

A. Purpose of Public Deliberation

The primary purpose of public deliberation is to increase the likelihood of making sound, well-supported decisions about public issues.

Making decisions together proceeds best when we use a form of talking and reasoning known as deliberation or deliberative dialogue. General discussion isn't as effective because it doesn't lead to decisions, and debate tends to center on two options, often polarizing people to the point they won't work together.

The particular character of deliberative talk comes from the work it is designed to do. If we are to increase the probability that our decisions will be wise, we can't just sound off, argue over solutions, or clarify values. We have to explore and test our ideas as we struggle with hard choices, considering the pros and cons of each option. To deliberate is to weigh the consequences of various approaches much as people used to weigh gold on an old-fashioned scale. What are the costs of doing what we want to do? What are the benefits?

Deliberation increases the likelihood that our decision will be sound by helping us to determine whether we are willing to accept the consequences of the action we are about to take. While we can't be certain that we have made the right decision until we have finally acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate costs and benefits, to ask ourselves how high a price we would be willing to pay to get what we want. (David Mathews, *For Communities to Work*, p. 23)

Privately, we deliberate whenever we have an important decision to make and have to weigh several options carefully. This collection of materials offers guidance for bringing the kind of deliberating we do privately into a public setting – where we have to make decisions about what to do about public issues, not just with friends and family members, but with people we may not know at all.

REMEMBER

The good moderator:

- Doesn't advance any opinions
- Is not an expert
- Knows a few strategic facts on each choice
- Has a pithy quote or two, for and against each choice
- Spends about the same amount of time on each choice
- Sticks to the choices
- Introduces the issue clearly
- Makes sure that everybody joins in the talk
- Doesn't let one person dominate
- Pushes the group to make hard choices
- Doesn't make up the group's mind
- Helps the group hear its public voice

THE DELIBERATION

This is the actual forum/study circle experience. It is absolutely critical that the moderator remain neutral. Your task is to guide the deliberation. Some typical questions that promote deliberation are:

I understand you don't like that position, but for those who hold it, what do you think they deeply care about?

For those who hold that position, what do they care deeply about?

What might be the consequences of that choice for other citizens?

What motivates that choice?

If push came to shove, what would you do and why?

What might be the results of your ideas on others?

What is blocking the discussion?

If we followed this course of action, what would be the effects on your life?

What are the trade-offs you are, or are not, willing to make?

What is most valuable to you or to those who support this choice?

How do you separate what is a private matter and a public matter on this issue?

Could you tell me a story to illustrate that?

Can you make the best case for the choice you least favor?

How would someone make a case against what you just said?

Would someone identify the values that seem to be clashing? What is really happening here?

What are the negative aspects of the choice you favor?

Can someone suggest areas that we seem to have in common?

Who should we all be talking with? Policymakers? Neighbors?

What were the consequences of what you said? Does that make a difference?

Can anyone envision how their life would change if this choice became national policy?

How might your concerns differ if you were poor? Wealthy? A worker in an affected industry?

What is there about this choice that you just cannot live with?

How might others see the issue?

Suppose you can't have everything, what would you choose?

Stages of a Large-Group Forum

Welcome	The convener or moderator introduces the NIF program.
Ballot	Participants complete Pre-Forum Ballots before discussion begins.
Ground Rules	Participants review desired outcomes of the forum.
Starter Video	The starter video sets the tone for the discussion.
Personal Stake	As an icebreaker, participants tell personal experiences related to issue.
The Deliberation	Deliberation: Participants examine all the choices.
Closing	Hearing a Public Voice: Going from my voice to our voice.
Ballot	Participants complete Post-Forum Ballots.

Deliberative Forums: 4 Questions

1. What is valuable to us?

- How has this issue affected you personally? (This question is usually asked at the beginning.)
- When you think about this issue, what concerns you?
- What is appealing about the first option or approach?
- What makes this approach a good one—or a bad one?
- How did they come to hold the views they have?

2. What are the consequences, costs, and benefits associated with the various options?

- What would be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
- What would be an argument against the option you like best? Is there a downside to this course of action?
- Can anyone think of something constructive that might come from the option, which is receiving so much criticism?

3. What are the inherent conflicts that we have to work through?

- What do you see as the tension among the options?
- What are the "gray areas"? Where is there ambiguity?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?

4. Can we detect any shared sense of direction or common ground for action?

- What trade-offs are we willing and unwilling to accept?
- What are we willing and unwilling to do as individuals or as a community in order to solve this problem?
- If the policy we seem to favor had the negative consequences some fear, would we still favor it?

Handling Moderator Challenges

Dealing with participants who dominate the discussion:

Ask questions such as:

- What do others think about this?
- What ideas have not been expressed?
- How would you respond to the concerns just expressed?
- Could you tell me a story to illustrate that?
- For those who hold that position, what do they care deeply about?

Dealing with a difficult participant

- Gradually escalate your response.
- Use body language (move close to the person)
- Gradually use more assertive verbal techniques such as interrupting to capture the points stated so far
- Refer to the guidelines (everyone participates, no monopolizing conversation)
- Redirect the conversation by saying “Thank you. What do others think about that?” or “Let's create some space for those of you who have been quieter. Someone else?”

Handling misinformation from a participant

Ask questions such as:

- Does anyone have a different perspective on that?
- Use the issue book. Point out that “on p. xx it states”... How does that fit with the information you just gave us?
- What meaning does that information have to you?
- Would you give us an example?

Often in a forum, participants themselves will call other participants on their behavior such as dominating the conversation or giving misinformation that others know is not correct.

Talks Too Much?

When someone dominates a discussion, the other participants hold back their ideas. Team members get bored. Instead of coming up with solutions that incorporate a wealth of diverse opinions, the team ends up with a mediocre decision.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with participants who talk too much:

- Avoid discouraging the excessive talker. Instead, encourage the others to participate more.
- Go around the group, giving each participant a turn to talk.
- Divide the group into pairs for preliminary sharing of ideas. Then ask each pair to give a summary report of their discussion.
- Impose *air-time* limits on participants. Give the participants equal number of poker chips, each worth 30 seconds of talking time.
- Interrupt the person with a question directed to someone else.
- Acknowledge the comment and involve others: "Al, that was an interesting insight. Barbara, what are your views on this issue?"
- Before the meeting or during a break, enlist the help of the excessive talker in encouraging the silent participants to open up.
- At the start of the meeting, establish equal participation by all members as a team goal. Encourage the participants to help monitor and manage personal participation.

Does Not Talk?

I am not sure who presents a tougher challenge to the facilitator: the participant who talks too much or the one who talks too little. It is easy to ignore the silent ones than the excessive talkers. Remember, however, that you pay now or pay later. Silence does not always mean consent. It may mean that the uncommunicative participant is plotting future sabotage.

Encouraging the silent types to talk will help ensure a much more inclusive solution and speed up the implementation. Also it will set a model for equal participation from everyone.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with participants who don't participate:

- Reduce the anxiety level by using an alternative format. For example, break the large group into dyads for preliminary sharing of ideas. Then ask each pair to give a summary report of their discussion.
- Ask the participants to write their concerns, comments, suggestions, or whatever on index cards. Then ask the team to cluster these cards and organize them into themes.
- Direct questions to the silent participant. Ask questions related to the silent participant's areas of expertise and interest.
- Ask the silent participant to react to someone else's statement.
- Ask everyone to take turns to make a 1-minute presentation.
- Reinforce comments from the taciturn participant (without appearing to be patronizing).
- Before the meeting or during a break, talk to the silent participant. Emphasize the importance of her or his participation and collaboratively work out strategies to increasing the level of participation.
- Before the meeting or during a break, assign the role of identifying and drawing out the reluctant participant to a one or two team members.
- Call on the silent participant by name. Frequently use the name of this participant.

Reflections on where we are – as we end this forum

These questions can be used during the closing (the last stage of the forum) to help focus on the results of the deliberation and on efforts toward addressing the issue.

1. Has the way I'm thinking about or understanding this issue been affected by how we've worked our way through it? If so, how?
2. Did I, as an individual, really grapple with the costs and consequences of each approach, even the one I liked most?
3. Did we, as a group, really identify and work through the costs and consequences of each approach?
4. If we did not thoroughly work through this issue in this forum, what should we do about that?
5. What tradeoffs are we willing to make, at this point, to work on this issue? Why?
6. What tradeoffs are we not willing to make? Why?
7. Do we see any ways for taking action on this issue, with the information we now have?
8. If not, what kind of information would help us see ways of acting on this issue?

The Art of Recording

- Capture big ideas and themes, not every word.
- Use the words of the speaker as closely as possible. Be careful not to alter the intended meaning.
- Check with the speaker or the group to make sure your notes are correct.
- Write neatly so everyone can read the notes.
- Number each page at the top. Identify each set of notes with a clear title.
- Use markers that are deep earth tones, such as dark green, brown, blue, and purple. Use black sparingly. Use light colors (red, yellow, orange, light green) for highlighting or emphasis only.
- Be low-key. Stay in the background and don't distract people from the conversation. Be aware of times when recording is not appropriate (for example, when people are sharing personal stories).
- Create a sheet called "Parking Lot." Capture—or "park"—ideas that come up in the conversation that the group wants to return to later.
- Post the ground rules each time, along with any notes or sheets of paper that the group will need to refer to during a particular session.

Note taking serves many purposes:

- It helps group members stay on track and move the discussion along.
- It creates a group memory of the whole dialogue.
- It provides a way to capture the wisdom and common themes that develop in the discussion.
- Notes from the discussion can help organizers plan for action.
- Notes from all the discussions in your program can contribute to a summary report of the activities