

Talking about Health Care in a Divided Nation

A Report from the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Network

For forty years, the Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan research institute, has collaborated with the network of the National Issues Forums (NIF), a group of locally based organizations that convene public forums, to learn what Americans say about urgent issues when they weigh options and deliberate about them together. Since 1984, the NIF network has convened nationwide forums on health care seven times. We have observed how people talk about health care, what they understand, what confuses them, what worries them, and what generates trust versus what breeds skepticism. We've heard typical Americans weigh the costs and benefits of many ideas and proposals. Here is what we've learned about what derails useful communication between leaders and the public and what promotes it.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Facts and figures will be questioned. People need sound factual information, but too many facts and figures can overwhelm. Choosing statistics that reflect differing ideological and political concerns is crucial. People will be suspicious if they suspect they're being pushed in a specific direction.

Talking about systemic change is a recipe for miscommunication. Leaders tend to see health care from a top-down perspective and provide long-term, systemic analyses. People know about what is happening to them and their communities. Both perspectives are crucial to solving complex problems, but they often lead to misunderstanding and cross talk.

Poll results can be misleading. Polls measure people's views regardless of whether they understand the implications of the ideas and proposals being tested. In NIF forums, participants repeatedly back away from seemingly popular proposals once they wrestle with their risks and trade-offs. Polls showing high support for sweeping reforms should be taken with a grain of salt.

WHAT WORKS

Sharing stories spurs realism. Experts often dismiss anecdotes—and for good reason. One person's story can't possibly capture overall trends. But in NIF forums, personal stories allow people to hear about different experiences and perspectives. "I never thought of it that way" is a common reaction when people have the chance to see things from another point of view.

Wrestling with choices and trade-offs helps people understand. Experts and policymakers have weighed choices for decades, but very few Americans have that experience when an urgent issue enters the public arena. "Choice work"—the heart of NIF forum deliberations—is one of the quickest, most effective ways to help people grasp what's at stake. This involves presenting three or four broad strategies, each with its benefits and trade-offs explained.

Listening is more useful than talking. In forums, participants often point to problems that receive minimal attention from policymakers. Even Americans with top-notch insurance see the current health-care system as convoluted, impenetrable, opaque, and occasionally deceitful. More facts and figures won't change this perception. Policymakers need to develop options for addressing it.

You can expect more from the public than you think. In NIF forums, participants generally become more pragmatic and less judgmental as they exchange views. Just as important, they often see active roles for themselves and their communities. When people deliberate together, they tend to reach judgments that are reasonable, thoughtful, and easier to act on than what emerges from polls and town hall meetings.



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