

Public Talk – Real Choices: A Model for Public Engagement in Creating Pollution Control Strategies

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Introduction

Public issues are complex, ‘wicked’ problems. Poverty, education, land-use, environment and others are issues not easily resolved. Delaware for example is a national leader in welfare reform, education reform, land use legislation and the environment but those close to these issues know the reforms are stalled locally and nationally. Why? We believe a lack of public engagement in creating public policy is a fundamental reason. We have become a technocratic society, resulting in the public abdicating its role as participants in creating public policy to a bureaucracy. It is generally accepted by both parties, the public and bureaucracy, that the public does “not have the capacity” to work through complex issues. It is incumbent on those who work with the public to create a better way to engage the public in creating sustainable public policy.

A Common Model for Public Engagement

One model found frequently when public agencies need public input is the “workshop” model. The model begins with a selection of a small group of people, a citizens advisory committee or “blue ribbon” panel. The group, usually with the help of the public agency, goes through an education process, writes a report, and delivers it to the agency. The agency holds

“tell and sell” workshops, followed by public hearings and possible promulgation of regulation. The model more often than not fails to give the public a significant chance to participate in policy formation, resulting in disillusionment, and failed policy. Both the public and public agencies need and deserve a better way to work together that produces sustainable decisions.

A Preliminary Approach

Losing Ground: What Will We Do About Delaware’s Changing Landscape? A series of issue forums or public conversations, throughout the state in 1996, introduced deliberative dialogue to 340 Delawareans. Deliberative Dialogue is a conversation in which people, the public, weigh the cost and consequences of their thinking and make choices based on their deliberations. It was the first time for many where in a public meeting citizens had the opportunity to both listen and talk to each other in an environment conducive to learning. It was not a public hearing where comments are taken for the record or workshop with information presented by experts. Comments after the forums indicated citizens would come out and discuss issues of importance, people want a way to engage issues personally, and will engage each other in questioning and learning. The results of *Losing Ground* appear to indicate the public wants a better model to engage public issues. It is from the conversations heard from citizens that participated in *Losing Ground* that the model *Public Talk – Real Choices* emerged.

Why Develop Another Model?

Two major citizen efforts assisted by DNREC, the Inland Bays Monitoring Committee and the Citizens Advisory

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Committee of the National Estuary Program, produced action plans for restoration of the Inland Bays. The plans are very similar to each other, in fact a matrix of the two plans attempts to avoid duplication of effort (CCMP, 1995). Citizens spent over nine years of work between the two plans. Both plans emerged from a visioning model asking the questions “What do we want the Bays to look like?” and “How can we get there?” The action plans are broad recommendations that lack specific suggestions for implementation. There remains a tremendous amount of frustration from citizens who have engaged in one or the other or both of the Bay protection efforts (Citizen Advisory Committee Minutes, 1997) and the public agency, DNREC, whose mission is to preserve and protect the natural resources of Delaware. Both parties want the same thing, healthy bays, and still there is no solution or commitment.

A Caveat

There is a difference between then and now and that is TMDL's are regulations. Both the Inland Bays Monitoring Committee and the National Estuary Program were voluntary. The regulatory community can argue TMDL's are promulgated regulation that demand action through pollution control strategies. That is true to a point. The State met the requirement of the settlement by establishing the TMDL's for the watershed. The pollution control strategies are self-imposed requirements. Without significant public engagement in creating strategies that potentially impact all residents in the watershed, the strategies will die in the political arena. By taking time on the front end, and working through a truly public process, the State stands to gain more in the end product of a sustainable public policy.

The Model: Public Talk – Real Choices

The purpose of *Public Talk – Real Choices* is to move formulation and creation of a major

public policy decision from a public agency to the public for dialogue and deliberation. *Public Talk – Real Choices* builds on what happened in *Losing Ground* forums. Using deliberative dialogue as the core, *Public Talk* goes further by engaging the public in learning about the issue, weighing the costs and consequences of what is important through dialogue with each other, and coming to public judgment. The model consists of six steps; Organization of Work Team, Education, Issue Framing, Evaluation of the Issue Framework, Public Forums/Choice Work, Recommendations.

Model Components

Organization - is a structural component that brings the public agency and public, the work team, into agreement as to what needs to be accomplished. Without preliminary understanding and agreement by both parties, the effort will fail. **Education** - further enhances this arrangement by building upon the knowledge of the process shared in the organizational discussions and then adding information necessary to frame the issue. A good portion of technical information will come from the public agency e.g. the Inland Bays Whole Basin Assessment Report.

Issue framing - is the critical piece necessary for public engagement. Issue framing lays out in an organized fashion for public consumption three or four choices. The framework must be unbiased, represent the under girding values embedded in policy choices and articulate the basic costs and consequences of the choices. It should represent the voices of all impacted by the issue.

The framework sets the stage for our conflicting motives – those things we consider valuable and that pull us in different directions when we have to decide how to act. The issues need to be stated in ways that compel the public to make their views known.

Evaluation of the Framework - This piece gives insight into how successfully the teams framed the issue. The use internal deliberation, focus groups, etc. enhances the success of the framework. For successful public deliberation all voices need to be heard within the framework. The choices must be neutral and offer a positive approach for issue resolution.

Public deliberation - is the cornerstone of *Public Talk – Real Choices*. A significant representation of the public must deliberate the issue. This occurs through successful planning and selection of venues for forums. The forums must result in some form of common ground for action.

Recommendations - The work teams sift through and analyse the public voice they heard from the forums. From this public voice the work team develops the pollution control strategies.

Why This Model?

National Issues Forums

National Issues forums are “town meetings” that bring people together to deliberate “wicked problems,” problems that won’t go away, with the help of moderator. The medical analogy of a broken arm versus diabetes describes wicked problems. The broken arm can be set and heals. Diabetes requires life-changing alterations. Participants use an issue book that offers three to four choices for resolution. Within the choices are basic values, cost and consequences of the choice. With the help of a moderator the public works through the choices, by looking at four things: What is valuable? What are the costs and consequences of the choice? Where is the tension? Where is there common ground for action? Participants must consider “It’s not what I want to do but what we ought to do.”

Why Are These Models Effective?

The Harwood Group in a report *Meaningful Chaos- How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns*, found nine factors necessary for public engagement.

Connections – People tend to enlarge rather than narrow their views of public concerns, making connections among ideas and topics that society tends to fragment.

Personal Context – People relate to concerns that “fit” with their personal context, moving beyond self-interest to what is meaningful

Coherence – People want to hear the whole story. They want to understand what it means.

Room for Ambivalence – People do not immediately see black and white. They want a gray area to question, discuss, test ideas, and become comfortable with their opinions.

Emotion – Too many processes try to remove emotion from decisionmaking. Emotions are necessary to sustain relationships with public concerns.

Authenticity – People and information must “ring true”.

Sense of Possibilities – People really want something to happen and they might play a role in it.

Catalysts – Everyday people, not just experts and elite, are critical in helping people form relationships with public issues.

Mediating Institutions – Places where people come together to talk and act on public concerns. (Harwood, 1993)

National Issues Forums and *Public Talk – Real Choices* adhere to these tenets.

The Facilitator Team

Public Talk – Real Choices uses a neutral, third party facilitator. By using a neutral, third party as the facilitator, the facilitator becomes an advocate for the process (Kaner, 1996). Third party facilitation avoids the perception of bias that can occur when the facilitator is personally associated with the issue.

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