Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions

Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions is a report for people who want a stronger hand in shaping their collective future and recognize that this requires working through disagreements on what the future should be. Replacing an earlier publication, Framing Issues for Public Deliberation, this booklet incorporates the foundation’s latest insights on how people can describe problems and present different ways to address them so as to encourage sound judgments and avoid immobilizing polarization.

Kettering Foundation | 2011  
FREE | 24 pages

Working Through Difficult Decisions

Working Through Difficult Decisions is a brochure for people interested in helping their communities work through their most challenging problems and for anyone interested in moderating forums based on National Issues Forums materials. The brochure speaks to how people can move beyond disagreements to arrive at shared and reflective judgments.

Kettering Foundation | 2011  
FREE | 12 pages

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering’s primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering’s research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s website at www.kettering.org.

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Why would the Kettering Foundation tinker with a long-established rite of spring? Maybe it’s because, like Charles Kettering and the other inventors who made Dayton a hotbed of experimentation and research in the early 20th century, we’re always on the lookout for a way to do something better.

The case in point is the Kettering Foundation’s annual program in Washington, DC, known as A Public Voice. Every spring since the late 1970s, the Kettering Foundation has produced this vernal ritual as reliably and predictably as the blooming of redbuds is followed by the blooming of tulips, which is then followed by the blooming of dogwoods.

The format and details of A Public Voice have varied over the years, but its aim has always been the same: to demonstrate to policymakers and elected officials the value of a deliberative public. To do that, the foundation has presented the outcomes of deliberative forums hosted by members of the National Issues Forums (NIF) network.

Some years, the program seemed to resonate with the policymakers who attended. Other years—well, not so much. But through the years (according to those whose association with A Public Voice is much longer than mine), all these efforts have faced an enduring challenge: how to overcome policymakers’ skepticism because of the nonstatistical nature of the information that emerges from deliberative discourse.

That skepticism is often voiced in a few questions: How many people attended? How many women? How many men? Were the groups demographically balanced? Were the forums held in geographically balanced locations? What was the party registration of those who took part? And so on.

Anyone familiar with NIF forums knows that they don’t produce the kinds of answers to those questions that will satisfy policymakers accustomed to dealing with a tsunami of scientifically produced polling data. So dealing with such questions has often been not just challenging but ultimately frustrating for all concerned.

All of which made our experience in Washington in late 2012 encouraging. A group of Kettering staff members and
associates held a series of meetings with congressional staff members and other members of what might be termed the Washington policy community. At those small-group meetings, we presented the outcomes of NIF forums on how to deal with the national debt. The forums used an issue guide A Nation in Debt: How Can We Pay Our Bills? produced by the Kettering Foundation.

What made the 2012 meetings so notable was that almost no one asked the usual quantitative questions about the forums. Everyone seemed willing to accept the proposition that forums produce a different kind of information about public thinking and that this information is valuable and useful. And they all were eager for just such a different sort of information.

Why the change? My guess is that it stems from the basic facts of life for DC policymakers these days. They are awash in a sea of polling data. Every congresswoman has access to her own polls about the views of her constituents on a wide range of subjects. Hundreds of interest groups flood every senator’s office with polls proving the worthiness of their views and the worthlessness of views that disagree. Every week brings new polls—all bulletproof in their professionalism, many designed to prove one particular point of view, all purporting to show definitively what the public thinks—contributing to what eventually and inevitably becomes a wall of indistinguishable noise that contributes to the gridlock now afflicting Washington. They have plenty of information, but it doesn’t tell them what they really need to know, which is what citizens really are willing to support when it comes to debt and spending.

No wonder, then, they were receptive when Kettering showed up offering to share information that was qualitative rather than quantitative, nuanced rather than blunt-edged, thoughtful rather than knee-jerk.

The Kettering folks left those December meetings elated by the reception that our presentations received. But we also left with a question: how can we build on the momentum of those meetings going forward? Thinking about that question led us to a new formulation for the 2013 edition of A Public Voice.

We decided that this year, instead of reporting to policymakers on what happened at forums, we would ask them to join with us in framing a new issue guide around questions of the role of government in a time of deep deficits and a corrosive mutual distrust between citizens and government. And we would try a new means of conveying the value of the information that would emerge from these forums.

In preparation for this year’s A Public Voice, Kettering conducted research forums in the late winter and early spring to gather citizens’ concerns on that range of issues. We then did some preliminary groupings of those concerns.

Up to that point, we were pretty much engaged in business as usual. But then we did something highly unusual. Instead of inviting Washington policymakers to a meeting at which we would unveil the results of our research, we invited policymakers and leaders of a wide range of deliberative democracy organizations to join us for a meeting. Our goal was to set up an exchange unlike any we’d had before. If the meeting worked as we hoped it would, policymakers would speak about what kinds of information regarding public thinking would help them do their jobs. People from the deliberative democracy organizations would listen and respond frankly about the kinds of information that emerge when citizens deliberate. And both groups would leave with a renewed and expanded sense of the value that a deliberative public brings to difficult policy decisions.

That meeting, A Public Voice 2013, took place June 5 at the National Press Club. Like all tinkerers, we were curious to see how this experiment would work out. In a word, the answer is: promisingly.

The interaction made clear that policymakers are aware of the limits of the information that they now get about public thinking and are frustrated by their interactions with citizens. It also became clear that they had little idea of the existence and scope of deliberative actions that routinely take place across the country.

On the other side, the exchange revealed that deliberative democracy groups would benefit from a deeper understanding of just what kind of information policymakers need about public thinking.

So now we’re moving forward on developing our framing on budget cuts and the role of government, incorporating the insights we gleaned from the June 5 meeting. We’re setting up meetings to stay in touch with the people who participated in A Public Voice 2013. And we’re moving ahead to select a new topic that we will ask policymakers and deliberative convenors to help us frame next spring.

It turns out there’s always something to tinker with.

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