

University of Missouri Extension

DM461, Reviewed October 1993

Defusing Public Decision: A Way to Minimize Controversy While Facilitating Public Decision Making

Robert J. Bevins

Department of Agricultural Economics

At least two sides

There are at least two sides to most issues. Sometimes when public decisions are involved, things that begin as a search for a better understanding degenerate into heated controversy. There is a way to minimize this possibility. It calls for the use of what many public affairs educators have come to call the policy method. To describe this method and explain its relevance to community decision making is the purpose of this leaflet.

How decisions are made

Decisions, be they public or private, are made on the basis of beliefs, facts and values. People do not hold the same beliefs as to what the facts are. Even if they did hold the same beliefs as to the facts, there could still be disagreement as to what should be done. Why? Because decisions are not based on fact alone or on what we believe to be fact. They are also based on the values we hold, on our ideas of what is important.

Individuals do have different sets of values. No two people have had the same initial endowments or the same cultural, political and religious backgrounds. Thus, even if they agree on the facts and the relevance of the facts, they can still disagree on what is the appropriate decision. Educational programs involving public decision must take this into account, for both philosophic and practical reasons.

If information programs built around as yet unmade public decisions tell people what decisions ought to be made, this is an attempt to force a particular set of values on those participating. Thus the program becomes indoctrination, not just the presentation of information. This in a sense is dishonest and thus inappropriate for either a public educational agency or a group billing itself as nonpartisan. The practical reason for not prescribing solution in advance is that advocacy frequently stirs up a reaction that makes it "hot" for the program presenters.

The policy method

There is, however, a program format by which educators and public officials can get the educational job done with a minimum of heated exchange.

It is a five-step method, and it applies whether there is a meeting, a newspaper series, a radio or television program, or just a series of personal encounters.

- Define the problem.
- List goals and objectives.
- Develop alternative solutions.
- Explore the consequences of alternatives.
- Leave the decision to the people.

Let us expand on this method, show how to use it, and explain why it enables us to avoid unnecessary controversy.

Step 1

Clearly define the problem.

The problem must be defined with sufficient generality to avoid argument over what the problem is. One way of achieving this is to never define the problem in terms of a solution to the problem.

For instance, a problem facing a county might be poor assessment of real property. It would not be helpful to define the problem as either the lack of good assessment or the lack of a competent or honest assessor. It would be much more palatable to define the problem as "difficulty in maintaining equitable assessments." This suggests the problem and not the solution. The problem is stated in sufficient generality that there will be few who argue it is not a problem and even fewer who argue against equitable assessments in principle.

Controversy over definition of the problem is to be minimized, yet there must be sufficient sharpness of definition so that those discussing the topic are not addressing themselves to different matters.

Step 2

Develop a listing of the goals and values of those affected by the problem and decisions that might be made.

What things do various groups wish to accomplish? What, not how! This list of objectives becomes the criteria by which alternative solutions will be evaluated.

Suppose the problem is downtown parking. The police and fire agencies, the merchants (both downtown and in shopping centers), the customers, the taxpayer and school children form a partial list of those who will have an interest in or be affected by actions that are taken.

The public agencies will want uncongested streets. The downtown merchants will want their customers to have easy access to their business places; their competition in the shopping centers may regard downtown congestion to be to their benefit. The customers want to get where they are going and do it easily, but as taxpayers they wish to do it with minimum public cost. The school children, while unable to press their point, will have an interest in the safety of pedestrians.

Step 3

Develop the alternative approaches to solution of the problem.

Solutions should be categorized so that they do not exceed five, and they should cover the range of possibilities. A universal alternative is doing nothing or leaving things as they are. Others vary with the problem.

If downtown parking is the problem, the alternatives might be:

- Do nothing.
- Develop a one-way street system.
- Develop public parking lots.
- Develop a downtown traffic free area.
- Or combine some of the other alternatives.

The list could be extended or shortened, but three to five alternatives seem optimal.

Step 4

Develop the consequences of each alternative in the light of its impact on those affected.

The way this is done is the key to effective use of this method. Develop the consequences and state them in the form of positive statements; avoid value judgments. This means that words like pro and con, advantage and disadvantage, and good and bad are to be avoided like the plague. Here is why:

If the problem is downtown parking and the alternative under analysis is developing a downtown traffic free area, some of the consequences are as follows:

- Pedestrian movement will be made easier.
- Automobiles must move around the restricted area.
- Front door delivery to stores will be more difficult.
- Parking within the restricted area will be banned.
- Need for parking will be increased on the edge of the restricted area.

Now if this information is put in a good or bad, pro or con, or advantage or disadvantage framework, there have to be the same number of each or there will be accusation of bias. Also, what may be an advantage to one group may be to the disadvantage of another. A consequence stated positively but neutrally avoids these problems.

For instance, the banning of traffic within the restricted area may be an advantage to the pedestrians and even most merchants but the bank with a drive-in window within the area may have mixed feelings. The drive-in cleaning establishment will certainly be hurt. Telling them that something is an advantage when they know very well that for them it is a disadvantage may cause hostile feelings. A consequence may be stated neutrally, and then each person is free to assign the statement to his pro or to his con list.

Step 5

Leave decision as to the "best" alternative up to the people.

Decision is based on fact, belief, values and goals. This means you cannot prescribe for another unless you presume you know the relevant facts and can accurately predict the goals and values held by another. If we try to tell people how they should decide and thus by implication that we know better than they what is good for them, we ensure conflict and controversy.

Limits of method

The methods described here are not appropriate for the advocate of a cause who wishes to sell his view. It is appropriate for those who wish to provide a way public decision making can be facilitated by providing opportunity for issue exploration before sides have been chosen and while unbiased information is still welcome. At that time, new information is not a threat to established positions that are likely to be defended with a tenacity that hardly makes for an open, exploring mind.

For additional information, contact your MU Extension community development specialist through your local MU Extension center, or the Department of Regional and Community Affairs, MU, Clark Hall, Columbia.

Related MU Extension publications

- DM463, Decision-Making Techniques for Community Groups
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM463>
- DM464, Town Meetings That Work
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM464>

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



■ Issued in furtherance of the Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211
■ an equal opportunity/ADA institution ■ 573-882-7216 ■ extension.missouri.edu