

HOW TO DO EDUCATIONAL WORK ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

A Group Consultation

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Members of the audience were first asked to identify the single most important and difficult issue with which they have to deal. Several suggestions were made, including “local, state, and federal taxation policies,” “foreign policy,” “farm policy,” and “national elections.” When the conference leader pressed for agreement on which of these was the most important and difficult, the audience was divided. When the conference leader asked what the position of extension workers regarding one of these issues, national elections, should be, a controversy arose between those who felt they should avoid all discussion of this issue and those who felt extension workers had a positive responsibility to see that constituents were informed on the issues being raised by the candidates—so long as personalities were not discussed.

The conference leader then interrupted this debate and suggested that this experience with the discussion of a controversial issue be used to extract some generalizations about how to handle controversy constructively. He invited members of the audience to identify the conditions that must exist if educational results are to be achieved from this or any other controversy. The following required conditions were suggested:

1. A climate of mutual respect and acceptance—even positive valuation—of the right of individuals to differ must prevail.
2. All parties to contention must be willing to listen to all others (open communication).
3. Before actually starting to discuss the issue, the participants should agree on the criteria of an ideal solution (clarification of mutual values).
4. All interested parties must have an opportunity to participate—to exert their influence. This condition is maximized when a large audience is divided into small groups.
5. The information required to think intelligently about the issue must be available.

6. An orderly process of problem solving should be followed:
 - a. Define the issue or problem.
 - b. Examine the relevant data.
 - c. Explore all possible alternative lines of action.
 - d. Test the consequences of each alternative.
 - e. Choose a line of action and plan its implementation.
 - f. Plan for evaluation of the results.