**Fall**

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**100 Commons Rd, Dayton, OH 45459**

Deliberative Facilitator Handbook

 National Issues Forums Institute

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**Fall**

**A Guide to Deliberation[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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aking decisions about how to deal with community issues is difficult because different people favor different approaches, and the options for action may contradict or conflict with one another. Certainly any strategy for action will have costs that people must take into consideration and consequences that people should anticipate, as best as they can. However, behind each approach lies a range of concerns and values that, while common for many people, nonetheless pulls them in different directions, creating tension, and influencing how they weigh costs and consequences. Therefore, people must work through these conflicts and deal with the tradeoffs until they develop a shared sense of direction. While people may not reach full and complete agreement about what course of action they should take to address a community issue, they may have a better grasp of what they are and are not willing to do to solve the problem. This mutual understanding paves the way for cooperation and collaboration.

The goals of coming to public judgment and inspiring community action require a particular kind of decision making and a process of reasoning together that is called *deliberation*.

Interestingly enough, we deliberate all the time in our daily lives. When we have a difficult decision to make about an important matter and have to weigh several approaches carefully that, in a nutshell, is deliberation. **Deliberation is the process of carefully weighing various approaches to a situation, examining the attractions and tradeoffs of each approach, and determining what we are willing to give up in order to get what we want.** Deliberation provides the opportunity to explore, to test ideas, and to look at ambiguities or gray areas rather than seeing only the stark black and white of polar opposites.

What follows are a few simple recommendations for bringing the kind of deliberating we all do privately into a public setting.

**Basic Principles of Deliberative Facilitation**

**Key Facilitating Skills**

* *Reflecting & Clarifying*
* *Summarizing*
* *Shifting Focus*
* *Asking Probing Questions*
* *Managing Conflict*
* *Using Silence*
* *Using Non-Verbal Signals*

Facilitators play a vital role in moving forum conversations from discussion of an issue to genuine deliberation. It is the facilitator’s responsibility to get participants to engage with one another. The facilitator poses thought-provoking questions to stimulate deliberation, handles difficult participants, and keeps the deliberation focused on the issue at hand. An impartial facilitator is key to prompting deliberation.

**Eight Primary Responsibilities of the Deliberative Facilitator**

* **Remains *impartial* about the subject of the forum.** Avoid expressing your own opinion or evaluating the comments of participants (be careful with phrases like “good point!”). Facilitators are however, not “neutral” or disengaged. You are encouraged to exhibit “passionate impartiality,” as you should be actively invested in democracy and supporting the deliberative process itself.
* **Allows the participants to own the process and topic as much as possible.** Every time a facilitator intervenes in any way, she or he is essentially taking some of that power and control from participants, so each intervention should be purposeful. Work with the participants so people know the order of speaking and do not get frustrated with procedural issues, but do your best to support their ownership of the deliberation.
* **Keeps the deliberation on track in terms of time and subject matter.** When comments go astray, bring participants back to the issue guide framework. Ensure each approach receives equal consideration.
* **Manages the group by maintaining a safe environment, encouraging everyone to join in the conversation, and ensuring no one dominates the conversation.** Participants must feel safe in order to productively participate in a deliberative forum, so it is important that the ground rules are honored throughout the deliberation.
* **Models and encourages democratic attitudes and skills, particularly listening.** By exhibiting strong listening skills and asking good questions, you can model the behaviors you are hoping the participants will develop.
* **Does not take on an “expert” role with the subject matter, and seeks to support the appropriate role for quality data in the discussion.** Your role is not to teach participants about the issue, even if it is a subject you know very well. Facilitators need to think like non-experts in the room, and if jargon is used, ask for clarification.
* **Helps participants develop mutual understanding and identify the values and underlying interests that can serve as common ground across their perspectives.** In deliberation, the participants’ values and motives are just as important, if not more so, than their opinions. Sometimes people have differing opinions but share the same motive or value, and that similarity can form the basis for common ground.
* **Helps participants consider a broad range of views, particularly the drawbacks of their perspective and the benefits of opposing views, and work through key tensions within and between their perspectives –working toward public judgment.** Ask thoughtful and probing questions that can surface the costs, consequences, and benefits of potential actions. The wrestling through tensions and evaluation of tradeoffs is one of the key elements of a deliberative discussion. Participants should be considering what they must give up to get what they want throughout the forum.

**Stages of a Deliberative Forum**

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| **Welcome** | The convener or facilitator introduces the program. |
| **Guidelines/Ground Rules** | Participants review desired outcomes of the forum. |
| **Starter Activity** **(optional)** | A starter video, short sketch, or overview of strategic facts may be used to set the tone for deliberation. |
| **Personal Stake** | Participants share personal experiences and concerns related to the issue. |
| **Deliberation** | Participants spend equal time examining all approaches. |
| **Reflection** | Participants reflect on common ground and identify opportunities to act publicly. |
| **Questionnaire** | Participants complete a post-forum questionnaire. |

**Establishing Ground Rules**

Effective deliberation is more likely to occur if forum ground rules are outlined at the beginning of a forum. Ground rules create a safe space for everyone to participate and they ensure that deliberation remains centered on the issue, rather than on personalities. Ground rules encourage the group to engage in genuine deliberation rather than in heated debate. It is helpful to post the ground rules in a highly visible location for easy reference during the forum. It is also important that everyone feels comfortable with the ground rules and agrees to honor them before the deliberation begins. When reviewing the ground rules, allowing time and space for participants to ask clarifying questions and make amendments and/or additions is an additional way to ensure that participants feel ownership over the ground rules and the success of the forum.

* Everyone has a voice.
* We’re all experts in our own experiences.
* Step out of your comfort zone.
* Be respectful.
* Listen harder if you disagree.
* Address one another, not the facilitator.
* Consider each option fairly; creativity is encouraged.

**Recognizing and Supporting Deliberation**

**A good facilitator recognizes when deliberation is occurring and nurtures it.**

* Discussion considers several points of view – a range of views.
* People are talking about what is valuable to them.
* The group recognizes that the issue is complex.
* People are talking about consequences and weighing the trade-offs.
* People are struggling within themselves and *with* each other.
* “I” becomes “we.”
* The discussion is civil, but also not simply polite. Disagreements are aired, but aired in a spirit of seeking increased understanding.

While facilitators should be neutral as to the perspective, **they are not neutral about the process.** Perhaps one of the most important jobs of a deliberative facilitator is to ask good questions. Questions should serve specific, intended purposes. Consider the following types of questions and the examples provided:

**Questions that connect the policy issue to the lives and concerns of real people:**

* Could you illustrate a story to illustrate that point?
* What makes this issue real for us?
* What evidence do you see that this is something that is important to all of us?
* Can anyone envisions how their life would change if this approach became national policy?

**Questions to ensure a fair and balanced examination of all potential effects:**

* What would be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
* What would be an argument against the choice you like best?
* Is there a downside to this course of action?
* Can anyone think of something constructive that might come this approach, which is receiving so much criticism?
* If we followed this course of action, what would be the effect on your life?
* Could you live with the actions being considered?
* Would you be willing to have that action apply to everyone?
* How might your ideas affect other people?
* How would someone make a case against what you just said?

**Questions that ask participants to weigh the costs they are willing to accept in order to achieve the results they want:**

* Can you live with the consequences?
* Would you give up \_\_\_\_\_ in order to achieve \_\_\_\_\_?
* What costs are at stake and can we live with them?
* What do you see as the tension among the approaches?
* Why is this issue so difficult to decide?
* Could you identify those things that are important to us that seem to be clashing?
* What seems to be most important to those who are attracted to this approach?
* For those who think negatively about this approach, what seems to be their concern?

**Questions that probe each participant’s statement until others can understand what she or he believes should be done and why she or he thinks it should be done:**

* What does that mean to you?
* Why does that choice appeal to you?
* What is important about taking this direction?
* Can you give an example of how that might work out?
* What is most valuable to you or to those who support that action?

**Questions that promote interaction among participants instead of just between the facilitator and the participants:**

* Does that bring up anything for anyone?
* That gets us started, so how do you respond?
* Could someone give an example to illustrate what was just said?
* Allow silence – someone will respond.

**Questions that give the participants an opportunity to identify what they have heard, to recognize understanding of the issue, and/or acknowledge common ground for action:**

* What actions did you hear that you think we could not accept or live with?
* What trade-offs are you unwilling to accept?
* What seemed important to all of us?
* Is there some action we could all live with?
* Where do we want this policy to take us?
* Can someone suggest areas that we seem to have in common?

***At the heart of deliberation is the question of whether we are willing to accept the consequences of our choices.***

# **Reflecting on the Deliberation**

It is important to include plenty of time at the conclusion of a forum to reflect on what the group accomplished and to further explore common ground for action. The following questions help stimulate individual and group reflections, and uncover common ground for action:

# ***Individual Reflections***

# How has your thinking about the issue changed?

# How has your thinking about other people and their views changed?

* Were there moments where someone said something that gave you pause or changed your thinking?
* What are some of your takeaways about this process?

# ***Group Reflections***

* Did we discover any common ground or build a possible foundation for it?
* What were the trade-offs the group was or was not willing to make?
* Suppose we cannot have everything. What are willing and unwilling to do as individuals or as a community in order to solve this problem?

# ***Next Step Reflections***

# What do we still need to talk about?

# How can we use what we now know?

# Who should we include in this deliberation that is not already represented?

* What might you do differently after leaving this forum?

# **Handling Facilitator Challenges**

# **1.) Dealing with participants who dominate the discussion**:

# What do others think about this approach?

# What ideas have not been expressed?

# How would anyone else in the group respond to the concerns just expressed?

# Could someone tell us a story to illustrate that point?

# **2.) Dealing with a difficult participant:**

# Gradually escalate your response.

# Use body language (move close to the person if you are already standing up).

# Gradually use more assertive verbal techniques such as interrupting to capture the points stated so far.

# Refer to the guidelines (everyone has a voice - no one dominates).

# 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?”

# **3.) Handling misinformation from a participant:**

# Does anyone have a different perspective on that?

# Use the issue book. Point out that “on page xx it states...”

# What does that information mean to you?

# **4.) Dealing with participants who direct all comments to the facilitator:**

* Does that bring up anything for anyone?
* Could someone give an example to illustrate what was just said?
* Allow Silence. Someone will respond.
* Move back out of the circle (if standing).

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| **Tips to get back on track** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Signs the facilitator should make a move** | People are just waiting their turn to “have their say.” | All comments are directed to the facilitator. | There are “sidebar” conversations or interruptions. | The group mainly concurs on each approach. | The pro arguments have no negative consequences. | People speak theoretically, analytically, or cerebrally. | Comments ignore prior considerations. |
| **Good Signs** | People listen to what others are saying. | People are talking to each other, asking questions of each other. | Everyone is listening with respect; no one is dominating. | Alternate viewpoints get aired. | Consequences of each approach are addressed. | People share personal experiences and express emotion around what is important to them. | The deliberation builds on any prior work by the group. |

**Recording**

Recorders of public forums capture the common themes, action ideas, tradeoffs, tensions, common ground, and key points about what is attractive or unattractive about each approach. The recorded notes remind participants of their comments, agreements, and action ideas during the forum, and they serve as a reference document for forum participants, as well as for a wider audience after the forum concludes. Strong recorded notes are brief, clear, well organized, and use language that conveys participants’ intended meanings. Effective recorders ask for clarification from participants when necessary, remain impartial, and avoid infusing their own opinions into their recordings.

**Purpose of Recording**

* To remind forum participants of their comments, agreements, and action items.
* To serve as a reference document for future forums.
* To inform stakeholders, or a wider audience, of deliberation, decisions, and actions.

**Recorder Checklist**

* Capture the key points that are appealing and not appealing about each approach.
* Ask for clarification when necessary.
* Be brief.
* Be careful to use words that clearly communicate the intended meaning. (Will your notes be understood days after the forum?)
* Avoid trying to write everything - some comments are discussions of prior points.

**Effective Questions – Final Review:**

# Could you share a story to illustrate that point?

# I understand you do not like that position. What do you think people who favor it deeply care about?

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

# What is there about this approach that you just cannot accept?

# How may your ideas affect other people?

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

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

# How might this conversation be different if other voices were in the room?

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

# What values might people hold who support this position?

* What are the consequences of what you are proposing for others?
1. This document is adapted, with permission, from the David Mathew’s Center for Civic Life’s Facilitator Development Handbook. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)