want to decide on the input, feedback or recommendations they want to communicate. Such groups often decide they want use consensus.

We define "consensus" to mean that everyone (1) understands the decision, (2) has had his or her say, and (3) states they will actively support the decision. It is easier to reach consensus when there is a back-up decision-making process. In a horizontal group where everyone has equal decision-making authority (which is what citizen groups, Board of Supervisors, or City Councils are) the fallback decision-making process is usually a vote with a simple or super majority deciding. Within hierarchical organizations, like a department in a governmental agency, the fallback decision-making process is usually the next person up in the hierarchy.

In large and/or complex projects, sometimes the most a public agency can achieve in public-sector decision-making is "informed consent" or "substantial effective agreement on a course of action."[31]

Generate Thoughtful, Collaborative, Wise and Productive Conversations

Individual preparation and "presence."
Traditionally this has meant planning your remarks; anticipating what others will say and preparing your rebuttals; and organizing others to come and support your position. Sometimes during the public process it has also unfortunately meant getting emotionally triggered and reacting (for example, getting angry, calling people names, engaging in sarcasm) to the situation, often without fully understanding it.

In meaningful public conversations individual preparation and "presence" means clarifying what is important to you and why; setting your intention for how you want to contribute to the process for the greater good; and preparing yourself to remain rational and civil throughout it. During the process, it means managing your inner state so that you can listen to the points of view of others and respectfully acknowledge them. It means you are able to participate with a "beginner's mind," remain interested, curious, compassionate and connected to your highest individual potential along with that of the community.

Neutral facilitators or moderators keep conversations focused, on track, and make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak. The presence of a neutral and skilled facilitator increases the likelihood that all perspectives will be voiced and considered by the group. They help make sure there is a balance between people advocating for their point of view and inquiring into those of others.

The approaches listed in Appendix A vary in how experienced and skilled the facilitator needs to be. For example, people with minimal experience can facilitate table conversations during 21st Century Meetings while significantly more experience and training are required to facilitate a structured dialogue or an appreciative inquiry process.

Agreement on the ground rules, guidelines or "rules of engagement." This is an important step in the process. Some typical ground rules include:

◗ One person speaks at a time. Do not interrupt

◗ No one contributes twice until everyone has had a chance to speak

◗ Listen for understanding first. Check your understanding before responding

◗ Build on each other's ideas

◗ Encourage diverse viewpoints

◗ Fairly consider every perspective or option

◗ Share responsibility for achieving desired outcomes

◗ Stay on task

◗ Come prepared, do your homework

◗ Begin and end meetings on time.

Small groups of three to 12 sitting in circles is the cornerstone of the newer models of public participation. Small groups:

◗ Provide an opportunity for everyone to speak and be heard

◗ Help people develop a sense of connection and relationship to one another in addition to the task at hand

◗ Help maintain the sense of everyone's humanity and each person's unique contributions to the proceedings.

For example, in a World Café[34], people gather in groups of four and individuals rotate among tables for several rounds to form new groups and advance their understanding and consideration of the question at hand.

Large forums. Small groups comprise forums of 40 to several thousand depending on the scope of the issue and the ambition of the sponsors and conveners. Forums combine facilitated small group conversations with feedback from and to the larger group. Depending on the approach being used, participants either stay in the same group or form different small groups throughout the process.

For example, in Study Circles[35], a large number of people work in groups of eight to 12 over a weekend or several weeks to develop solutions to a common concern. All the participants then gather at an "action forum" to develop an integrated action strategy.

Processes to synthesize and prioritize information. Collaborative processes can seem a bit chaotic at times since they usually involve a plethora of input. There need to be vehicles for capturing and

In meaningful public conversations individual preparation and "presence" means clarifying what is important to you and why; setting your intention for how you want to contribute to the process for the greater good; and preparing yourself to remain rational and civil throughout it.

synthesizing all of it while respecting each person's contributions. Here are two different examples for how to do that.

In a series of public hearings held in northern California to provide input to a county department, people interviewed one another at a series of public meetings. They worked in small groups to identify the major messages and themes from the interviews. These messages were transcribed onto large pieces of paper and then prioritized by the entire group. The prioritized lists were summarized by a consultant and presented to the project's stakeholder steering committee who then formed five different groups of stakeholders who developed a series of recommendations.

In their 21st Century Town Meetings, America-Speaks uses a Theme Team of content experts whose exclusive responsibility is to summarize messages streaming to them during the meeting via computer.[36] The Theme Team feeds a summary back to the forum via a fast feedback system.[37] Forum participants use wireless keypads to prioritize the themes. Participants see the results of the polling projected on a screen as voting progresses.

Technology augmentation. Before or after face-to-face sessions, elected officials can converse with their constituents online.[38] Because our primary focus here is face-to-face meetings, the array of online approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information we suggest pages 33 to 43 in "Public Participation: A Manager's Guide to Citizen" engagement available at **www.businessofgovernment.org**.

Productivity during both small and large group meetings increases dramatically when supported by technology that can range from (at the low end) manual recording on large pieces of paper with use of sticky notes, pens and tape to (at the high end) networked laptop computers and wireless keypad polling.

21st Century Town Meetings may be the most ambitious in its use of technology. Its use of networked laptop computers, wireless keypads, and interactive television enables this approach to engage hundreds or thousands of people at one or various locations in one forum. Choosing Healthplans All Together (CHAT)® uses a computer process to help a smaller number of participants wrestle with limits and tradeoffs in order to make explicit and visible choices.[39]

Geographic information systems (GIS) help people visualize, analyze, and communicate about important decisions by creating realistic 3D visual models that help people analyze choices about land use, transportation planning, siting of social services, environmental remediation, and policy planning.[40] This tool supports citizens being able to collaborate with "the experts" on decisions about the future of their community.

Some of the leading players in the country in the field of technology augmentation to public processes are at the Institute for Spatial Analysis at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California and CoVision in San Francisco.

Translate Decisions into Actions

Track progress. Creating citizen-friendly methods to track the results is an important part of any public process. People's faith in deliberations and commitment to future ones will increase when there is an understandable and accessible way to hold those responsible for implementation accountable.

For example, in 2001, citizens in Hamilton County, Ohio, developed a comprehensive master plan through eleven community forums, one youth forum, and a week-long online forum followed by a town meeting of 1,300. Through this process they agreed on four core goals: assuring economic prosperity; building collaborative decision-making; embracing diversity and equity; and balancing development and the environment. A series of community action teams developed strategies to help the county achieve the goals. In 2003, the County Commissioners endorsed these and in 2004 the Regional Planning Commission launched the implementation phase. To hold themselves accountable, they put in place a Community Results Accountability Framework online so citizens can evaluate the progress that the various initiatives and projects make toward carrying out the strategies and achieving the goals. [41]

Manage transitions. "Transition" is the mental and emotional process that people go through to come to terms with a new situation. Transition is internal and usually hidden. Change is external. For example, changing jobs is a change. Your response to the new job is transition.

Until this more hidden aspect of change is compassionately and skillfully tended to, changes resulting from public processes will most likely not be real or lasting.[42] Meaningful public conversation involves people going through a transition either at the start of the process, during it, or afterwards. Key questions to ask periodically include "Who has lost what?…Who stands to lose what?…Who might benefit and how?…Who stands to gain what?"

For example, in this paper we suggest that people change how they participate in public conversations. This will entail going through the psychological process of letting go of how they have done things in the past and adopting new ways of participating. In between, people will most likely go through a period of confusion and discomfort as they grapple with and eventually become more accustomed to different ways to engage in public conversations.

"Transition" is the mental and emotional process that people go through to come to terms with a new situation…Until this more hidden aspect of change is compassionately and skillfully tended to, changes resulting from public processes will most likely not be real or lasting.

Tips for Combining the Principles and Elements into an Effective Process

Part of the art of effective process design involves knowing which principles and elements to combine and emphasize for which public conversation. Here are some tips related to the degree of complexity of the issue at hand and the amount of controversy surrounding it.

Complexity. A well-designed approach to public participation can make a significant difference to the quality of the deliberations and decisions regarding complex issues. If the issues at hand are complex, the approach will need to

◗ Allow adequate time for people to understand the issues from prepared materials and content experts

◗ Include education about issues and the relationships among them

◗ Frame questions that invite constructive inquiry and possibility thinking

◗ Include small and large group sessions to engender left and right brain thinking along with systems thinking (in other words, consider the dynamic relationships among elements of the topic at hand)

◗ Employ technology augmentation to help people see patterns, relationships, and the big picture.

Controversy. When the topic at hand is the subject of dispute…

◗ Assess the situation to understand the needs and interests underlying the positions of various stakeholders; check whether stakeholders are willing to participate; and plant the seeds for a collaborative process

◗ Do everything possible to build understanding and support for the purpose, desired outcomes, process, guiding principles, and decision making process

◗ Design the process in collaboration with a steering committee or design team of stakeholders. (Building process agreements at the start makes building content agreements at the end more possible.)

◗ Include an informal, parallel process among stakeholders to build understanding and engender improved communication

◗ Ask people to prepare themselves to participate effectively in the process

◗ Build agreement on ground rules

◗ Use an experienced, neutral facilitator

◗ Educate participants about the difference between positions and needs and interests

◗ Allow adequate time for people to share and understand each others' stories about what is important to them and why

◗ Use structured conversational forms in the early stages of the process.[43]

Potential Hurdles to Changing Public Processes

Here are some of the challenges that we may face in improving our public processes. With patience and persistence, it is possible to successfully handle them.

Role of elected and appointed officials.
Developing more thoughtful, collaborative, wise, and productive public conversations could take decision makers out of the difficult job of gauging public opinion into the hard work of helping citizens make public judgments. However, some believe that it is exclusively the role of elected officials, with the help of staff, to shape policies and programs. Some elected officials and staff members may believe that citizens cannot contribute meaningfully to policy and program development. Leaders may feel more comfortable with the more common and familiar techniques for citizen participation.

What if we decided that one of the most important roles of today's elected officials and leaders in the 21st century is to create the conditions for thoughtful, collaborative, wise and productive public participation? We believe that the complex challenges facing us require new deliberation and decision-making processes to help us meet them. As noted in a report prepared for the National Rural Assembly in June, 2007, "The rapid rate of change, declining effectiveness of traditional economic strategies, increasing environmental challenges, and demographic transitions require leadership to guide the community in new ways of thinking and doing."[44]

Enough input already!
Public officials may think that they already gather enough public input. In fact, they may think they gather too much and, at times, wish they could meet behind closed doors to sort things out. Traditional processes of public participation are often so ineffective that the very people who may have started out well-intentioned in their desire to gather public input now feel exhausted and cynical about it.

Idealism and loss of control.
Those who convene public meetings might be skeptical or inexperienced regarding what is possible. Some may dismiss the new forms of engaging "the public" as idealistic or simply fear loss of control of the process. They may not realize that the approaches summarized here and detailed in the Appendix have more than a fifteen-year history in the U.S. and abroad. (These approaches have a much longer history in the private sector.)

Strategic choice.
The newer approaches will not be appropriate for all decisions. Leaders will need to be strategic about choosing issues for which they want to design a new approach to public participa-

People have become accustomed to showing up at public meetings, stating their position, and then leaving…It will take time to develop the habit of coming…ready to engage in more thoughtful and collaborative processes.

tion in decision making. The criteria to consider when deciding whether and how to involve citizens in more participatory ways includes time available to make the decision, potential impact of the decision, degree of buy-in needed for implementation, whether it is an important educational opportunity for the community, and whether the decision makers have already made up their minds.

It is important *not* to engage people in a participatory process if the decision makers have already made up their mind. Processes that are charades increase people's cynicism and make it nearly impossible for them to trust in public processes in the future.

Raising expectations.
Elected officials and governmental administrators may be afraid of interactive processes that increase public investment and raise expectations of performance.

More work upfront. Improving our public conversations and decision-making processes would require organizations, agencies and governing bodies to think about decision making, public policy development, planning, and citizen involvement in a more strategic vs. a routine way. Public processes would need to be designed and led differently than in the past. Initially, this would involve more work.

No incentive. People who get what they want with the current approaches may object to the rules changing. There may be no incentive for them to want to participate in more collaborative processes if the current approaches serve their interests. Others believe that they have been vilified in public processes and so understandably may refuse to come back to the table.

Organized interest groups. Creating a level playing field among interest groups and non-aligned individuals may not attract interest groups who have a clear agenda to which they are wedded. A pre-determined, set agenda does not lend itself well to a process that invites multiple stakeholders with their respective agendas to work together to figure out a way forward for the good of the whole.

Busy people/complex issues. People have busy lives. Many want to be able to drop into a public hearing, state their piece, and then go home. This often provides decision makers with ill-considered and ill-informed opinions. We need to get more adept at educating people about complex issues.

Changing cast of characters. For lengthy and complex public processes, it is challenging to continue to educate and update newcomers. As processes get more effective and efficient, we hope people will want to participate more consistently and decrease the need to continue to orient people in any given process.

Old Habits. People have become accustomed to showing up at public meetings, stating their position, and then leaving. Some are in the habit of coming to public conversations "loaded for bear." It will take time to build their faith in "positive sum" processes that are more than a "hit and run" endeavor. It will take time to develop the habit of coming to public conversations ready to engage in more thoughtful and collaborative processes.

Used to saying whatever they want to say, sometimes for however long they want to say it, people might experience more focused and structured processes as too restrictive. It will take time for them to see that the benefits of a more disciplined approach outweighs any initial discomfort they might feel.

Trust. People will need to believe that they have contributions to make and that decision makers will value theirs. Where there is a history of being disenfranchised or ignored, this will be a hard belief to inculcate.

Potential Next Steps to Change Public Conversations

Here are some potential ways to change public processes and tackle the hurdles noted previously.

1. Ask organizational leaders, elected officials, governmental administrators and staff, and citizens what they think is and is not working in the current approaches to public participation and the cost of staying with "business as usual." Build agreement on what people want public processes to be and what they want them to achieve.

2. Identify "early adopters" who may want to experiment with new approaches in their next project.

3. Identify an issue to experiment with a different approach. Implement and evaluate the process and its impact. Begin to develop a set of guiding principles and effective approaches for the community.

4. Work with elected officials and governmental administrators to build agreement on the criteria for "good decisions" and "good decision making processes" in your community.

5. Create a coalition of diverse groups to sponsor an initiative to strengthen your community's civic engagement processes.

6. Develop and deliver a series of workshops and/or host a forum on New Approaches to Public Participation.

7. Identify local leaders, consultants and facilitators to become experts in the design and implementation of more meaningful public conversations.

Conclusion

The characteristics of traditional approaches to public participation in decision-making are not equal to the task of defining and solving the complex issues facing most communities. In addition to the cost we pay for them in dollars, energy, effort, time and social capital, they profoundly compromise the quality of our decisions while at the same time undermining our desire and ability to work together. Newer approaches are revitalizing public processes in communities around the world.

We invite those of you who convene or participate in public conversations to consider how to make your involvement in them more thoughtful, collaborative, wise and productive. The quality of public participation processes is central to the life and meaning of our communities and our democracy. Each public conversation is an opportunity to make a positive difference.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix A—Approaches to Public Conversations

Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
Appreciative Inquiry	Strengthen a system's (group, community, organization) capacity to understand, anticipate, and enhance/create positive possibilities. An approach to change that focuses on what is and could be rather than what isn't and what should be	◗ One on one and small group interviews identify and appreciate the best of "what is" ◗ Small and large groups dialogue about and envision system's (group, community, organization) potential for unique contribution	www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu
Art of Hosting and Harvesting	Connect and align our inner and outer worlds; create a container for emergence of ways forward; learn to be together in the best possible way; gain the courage to travel through fear; host with a consciousness so people can be together in an authentic way	◗ Find a path between chaos and order that leads to new possibilities, collective learning, and innovation ◗ Process "steps" include: name the issue, define the core question; create collective clarity of purposes and principles; design the process; host the group; follow-up and continue learning	www.artofhosting.org www.berkana.org
Circle Practice	Build communities of reflection, adventure and purpose	◗ Components include: intention, welcome or start-point, establishing the center (object(s) in center of circle that represent intention of the circle), check-in/greeting, setting circle agreements, Checkout and farewell ◗ Three principles; leadership rotates, responsibility is shared, place ultimate reliance on inspiration rather than on personal agenda	www.peerspirit.com
CHAT (Choosing Healthplans All Together)	To ensure that community values are incorporated into healthcare policy and practices	◗ Two and a half hour computer simulation game and discussion during which 10-12 participants make decisions about health plan benefits packages when there are more choices than resources	www.sahealthdecisions.org

Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
Choice Dialogue	Engage the public and other stakeholders in dialogues that build trust and improve decision-making	◗ Day-long structured dialogues in which up to 40 randomly selected participants learn to see an issue from viewpoints other than their own ◗ Materials present values-based scenarios in citizens' language, not as policy choices, and used as a starting point for participants to define a shared vision, steps towards that vision, and tradeoffs they could accept.	www.viewpointlearning.org
Citizen Jury	Create and maintain a high quality method for engaging a microcosm of the public in the discussion of public policy issues	◗ A randomly selected panel of about 18 citizens (a microcosm of the public) meets for four to five days to examine an issue of public significance. Jurors are paid a stipend for their time. They hear from a variety of expert witnesses and deliberate an issue. ◗ On final day of their moderated hearings, the members of the Citizens Jury present their recommendations to the public.	www.jefferson-center.org
Citizens Assembly	◗ Empower average citizens to formally propose electoral reforms that politicians have too strong a conflict of interest to propose themselves ◗ Remove partisanship, special interests, and incumbent protectionism from the deliberations	◗ Convene a group of randomly selected (just like a jury pool) citizens ◗ Eleven-month tenure moves through three phases: learning;, public hearings; final deliberations	www.newamerica.net
Civic Discourse	Promote citizen deliberation on tough political and social issues, resulting in increased citizen participation, reflection, communication and respect	Principles include: provide framework for dialogue (ground rules), provide all with a voice (create safe space), focus on issues not personalities, invite/encourage variety of perspectives, value evidence variety, seek common ground, avoid personal attacks and ideological sloganeering, focus on understanding rather than persuading	Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy www.k-state.edu/icdd

| Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
Collaborative Change	Use systems thinking and collaboration to envision and create a desired future in a team, group, organization, community or among teams, groups, organizations and communities	◗ Stakeholders build agreements as they collaboratively work through three phases: develop the foundation for change, design change, implement and evaluate change ◗ Agreed upon principles of collaborative change guide how stakeholders work and involve others	www.gelinasjames.com
Collaborative Change Approach	Support people to engage conflict creatively and envision futures collaboratively; community reconciliation	◗ Help people understand the situation through three lenses or points of view: individual, group, and collective as a foundation for building consensus on goals and actions	www.ariagroup.com
Consensus Conference	Include views of the general public into the assessment of new scientific and technological developments	◗ Choose panel of 10-20 citizens to reflect a variety of socio-demographic criteria ◗ Panel prepares for and selects witnesses for conference that is open to the press and public ◗ At end of conference panel produces report outlining conclusions and recommendations that are circulated to key decision makers and the media	UK Centre for Economic and Environmental Development www.ukceed.org
Deliberative Polling	Public education. Useful with issues where public may have little knowledge or information or where public may have failed to confront the trade-offs applying to public policy	◗ Random, representative sample is first polled on target issue ◗ Members are invited to discuss issues face to face and provided with carefully balanced briefing materials. The question competing experts and political leaders ◗ Sample is asked original questions again	Center for Deliberative Polling, Stanford University www.cdd.stanford.edu

Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
Dialogue/ Constructive Conversations	Promote constructive relationships among individuals and groups whose conflicting positions about public issues involve fundamentally different values and world views	⬤ Customized, structured dialogues in which people who have different beliefs and perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding ⬤ Significant attention given to pre-meeting preparation, collaborative and appreciative stance of facilitators, clarity of purpose, and careful crafting of questions	www.publicconversations.org
Dynamic Facilitation	Empower people to solve impossible-to-solve issues by creating a "zone" of thinking and talking known as "choice creating" where shifts and breakthroughs are normal.	⬤ Facilitator elicits, sustains, and enhances self-organizing dynamics of change; focuses more on group energy than the agenda; helps people determine an issue they care about deeply; uses "appropriate level of thinking"	www.tobe.net
Dynamic Planning Charrette	Help people build community capacity for collaboration to create healthy community plans	⬤ A multi-day process consisting of a series of feedback loops between public workshops and a design studio A multi-disciplinary design team develops alternative plans based on public feedback and presents those plans back to the public at workshops. Over the course of at least four consecutive days, the plans are refined and developed further	www.charretteinstitute.org
Fast-Feedback	Accelerate feedback cycles in meetings in order to include everyone's input in an actionable framework. Build understanding and alignment through various levels—from the personal to the whole group—quickly and efficiently	⬤ Use groupware (networked laptop computers) and facilitated processes ⬤ Scalable to groups of 50 to 5,000 located in one place or several	www.covision.com

Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
Future Search	Help groups and communities to envision the future they prefer and to articulate specific steps to move in the directions they desire.	▶ Get the "whole system in the room" ▶ In four to five sessions, each of a 1/2 day, 60-80 people in one room (or hundreds in parallel rooms) draft a time line of key events leading to the present; identify external present trends and what want to do in future; describe preferred future; identify common ground; and action plan	www.futuresearch.net
Geospatial analysis (Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing)	Help people visualize, analyze and communicate about important relationships and trends in graphic form for more effective decision making regarding issues or policy questions affecting a large geographic area	▶ Remote sensing technologies such as satellite imagery and aerial photography generate data for use in GIS ▶ Software tools in the form of "smart maps" (realistic 3D models of the world or situation as it is and as it could be) enable people to analyze the impact of potential choices/options	www.humboldt.edu/~isa www.communityviz.com
Nonviolent Communication	Strengthen our ability to remain human even under trying circumstances	▶ Focus our consciousness and communication on four areas: what we are observing, feeling, and needing and what we are requesting to enrich our lives	www. nonviolentcommunication.com
Online community discussion	Broaden participation in democracy and build trust in government	▶ Web 2.0 technology facilitates community conversation among residents and elected officials ▶ Elected officials frame issues for on line discussion. Residents read official's framing article and post their thoughts in online forums	www.peakdemocracy.com

Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
Open Space	Enable and empower people in any kind of organization to create inspired meetings and events around issues and questions of importance to them	◗ Participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme ◗ Groups of five to 2,000+ work in one-day workshops, three-day conferences, or regular weekly staff meetings ◗ Self-managed work groups, shared leadership, diversity used as a resource	www.openspaceworld.org
Partnering Process	◗ Build effective coalitions (inside a team, group, or organization; or among teams, groups and organizations) through a collaborative process	◗ Through a series of small and large group conversations, Jointly develop a shared mission, goals, and operating agreements to ensure success in achieving common goals and resolving common issues	www.holonconsultants.com
Public Deliberations	◗ A network of civic, educational, and other organizations, and individuals, whose common interest is to promote public deliberation in America ◗ Provide citizens the opportunity to consider a broad range of choices, weigh the pros and cons of those choices, and meet with each other in a public dialogue to identify the concerns they hold in common	◗ Structured, local dialogues that occur across the country around a critical national policy issue. Dialogues are moderated by trained NIF facilitators ◗ Non-partisan 'issue books" provide background information and frame the discussion in terms of at least three policy options. Forum results are presented to national and local leaders	National Issues Forum www.nifi.org
Study Circles (now known as Everyday Democracy)	◗ Help communities develop their own ability to solve problems by exploring ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to create change	◗ Groups of 8-15 people within a community or region meet regularly over a period of months to discuss a designated issue ◗ At the end of the process, all participants take part in a community meeting, called an Action Forum, to create strategies for the future	www.everydaydemocracy.org

Approach	Purpose	Characteristics	For More Information
21st Century Meeting	Reinvigorate democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision making that most impacts their lives	◗ Large-scale forums (100-5,000) engage citizens in public decision making processes at local, regional, state, and regional levels of governance with the support of facilitators, networked laptop computers, polling key pads, and (at times) interactive television ◗ Recruit demographically representative groups of citizens through a variety of means, including grassroots organizing and the media	www.americaspeaks.org
Visual Recording and Graphic Facilitation	Enable participants to see their ideas, notice relationships and patterns, review and share the content of the event	◗ One or more "graphic recorders" scribe meeting proceedings or presentations using images, symbols, words and phrases in view of group on mural size paper with color pens ◗ Result is a mural or map that highlights key concepts in a relational way with illustrations, diagrams, and supporting text	www.ifvp.org
Wisdom Council	Develops, researches and promotes a social innovation in order to open new doors of possibility for our society	◗ Twelve-member, randomly selected Wisdom Council frames issues and presents them to representatives of a larger body or system (e.g., community, city, organization) for choice-creating dialogue and deliberation	www.wisedemocracy.org
World Café	◗ Enhance people's capacity to talk and think more deeply together about the critical issues facing communities, organizations, nations, and planet ◗ Access the mutual intelligence and wisdom needed to create innovative pathways forward	◗ Three rounds of progressive conversation lasting 20 to 30 minutes at small round or square tables that seat four or five. Each round followed by a dialogue among the whole group ◗ Explore powerful questions that matter	www.theworldcafe.com

Appendix B — Hierarchy of Factors to Consider in a Public Decision-Making [45]
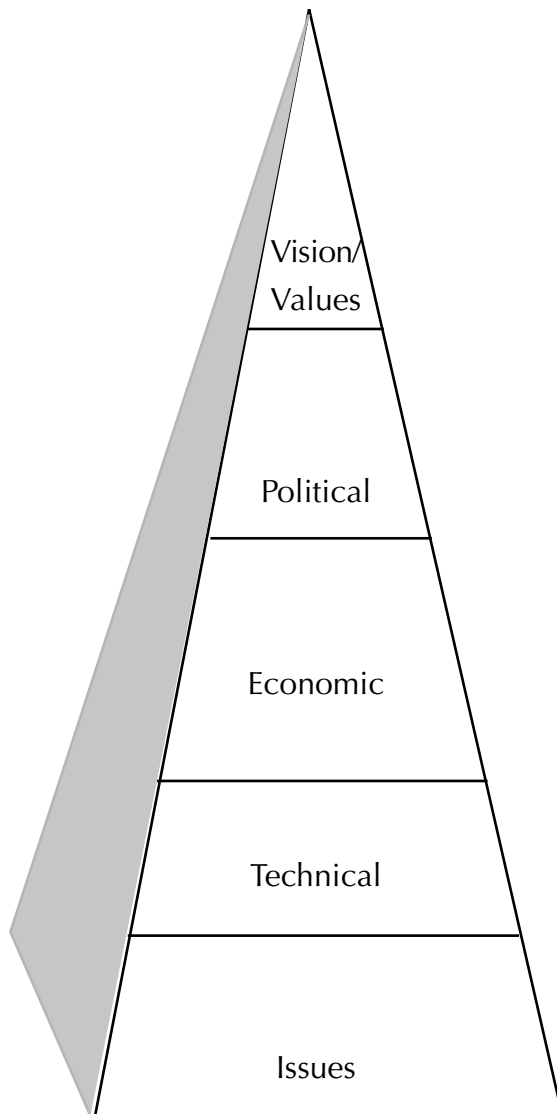
Vision/Values

◗ What future do you envision?

◗ What values to you hold dear? What has intrinsic worth in this community? What criteria should guide our decision making?

Political

◗ How important is this issue to decision makers and citizens?

◗ How important is it to solve it?

Economic

◗ What are the costs and benefits of solving this problem or implementing this solution?

◗ How does this project compare in importance to other projects?

Technical

◗ What proven practices or technology can be applied to solve the problem?

Issues

◗ What are the issues that are driving this deliberation? How do you define the "real" problem?

End Notes

1 We describe these figures as "at least" as the totals include six of the seven cities in the county; and only ten of the 41 special districts. The totals do not include school board meetings. We also assume that the totals are quite conservative because those completing the surveys interpreted "staff" in various ways. Some did not include the salaries of either paid elected officials or senior managers.

2 Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, 2).

3 Ibid, 279-282.

4 Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006, 268).

5 David Mamet, "Attention Must Be Paid," *The New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2005.

6 "6 dead in shooting rampage at Kirkwood City Council," (*St. Louis Dispatch*, Feb. 8, 2008).

7 Jay Rothman, *Resolving Identify-Based Conflicts* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, 7).

8 Joanna Macy, *Widening Circles: A Memoir* (British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2000, 190).

9 Neighborhood Action, *Citizen Summit III Participant Guide* (Washington, D.C. Neighborhood Action, 2003).

10 Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004, 30).

11 David Mathews, *For Communities to Work* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 2002, 41).

12 Ibid, 40.

13 Ibid, 39-40.

14 *Webster's.*

15 Joy Keller-Weidman, personal communication, 2007.

16 Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, 190).

17 Study Circles, *Success Story: East Hampton, Connecticut* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Study Circles Resource Center, 2005)

18 Frans Johansson, *The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts and Cultures* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2004).

19 Jay Rothman and Chris Soderquist, "From Riots to Resolution: Engaging Conflict for Reconciliation" (*The Systems Thinker*, 13 (8), 2-6).

20 Mary V. Gelinas and Roger G. James, *Collaborative Change* (San Francsico: Jossey-Bass/ Pfeiffer, 1998).

21 Peter Block, *Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community: Changing the Nature of the Conversation* (A Small Group, 2005).

22 Rothman, 34.

23 Barbara L. Frederickson and Marcial F. Losada, "Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamic of Human Flourishing," *American Psychologist* 60 (2005) pp. 678-686).

24　For more information about getting to needs and interests, see Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981); William Ury, *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way From Confrontation to Cooperation* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); William Ury, *The Power of A Positive No* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007); Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication, 2nd Ed.* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press Book, 2005).

25　Rothman, 61-67.

26　Eric Rosenblum, Division Manager, City of San Jose Environmental Services Department, and John Anderson, New South Wales Department of Public Works, have defined a hierarchy of factors to consider in public decision Making (See Appendix B.) Their hierarchy suggests that conveners ask the following questions in the following order. Are people's vision and values clear? Is the issue important to decision makers and citizens? How does it stack up when compared to other issues on the community's proverbial plate? Are there proven solutions to the problem? What are the underlying issues that would drive the deliberation? When the questions at the top of the hierarchy are not answered before the ones at the bottom of the pyramid, citizens can get trapped in "solution wars" or no-exit discussions. See Eric Rosenblum and John Anderson, "The Water Reclamation Matrix: A Framework for Sustainable Water Use," *2nd IWA Leading Edge Conference on Sustainability* (London: International Water Association, 2007).

27　Curtis Ogden, *Cherish Every Child in Springfield* (Boston: Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2006).

28　*The Brown Act: Open Meetings for Local Legislative Bodies* (California Attorney General's Office, 2003).

29　*Citizens Assembly: An Effective Vehicle for Political Reform* (New America Foundation).

30　W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, "Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy" (*Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 1997, 65-75).

31　When a leader convenes a group, the leader is responsible to let people know whether they are being asked to provide input, provide feedback on proposals, develop recommendations or make the decision (This would be rare in the public arena.). Assuming it is one of the first three (input, feedback, or recommendation), the group would need to decide how they want to decide on the input, feedback or recommendations they want to communicate. Such groups often decide they want use consensus.

We define "consensus" to mean that everyone (1) understands the decision, (2) has had his or her say, and (3) states they will actively support the decision. It is easier to reach consensus when there is a back-up decision-making process. In a horizontal group where everyone has equal decision-making authority (which is what citizen groups, Board of Supervisors, or City Councils are) the fallback decision-making process is usually a vote with a simple or super majority deciding. Within hierarchical organizations, like a department in a governmental agency, the fallback decision-making process is usually the next person up in the hierarchy.

In large and/or complex projects, sometimes the most a public agency can achieve in public-sector decision-making is "informed consent" or "substantial effective agreement on a course of action." For more information on this, see "Citizen Participation Handbook for Public Officials and Other Professionals Working in the Public Sector" by Hans and Annemarie Bleiker with the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning in Monterey, CA (**www.ipmp-bleiker.com**).

32 *Citizens Assembly: An Effective Vehicle for Political Reform* (New America Foundation).

33 Adapted from Interaction Institute for Social Change, *Cherish Every Child in Springfield*, March 2006,p. 6).

34 Juanita Brown with David Isaacs, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

35 Brad Rourke, *Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all* (Pomfret, Connecticut: Study Circles Resource Center, 2006)

36 **www.americaspeaks.org**

37 **www.covision.com**

38 **www.PeakDemocracy.com** or **www.OpenHumboldtGovernment.com**

39 Marjorie Ginsburg and Kathy Glasmire, *Issue Brief: Designing Coverage: Uninsured Californians Weigh the Options* (California HealthCare Foundation, June, 2007).

40 Steven J. Steinberg and Sheila L. Steinberg, *GIS:Geographic Information Systems for the Social Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006).

41 Community Compass, *Implementation Campaigns: Evaluation and Performance Development* (Hamilton County, Ohio: Community Compass, 2002).

42 For more on transitions see William Bridges, *Transitions* (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1980) and *Managing Transitions* (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

43 Margie Herzig and Laura Chasin, *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project* (Watertown, MA: Public Conversations Project, 2006).

44 Carsey Institute, *Rural America in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Field* (University of New Hampshire, 2007).

45 Adapted from the work of Eric Rosenblum and John Anderson, 2007. (See footnote 39 for more information.)

Conversation is the way we discover how
to transform our world, together.

- Margaret J. Wheatley

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