The Rise and Fall of the Town Hall Meeting

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Presentation Overview

• This presentation on town hall meetings is from a citizen-engaged perspective of democracy.
• My public deliberation experience includes 23 years of community meetings, Kettering-NCSL legislator-citizen connection project, and involvement in national deliberative democracy organizations.
• There is a robust national network of resources on dialogue and deliberation and a variety of methods for deliberation and group meetings.
• These resources are available to legislators who can expand their role in facilitating problem solving in communities.
• Washington Post writer Philip Kennicott wrote: the August 2009 “…town meetings have been just like primary schools, but without teachers or principals, and crowded not with children but with adults behaving worse than children, shouting, shoving and almost coming to blows.”
Town Hall Meetings Imply Public Deliberation on Issues

- Frank M. Bryan, author of "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works," writes in part: it's not even clear that what we're dealing with even deserves the name town hall meeting. The current format has only the most remote semantic connection with the genuine article.

- Carolyn Lukensmeyer, president of AmericaSpeaks, says what she witnessed in August were "faux town hall meetings that aren't anything about deliberation. . . . People are coming in advocating the answer, they're not coming in to learn anything about the options."
Upgrading the Way We Do Politics

- Public participation practitioners of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation called for an upgrade to higher-quality meeting formats.
- Suggested techniques that promote real dialogue, build trust, enable people to listen to perspectives different from their own.
- ...and encourage discussion of consequences, costs, and trade-offs of policy options – and work through the emotions and values inherent in tough public decisions.
Norman Rockwell based his famous 1943 “Freedom of Speech” painting on his neighbor Jim Edgerton who stood up at a town hall meeting and spoke against an idea that everyone else was for. The painting reflects the democratic ideal of respect for fellow citizens. Here, town people wearing suits in contrast to the man's casual attire, listening patiently.
NCDD Recommendations

• Provide balanced information on issues and include possible policy choices to discuss.
• Use a facilitator trained to be neutral and able to relate conflict and anger with interests, needs and concerns -- to get behind and address emotions.
• Use “ground rules” including the golden rule so participants can be heard and hear each other.
• Use a structured process to get different interests to talk with each, e.g. small groups to allow everyone a chance to speak and minimize people from dominating the meeting.
• Record what citizens say, and be clear on how you plan to use their input. In the meeting, “reflect back” the concerns, values and desires you are hearing.
Legislators’ Power to Convene

Suggestions

- inclusive
- neutral meeting location
- impartial
- clear purpose
- keep discussion moving
- commitment
- outcomes
Public Engagement Core Principles

These recommendations reflect *common* beliefs and understandings of NCDD members in the fields of public engagement, conflict resolution, and collaboration. People practice these and other principles in different ways.

- **Careful Planning and Preparation.** Through inclusive planning, ensure the design, organization, and convening serve a clearly defined purpose and needs of participants.

- **Inclusion and Demographic Diversity.** Include diverse people, voices, ideas, and information for quality outcomes and democratic legitimacy.

- **Collaboration and Shared Purpose.** Encourage participants, government, community institutions, and others to work together for the common good.
Public Engagement Core Principles (continued)

- **Openness and Learning.** Help all involved listen to each other, explore new ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes, apply information to generate new options, and evaluate public engagement activities for effectiveness.

- **Transparency and Trust.** Be clear and open about the process, and provide a public record of the organizers, sponsors, outcomes, and views and ideas expressed.

- **Impact and Action.** Ensure each participatory effort has real potential to make a difference.

- **Sustained Engagement and Participatory Culture.** Promote a culture of participation with programs and institutions that support ongoing public engagement.
Spectrum of Public Participation

Challenges

- **Involve:** work with public throughout the process
- **Collaborate:** partner with public in each aspect of the decision

**Public participation goal**

**Inform**
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

**Consult**
To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

**Involve**
To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

**Collaborate**
To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

**Empower**
To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

**Promise to the public**
We will keep you informed.
We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.
We will implement what you decide.

**Example techniques**
- Fact sheets
- Web sites
- Open houses
- Public comment
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Public meetings
- Workshops
- Deliberative polling
- Citizen advisory committees
- Consensus-building
- Participatory decision-making
- Citizen juries
- Ballots
- Delegated decision
Community Meeting Purposes

- Discuss issues of concern to the community
- Deliberate toward solutions and actions to address community problems and issues
- Build trust relationship with constituents
- Foster mutual understanding of issues, especially on different viewpoints
- Varied purposes and agenda include informational, solicit input on projects or ideas, town meeting on a theme, mobilize community action, deliberate on a decision
About the Community Meeting . . .

- Always have an agenda, even if informal and open ended
- Use a facilitator on contentious issues or to enhance trust; include ground rules if needed
- Have resource persons available, if needed to provide specialized information
- Co-sponsor meetings whenever possible
- Craft invitations to engage constituents’ interest, and deliver by mail, email, canvass, banners, and press release as may be appropriate
Community Meetings Held to:

• Inform residents on canal dredging and aging in place options
• Solicit public input on community college and hospital master plans, culinary arts building, bridge renovation
• Prioritize aging issues and empowerment zone projects
• Discuss solutions to neighborhood crime and drug problems
• Deliberate on whether to: form non-profit for senior center, file lawsuit to maintain seawall, challenge convention center EIS
• Mobilize residents on community problems: neighborhood parking, powerlines, watershed water quality, condo issues
• Conduct NIF forums on gambling, death and dying, campaign reform; and open space technology gathering on the economy
Compendium of Group Processes

Methods Include:

- National Issues Forums
- Study Circles
- 21st Century Town Meetings
- Open Space Technology
- World Cafe
- and over 50 other group methods
National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

www.ncdd.org
Online Town Hall Meetings
Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century

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Sustaining Public Engagement
Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities

by Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung
An Occasional Research Paper from
Everyday Democracy and the Kettering Foundation
For More Information

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