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.

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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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Learning Exchanges with Professional Organizations

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People often report that their efforts to engage with others around the problems they face in daily life are discouraged by the indifference or outright hostility of institutional actors. That being said, Kettering has found that many organizations are attempting to create pathways for more effective citizen-to-citizen interactions.

What motivates such institutional actors? Self-interest is one reason. They have recognized that strengthening the capacity of citizens to do what they need to do can reinforce what the institutions need to do to meet their obligations. Government agencies and administrative officials are also motivated because they are concerned with combatting hyperpolarization that can paralyze institutional efforts. Professionals are left with a challenge: how can normal institutional operating routines be aligned with the practices citizens use to do their work? Said another way, how can the ways institutions do their work and the ways citizens do theirs be interconnected?

When will organizations attempt such realignment? What challenges emerge when they attempt to design such changes? What affects do they attribute to such realignment? The Kettering Foundation is exploring these questions through learning exchanges with a number of innovative organizations.

For example, the Southern Growth Policies Board has been working with the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO), which is interested in improving the decision making of their membership. NASBO hopes to accomplish this through a better understanding of what citizens’ value, what they are willing and not willing to do, and what citizens understand to be the implications of their choices. One of the key struggles Kettering has identified is the tendency of the interactions among citizens to be framed around the details of budget and spending decisions. The processes that budget officers are familiar with seem to underscore this approach to decision making.

This approach has been particularly evident in past experiments with participatory budgeting and other like-minded efforts. The problem is that a focus on line items of budgets offers little information about citizens’ priorities and the tensions among the things everyone holds valuable. NASBO is looking to uncover a deeper understanding of such value tensions, and in so doing help citizens understand the implications of their choices. They feel that this will improve collective decision making—in specific contrast to what they are seeing in the partisan political world.

We are exploring these challenges in Kettering’s research exchanges. The focus is on the problem behind the problem, namely how to promote a more useful kind of civic discourse among citizens around the problems they face together in communities. The outcomes of that choice work can then become reflected in budget decisions. The promise of the approach for institutional actors is that when their budget decisions are popularly seen to resonate with a citizen-driven sense of direction, the sense of legitimacy of the budget outcomes will be strengthened.

Identifying the characteristics of such a civic discourse and putting it into practice presents a distinct set of challenges in the research with the budget officers. How can the things people consider valuable be identified? How can the tensions among those things be constructively identified in terms of the actions people and institutions might take? How can opportunities for people to come together to work through these tensions be created and supported? How can the outcomes of these deliberative discussions be conveyed in ways that can assist policymakers in their job of making budget decisions? Exploring ways to deal with these challenges serves as the crux of these research exchanges.

Kettering is also working with a number of organizations interested in naming and framing issues for public deliberation as well as convening and moderating deliberative forums. They, too, believe that the character of citizen involvement can be enhanced by opportunities for people to engage with others over the problems they face in daily life. The Association of Centers for the Study of Congress and several of its member organizations are in the midst of framing an issue on the problem of working together in a democracy. These congressional centers are concerned that it is increasingly difficult for people to interact with those who have differing views or experiences. Public life is filled with angry rhetoric, and in private life, more and more we associate primarily with others like ourselves (or who agree with us). This makes it difficult to face problems together. The question, then, is, how can we work together even when we disagree?

The American Bar Association (ABA) is another group experimenting with creat-
Learning Exchanges with Professional Organizations

Learning exchanges with professional organizations promise to shed light on fundamental questions about democracy. How do these organizations understand self-rule, and how do they understand what citizens should do? How does the work done in institutions affect the work that citizens must do? How can these organizations facilitate an active role for citizens in deciding and acting on problems they face in daily life? What does the work of a deliberative public contribute to the work of institutions? Stay tuned for future reports!

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