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2015 Symposium on Advanced Issues in Dispute  
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# Session One Notes

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## AN INTENTIONAL CONVERSATION ABOUT Public Engagement and Decision-Making: Moving from Dysfunction and Polarization to Dialogue and Understanding

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### SESSION ONE: SMALL GROUP THEMES (AND THE “POST-IT” NOTES WHICH WERE INCLUDED)

#### Table 1: Including the middle and extremes in dialogue (process)

“what about introverts” “Civic education” “how to dialogue with diverse communities and educating majority on diverse communities” “what resources are required to foster public engagement and is there the political will to provide them?” “civic engagement and the electoral/political process” “science denial. Everyone has their own facts” “how do you foster community engagement as a way of being and not just a process” “how do we strategically engage communities who have not traditionally been involved in public engagement?” “how do we have dialogue with folks who have extreme differences?” “are we inviting or reaching out to?” “with Roberts rules as the example, how do we bring people to the table for whom decision-making at a table is unfamiliar or even alien?” “how to connect outcome of civic dialogue with public policy at all 3 levels: local, state and federal.”

#### Table 2: Using technology to advance engagement and dialogue

“social connection tech is being developed for commerce. Where’s the investment to make it work for meaningful public engagement?” “faster communication keeps the communication emotional – exciting; boiling water is how we cook pasta” “facebook/twitter are important places for civic engagement. Ex: the marriage amendment was defeated because facebook allowed allies to step out from silence” “In a hashtag society (where ideas are overly 1) simplified and 2) polarized) how do we reach the depth of dialogue necessary to even ascertain real issues, let alone legitimate solutions?” “how to capture ‘fast’ moving youth to engage in (and trust) ‘slow’ moving institution’s processes?”

#### Table 3: Story - understanding story, values and beliefs

#### Table 4: Establishing trust

“how do convenors and leaders we cultivate openness (trust) with staff?” “gatekeepers” “risk of self-disclosure; withdraw or lash out from the process” “trust amongst other communities”

#### Table 5: Anonymity

#### Table 6: Addressing systemic & power barriers to engagement and dialogue

“How can public engagement be about encouraging powerful advocacy, not suppressing it?” “Voluntary and involuntary minorities” “are we resisting or embracing and leveraging?” “We

know that historically protest and revolution bring about real change. Why give public engagement and civil dialogue a chance?" "Kids dying, the need for gags and community fear" "In our models of 'citizen engagement' where do incarcerated persons fit, are they still citizens (who can't vote)?" "What would disparities look like if there were no constructs of race?" "How can I learn wisdom about ally-ship; how to be a privileged citizen yet also a critically reflective person with the movement for change?" "Are there needs for 1<sup>st</sup> amendment changes?"

**Table 7: Capturing the human/relational elements of engagement given our fast paced individualistic society**

"asking questions key to listening" "how to restrain dehumanization in public square and build relationships meaningfully" "how to promote deep listening" "how can we get people who don't talk to each other to do so in a meaningful way?" "how to create communities to listen, take deeper dives, and collaborate with others?"

**Table 8: Embodying the values of engagement - way of being**

"How do we cultivate curiosity?" "taking space and time - how to build into fabric of society?" "Most curious about ways to have uncomfortable conversations and encouraging people to share their story when cultural and linguistic background does not fit that mode." "culture" "inclusive of believes/values" "how to heal the fabric of relationship in society" "how to nurture a culture of respect and empathy" "cultural competence in civic engagement" "how might we together invite the spirit that connects us into the places of conflict so that we may recognize difference as an opportunity rather than a threat?" "how do we work towards understanding our different life experiences so that we may find common space to work on things together?"

**Table 9: Why do public engagement - goals?**

"Underlying assumption seems to be that public engagement leads to different/improved outcomes. Is it true? When and under what conditions is it true? Is public engagement a means or an end?" "Why are we so interested in public engagement? Why is it important?" "I'd like to explore the tension between the oft-lauded goal of 'self-determination' and the 'dangers' of 'individualism'" "we are not happy being individualistic"

## REPORTS

### Table 1: Including the middle and extremes in dialogue

- Start with many policy options
- Elected officials and other leaders as convenors
- Include people at point of option generation vs. point of decision
- Humanize dialogue – learn about individuals participating (not just their position)
- Take the time needed for relational work
- Recruit middle to participate in dialogue
- Civic education on value of participating
- Neutral entity to speak on behalf of middle
- Nonpartisan redistricting processes
- Framing dialogue and engagement in ways that appeal to widest audience
  - Positive vs. negative
  - Action vs. talk
  - In own interests
- Use ideologically based think tanks
- More dialogue/engagement tools to community leaders
  - Marriage and amendment approach

### Table 2: Using technology to advance engagement and dialogue

- Overall Optimism about use of technology to increase **meaningful** participation and engagement
  - It is the future ... we must decide how to use it effectively
- Speed is symbolic of desire to engage
- There are wonderful models of successful crowd sourcing/sharing (ex., Wikipedia)
- Models of participation – NPR's Minnesota and national Budget Balancing Tools
- Education (K-12) is key: we need to be teaching what it means to participate effectively in online/tech environment. Have to be a virtual citizen.

### Table 3: Story - Understanding Story, Values and Beliefs

- Quality of asking and listening matters
- Multiple ways to share story – art, voice, narrative, written, Facebook
- Story can be used to bridge or push away
- Story with a purpose
  - Measures drive policy
  - Who asks matters – invitation/power/modeling
- Bringing everyone into the story
  - Preparing them
  - Process decisions important, inclusivity
  - Sharing consistent with cultural values and beliefs
- Role for effective advocacy
  - Assisting people to be heard in existing frameworks and systems

#### **Table 4: Establishing Trust**

- Listening is not enough; we need to ask questions
- It's not just about voice, it is about decision-making power
- Need a system that not only educates, but also fosters relationship building
- There needs to be an incentive for people to do things they would not normally do
- Trust can be enhanced by participation in the design of the system
- Transparency is required
- Need to build from "anchor" of consensus
- There has to be something to bring people forward to the public/take the first step

#### **Table 5: Anonymity**

- Connect/nexus between political process and civil dialogue
- "Decision-making" process
  - "comments"
    - Not helpful?
    - Impact of anonymity?
    - Who is making decisions?
    - Value of anonymity for decision-making so not "put in box"
  - Hybrid
    - Representative democracy: Decisions made to remove to develop the ideas
    - Legislative v. executive view
- Anonymity allows people to not engage as citizens
- "Insiders" only/"Ousiders" only - neither is representative
- Can anonymity help draw back to the middle?
  - But then can't stay there
  - Right answer doesn't exist in middle
- How can we learn from what is being said that may seem like an anonymous rant?

#### **Table 6: Systemic and Power Barriers**

- Cultivate common language to create shared values
- (Barrier) Not recognizing and understanding (all) cultural norms
- (Barrier) Dominant norms are restrictive in terms of access and effectiveness
- Building democratic capacities in our smaller, local communities
- (Barrier) Too much is invested in disenfranchisement
- "America" changes culture/communities/society
- Revolution of what we have now (cultures, technology, etc.) to empower & renew spirit of public engagement
- "We the people" ... (preamble)

**Table 7: Capturing the human/relational elements of engagement given our fast paced individualistic society**

- Need to reclaim time and relationships (but it is OK to use new tools!)
- Need to cultivate/recognize wisdom in midst of fast paced world
- Relational nature v. individualism - needs more exploration
- Challenge of tech - emotion is necessary
- Pre-decision closes dialogue
- Technology not problem- individualism and pace are
- Pace impedes true engagement
- Brevity of tech platforms forces polarization
- Issues of depth of relationships
- Authenticity
- What if premise of public engagement is wrong?
- Is US too big for public engagement
- Mistrust is deep seeded
- Unable to let dust settle between “vomiting” of opinions

**Table 8 Way of Being**

- Difference between those who already possess and those where it needs to be cultivated
- Short term - leadership training
- Long term - k-12 education
  - In both need to teach perspective taking, communication, dispute resolution...
- Need for there to be successes to empower
- Polarization is exhausting for those in the middle - how to disincentivize polarization
- Understand need to learn new info to grow, to change thoughts
- Deeper conversations to uncover commonalities

**Table 9: Goals of Public Engagement**

- Serves an end in itself
  - Fuels democracy
  - Builds community
  - Empowers individuals
  - Educates
- Can lead to improved decisions
- Obligation/responsibility of citizenship
- Help address/cut across disparity from social constructs
- Serves as community glue (but can be harmful)
- Protects individual freedom
- Fuels our constitution