

DOING DEMOCRACY THROUGH CIVIC DIALOGUE

REQUEST TO READERS

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INTRODUCTION

Civic dialogue is one of many methods of communication. It is also a term with many possible meanings. For the purpose of this document it is used as one of several descriptive terms including discourse, deliberation, and conversation – all referring to the activity of human communication in social discourse.

Why is Civic Dialogue Important?

Civic dialogue is important as a process of organized group discussion for its potential to facilitate adult learning and decision making in organizations. Many people are expressing an interest in learning the techniques and skills that will enable them to facilitate conversations that are more useful and group decision making that is more productive.

A second perspective sees civic dialogue as behavior essential to our social and democratic well-being. Also called civic discourse or deliberative democracy, it is important as a method for creating the relationships that are the foundation of our society. Civic discourse is also important because it is the way we create knowledge — both personal and public. As a deliberative process, civic discourse is the way we make the personal, societal and economic choices that determine our futures.

In this new millennium, people are fearful about the future. They struggle to create relationships of trust in both their personal and public lives. They struggle to find meaning in a blizzard of information. They struggle with the uncertainties of economic change and political polarization. They contemplate uncomfortable questions that in one form or another address the concerns implicit in the subtitle of Jared Diamond’s book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. So, we wonder, how do we choose to fail or succeed if the society we live in is struggling to deliver on its democratic promises of safety, security, equality and opportunity? Diamond’s subtitle suggests two questions for beginning our exploration: (1) How do we use information? and

(2) How do we make decisions? Information is important as the raw material from which we create the knowledge we need to make decisions. In the context of democracy, information feeds the dialogue which creates the public knowledge that informs the deliberation that leads to the democratic behavior of informed and thoughtful choice making.

What are the connections between dialogue, deliberation and democracy? In the preface to William Isaacs' book *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*, Peter Senge examined the role of dialogue in the city states of ancient Greece and concluded, "The capacity for talking together constituted the foundation for democracy, far more fundamental than voting. As one ancient Greek philosopher noted, 'When voting started, democracy ended.'" Senge concluded:

In a sense we are running an historic social experiment today. We are experimenting with whether or not a society can hold itself together without the core process that has always bound societies, the process of conversation.

The experiment does not seem to be going well. Given the images of our communication behaviors documented in news broadcasts, modeled by radio and television personalities, and portrayed in our media-based entertainment, it would appear we do not practice the "art of thinking together." Post election behaviors have given new meaning to the cliché, "It is all over but the shouting." And the shouting is becoming louder and longer with each election.

Dialogue and Democracy

So, how do we restore or reinvent the process of conversation that Senge believes is the core that binds? What do we need to restore? Given the spectacle of our national political conversations, the answer would begin with trust and respect. Jurgen Habermass, a German social philosopher, argued that communication is not possible without trust. He proposed a validity basis for speech in which I, as a party to a conversation, have to believe that you believe what you are telling me is true. From an ethical perspective this is a requirement for honesty. But from a practical perspective, your communication to me would be much more useful if I knew it was the result of a thoughtful and informed process.

Honesty and thoughtfulness create the potential for a useful conversation. They are what one person offers to another in the dynamic process of talking and listening — the process Senge is

talking about — the process of creating social relationships. It is what Isaacs describes as dialogue, which “is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people.” Or more succinctly, “dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship.”

Thinking together in relationship is certainly an element in dialogue. It may also be its most visible attribute. But it is not the activity that creates the trust on which it is based. Trust may not be so much about thinking as it is about emotion and feeling. Neuroscientists and brain researchers have long known that the physiological and chemical processes involved in thinking and feeling are interrelated. Some now believe that even choice making, or deliberation, is an emotionally based behavior with reason serving an explanatory and confirming or “confabulating” function. This has important implications for understanding the importance of dialogue as an experience of trust building that creates the possibility for rational deliberation. It may be cause for reevaluation of our cultural emphasis on a rationally based model of deliberation in the design of public forums or the economic assumption that man is a rational actor.

We are creatures of emotion and intellect. We think, we feel and we talk. We talk about war, unemployment and politics. We talk and we wonder if anyone is listening — not thinking that maybe we should become the listeners. And we wonder how do we need to change and what do we need to learn? What choices do we need to make? How can we begin the conversations that will create the knowledge we need to succeed both as individuals and as a nation?

A Programmatic Approach

The preceding question poses two additional questions: (1) How can we initiate conversations? and (2) How can we create conversations of purpose and meaning? This guide describes a programmatic response based on a growing body of theory and practice that includes dialogue, deliberation, civic discourse, public conversation, deliberative democracy, public conversations and study circles. What we call it is not so important as how we do it, so we will explore how a program in civic discourse can support processes of conversation that address the needs of people in community.

As an introductory guide, this publication provides information and ideas about the theory and practice of public discourse. It also proposes a model for incorporating them into a program based on a collaborative networking approach.

Five books and two websites will get you into the conversations that are creating this emerging and growing field of practice. William Isaacs's book, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*, is a very practical introduction to the field that describes methods for designing conversations in organizations and communities. David Bohm takes a more philosophical approach in his classic, *On Dialogue*. Other books by Bohm that are relevant are *Changing Consciousness: Exploring the Hidden Source of the Social, Political, and Environmental Crises Facing Our World* by David Bohm and Mark Edwards and *Thought as a System. The Change Handbook*, edited by Holman, Devane and Cady, is arguably the best introduction to over 60 methods of dialogue and deliberation. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation hosts the best website for beginners to the field. Its Resource Center at <http://ncdd.org/rc/running-a-dd-program> contains hundreds of references to publications, multimedia and web-based information on the subject from multiple perspectives. Another online resource is the National Issues Forums website at <http://www.nifi.org/>. It is more focused on a particular model of public policy deliberation based on the ideas of Daniel Yankelovich in his book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*.

A Model for Thinking Together

The following four-step model for civic dialogue is based on the following assumptions:

- Civic dialogue is a form of communication that includes both talking and listening.
- It is a method by which people initiate and respond to social change.
- Social change is the consequence of how we think and act in response to stimuli.
- Social change with a purpose can be thought of as community building.
- Community building is facilitated through community organizing.
- Community organizing begins with people in conversation – civic discourse.

A social change model for civic discourse is best approached as a community organizing activity consisting of four sequential steps: (1) hosting, (2) naming, framing, and designing, (3) convening, and (4) facilitating.

Hosting:

The activity of hosting is predominantly a brainstorming activity as it begins with a group of individuals or an organization (sponsors) who have a need, a problem or an opportunity. Hosts are the providers of facilities and, sometimes, the process expertise necessary to the clarifying, naming, framing and designing of an event or program. Sponsors are the organizations or individuals who have identified a topic as a matter of interest they would like to explore in a dialogic process. They are the initiators of the hosting discussions and essential participants in the hosting dialogues. Hosts are not necessarily sponsors and sponsors are not necessarily hosts, but they could be.

Process expertise is provided by process practitioners who have had training in theories of group process, methods of group process and the skills of design and facilitation. Process practitioners work with hosts and sponsors to facilitate a dialogic process of brainstorming, clarifying, and planning that includes the following activities:

1. Describing a topic
2. Defining why the topic is important – why do we care about it?
3. Identifying the sponsors
4. Identifying potential participants
5. Discussing and clarifying the purpose – outcomes

Naming, Framing & Designing:

Naming, framing, and designing can be thought of as separate but sequential steps in defining, designing and directing civic discourse. As such they are about power. Who gets to name a problem and how they name it are critical factors in determining how it will be solved. When people name problems in their own terms, they speak from their own experience about what is valuable to them. Naming is the process by which people give voice to their values by answering the question, What is important to us?

Naming answers the question: “What do we talk about?”. Framing tells us how. Framing is a guide for exploration, and it has power implications of enormous consequence for civic dialogue. How well it serves the interests of a group will be determined by the degree of separation between those who frame and those for whom the framing is performed. In the arena of politics framing is often used (moving from the good to the bad) as a tool to manipulate or persuade. Friedman describes it as “Framing-to-Persuade vs. Framing-for-Deliberation.” Carcasson addresses naming and framing as a goal-driven process with the ultimate purpose of community problem solving in his paper *Beginning with the End in Mind: A Call for Goal-Driven Deliberative Practice*.

One characteristic that describes the difference between these two approaches is the language in which the framing is expressed. Topics can be framed as propositions or questions. Propositions are more constrictive and directive while questions are more open to discovery and learning. An example of the proposition approach is the issue book by the Kettering Foundation that proposes three or more options for thinking about an issue that are intended to be representative of perspectives from within a particular social group. The question approach is exemplified by the Appreciative Inquiry method developed by David Cooperrider that begins with variations on two questions: “What are we doing right?” and “How can we do more of it?”. Fran Peavey offers a more graphic description in *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action* by Vogt, Brown, and Isaacs. She observes:

Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can It we have a short lever, we can only just crack open the lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can open the can up much wider and really stir things up If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions.”

The implications of these two approaches – to persuade or to deliberate – are particularly significant if one views civic discourse as a behavior necessary for creating and maintaining democracy. Framing with propositions limits the freedom of a group to determine its own direction. Propositions contain implicit assumptions about meaning and value that may not be shared by all members of a group. Propositions establish the context from which a dialogue or deliberation evolves and may bias the process. Framing with questions gives a group greater freedom to explore how their assumptions about meaning and value will inform their dialogue. Framing with questions creates the possibility for dialogue to develop as an emergent process of

meaning making and knowledge creation. It is a process for exploring the question within the question. As though we are opening Russian nesting dolls, we address the first question only to discover a second question that leads to more questions from which we finally arrive at an understanding — create the meaning — that enables us to identify the choices available to direct our actions. We then answer the first question by selecting a choice we believe will be good for us.

Methods for framing range from the complex and lengthy to the simplified and short. The more complex methods can take weeks or months to complete and may require substantial resources. The National Issues Forum method is a good example of a more complex method in which a framing group, which is different than the deliberative group or groups, conducts surveys, researches possible approaches and writes an issue book. The issue book is promoted as a framework for multiple discussions about public problems. It describes perspectives, suggests tensions among them and encourages participants to make choices based on the rational evaluation of trade-offs. The Kettering Foundation offers two reports that describe this process: *We Have to Choose: Democracy and Deliberative Politics* and *Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions*.

A simpler and less proscriptive method would consist of three or four exploratory questions developed by a convening group for the purpose of engaging participants in a framing dialogue. As the first step in a multi-meeting deliberative program, this method could be thought of as the citizen-driven process for framing.

Designing – the third part of this step – has two important purposes: creating a safe space and providing an effective method for achieving results. Creating a safe space may actually be a precondition for discourse, and not a design function. As an implicit part of the process, it runs the risk of not being explicitly recognized for its importance which is to create a place where people are willing to share some of the thoughts and feelings they normally would protect as private and personal. In such conversations people lower the boundaries that protect personal vulnerability — if they feel safe.

Experienced facilitators know that only the participants in a conversation can create a safe space, and they do it through agreements. Also called ground rules, agreements define behaviors that are socially acceptable to the group. Rules are proposed, discussed and adopted at the beginning of each event. They are effective only because participants voluntarily accept and abide by them. Facilitators have no power to enforce them; they can only make the group aware of them when they are not being followed.

The second purpose of design is about effectiveness which is the degree to which the purposes of a conversational event or program are achieved. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation proposes four options for thinking about purpose. They are: (1) exploration, (2) conflict transformation, (3) decision making and (4) collaborative action. *The Change Handbook* describes 61 change methods for organizing both small and large group discourse. For process practitioners, the practical challenge of design is determining which method of discourse will be most useful in fulfilling the needs of participants and achieving the purposes of sponsors.

W. Barnett Pearce, in a theory-based "communication" approach to the practice of dialogue, warned against technicians skilled in only one technique. He argued that "situations differ so much, and change so rapidly, that the consistent application of any single technique is not sufficiently varied to 'fit' emerging conditions."

Returning to the premise that civic discourse is a component, if not instrumental, part of community building, it is important to remember that civic discourse is about social change, and that social change requires some form of coordinated human thinking and action. How we might facilitate a dialogue or deliberation must therefore take into account how a group of individuals can create relationships that will enable them to:

- create and maintain trust
- clarify common interests
- identify learning needs
- obtain information relevant to their interests
- transform that information into social knowledge
- move from talk to action

The design dilemma for process practitioners is how the complexity of deceptively simple issues or problems can be revealed and clarified. This is necessary for making the choice between a one-time event or a multi-event process. More often than not, most public issues require more time than potential conveners are prepared to commit for planning or participants for dialogue. However, clarity of both problem and purpose are essential to the design of effective civic dialogue. Once sponsors agree on a clear understanding of these two, they can then determine which of the many methods for organizing group dialogues will be most useful for an event, or which combination of methods would be most useful for a process. As previously stated, the *Change Handbook* describes over 60 methods. Some of the more popular include National Issues Forums, study circles, world café, open space, appreciative inquiry, dynamic facilitation and future search.

Convening:

Convening is a logistical activity that includes:

1. Selection of a date, time, & place for an event
2. Facility design and equipment specifications
3. Identification and selection of individuals required to facilitate, record, sign-in, and serve participants
4. Choices on refreshments
5. Participant materials and supplies i.e. name tags, discussion guides, agendas, note pads, etc.
6. Advertising and marketing

Facilitating:

Many books, workbooks and training manuals have been written about facilitation, including *The Skilled Facilitator* by Roger Schwarz, *Strengthening Your Facilitation Skills: Level 1 Curriculum* by Haskell, Cyr, and McPhail, *A Guide for Training Public Dialogue Facilitators* by Campbell, McCormack and Barrett, and *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project* by Herzig and Chasin. Within these publications and other literature on the subject, readers will find information about purpose, skills and definitions. It can be overwhelming.

One publication offers a different approach by locating facilitation within a communication context. Kimberly Pearce in *Public Engagement and Civic Maturity: A Public Dialogue Consortium Perspective* writes, "the facilitators role is to shape emerging patterns of communication so that multiple voices and perspectives are honored and the tensions among them are maintained." She argues that "our social worlds are made in patterns of communication" and "are made one conversation at a time." She concludes that "dialogue is not just a set of techniques, but a way of being with others." It is a process for making and managing meaning.

The emphasis in the skill focused publications is on talking: how the facilitator can influence the process by talking and how talking among the participants can contribute to a successful group outcome. As Herzig and Chasin explain, "The way we talk with each other makes a difference. And there is no single 'best' way to talk." Pearce's communication perspective recognizes listening as an equally important part of the process. Her definition of dialogic communication as "Remaining in the tension between holding your ground while being profoundly open to the other" could also be a definition of listening. Isaacs believes, "The heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen. (p. 83)" He explains, "In dialogue one discovers a further dimension of listening: the ability not only to listen, but to *listen together* as part of a larger whole (p. 103)."

For the prospective facilitator, learning how to talk and manage talk, to listen and to shape emerging patterns of communication can be overwhelming. It is helpful for the beginning facilitator to recognize that their role is fundamentally simple. It is to help a group engage with one another in meaningful and respectful conversation.

It may be counterintuitive to say that facilitators are not responsible for outcomes, but there is truth in the statement. Facilitation is about working with people, and with people one is never in control. It is a group process in which the goal is to increase effectiveness by creating trust and improving relationships. There is no single best theory or method of facilitation. There is no "one size fits all" approach. It is this reality that prompted the development of the four-part model for civic discourse. If the convening, naming, framing, and designing processes are done well, the work of the facilitator is made manageable and can be focused on the following three "T" model.

1. **Time**: manage it.
2. **Topic**: keep participants focused.
3. **Talking**: manage participation.

It is important to distinguish the facilitator's role from that of the community organizer. The facilitator's role is to help groups create possibilities for changes in thought and action. It is not to take responsibility for that action. How to move from talk to action is the responsibility of the group, the community organizer or the political leader. Facilitators can help identify options for action, but they need to remember that their effectiveness is dependant on their ability to function as neutral and objective actors. Maintaining this role is one of the more difficult challenges for the facilitator who is not immune to the desire and passion for making the world a better place.

Moving from Talk to Action

Moving from talk to action is not a step in the deliberative process. Rather, it is a potential consequence of the process. It is as much about reflecting on how a dialogue has changed participants as it is about political or community organizing. Moving from talk to action is the point at which the facilitator creates space for the group to reflect on what they have experienced, how they have changed and what "next steps" they might take. It is when they consider whether their goals have been met and how effective their dialogue has been . Was their exploration successful? Did they create new social knowledge? Did they build new trusting relationships? Did they transform conflict? Are they better able to make decisions. Are they ready to take collaborative action?

Concluding Reflections

Purpose

Civic dialogue is a method of human communication that helps people make choices about how their societies will fail or succeed. It is a method for determining what information is relevant to their lives and how they will use it to change their behaviors. It is a means for creating social knowledge through dialogue and deliberation. It is a way to facilitate adult learning and improve the quality of group and organizational decision making.

Civic dialogue is a behavior. From a personal perspective it is the way we enter into relationships with our fellow humans. It is the skill that determines how we understand one another, how we

make meaning, how we use information, how we construct knowledge and how we make decisions. We can do it poorly or with thoughtful intent.

Process Skills

Three activities are necessary for civic dialogue: (1) listening, (2) reflecting, and (3) talking. Listening is the most important of the three. It is the opening of oneself to the presence of another. It is how we form and nurture relationships. It is how we receive information.

Reflecting is the meaning-making part of listening. It is a necessary prelude to talking and it enables us to use our conversations for sharing, learning, and creating. It is how we transform information into knowledge.

Talking is the activity that integrates listening and reflecting into a communication process that determines how we will make the choices of whether we will fail or succeed.

Civic Dialogue and Social Change

Social change happens — with or without human intent. How societies choose to fail or succeed is a function of how well they adapt to change and is influenced by how people use information and how they make decisions.

In a democracy, citizen dialogue and deliberation are the defining methods for making decisions. They are the way citizens create the public knowledge that informs their decisions and guides their community-building activities. Civic dialogue can be done spontaneously, reactively and with limited public participation. Or, it can be a program that creates the opportunity for all citizens to engage in a process that is informed, thoughtful and fair.

The four-step model for civic dialogue describes an organizational method for creating just such a program. It is predicated on a distributed sharing of tasks and an integrated organizing of activities based on the creation of relational networks of partnerships or collaborations. The division of programmatic tasks into the four steps of (1) hosting, (2) naming, framing, & designing, (3)

convening, and (4) facilitating creates opportunities for multiple combinations of collaborators, distribution of work loads and the utilization of differing skill sets.

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