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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Kettering research suggests that one reason citizens avoid getting involved in public issues is that what they hear from professionals—politicians, issue analysts, news reporters, and others—does not seem to speak to their everyday concerns. Kettering research, however, focuses on ways to name public issues that connect more directly with what people are seeing in their daily lives.

Our research also suggests that the conventional professional discourse fails to identify the trade-offs that citizens will inevitably face in dealing with issues that require public decision making and action. So we study ways to frame public issues so that the options for action are clear and reflect things that people hold deeply valuable—and the trade-offs and downsides of these options are equally clear. We think framing issues in ways that deliberately reveal the choices people face will more likely result in sound collective decisions.

As a research organization, one of the ways Kettering makes its findings available is through issue guides designed to promote deliberation. These National Issues Forums (NIF) issue guides are used in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities around the country. Kettering studies what happens as citizens engage with the guides in public, deliberative forums. (Issue guides are available through www.nifi.org.)

Over the years, the nature and format of the issue guides has changed. The changes reflect Kettering’s learning about the things that support deliberation and that discourage it. Those familiar with NIF issue guides may have noticed that they are now more brief, typically around 12 pages. We made this change intentionally, based on observation and reports from people who use them. We are trying to develop guides that provide necessary information without being overwhelming. From interviews with moderators and forum convenors, we have learned that the chief element that can support deliberation is the framework itself. A framework is simply the main options for action to address a specific issue, along with the likely consequences of those actions. Many forum moderators tell us that this is fundamentally all that is needed. While it is ideal for people to have read the issue guide before participating in a forum, very often only a few participants have done so. The summary at the end of the guides is therefore useful. Just as important, we hope to avoid setting up a situation where those who had a chance to read ahead are “experts” who endeavor to teach the others what they ought to know. In some cases, moderators will, in essence, take apart an existing issue guide, distill it down to its core framework, and use that in a forum, instead of the more complete guide.

Kettering is exploring this phenomenon by experimenting with shorter issue advisories that outline just a basic issue framework. The first one, How Can We Stop Mass Shootings in Our Communities?, was published in February 2013, and more are planned. We want to learn more about the minimum that can support productive public conversations. What is too much? What is too little? This should yield insights on what is essential and what is ancillary.

Kettering is also beginning to experiment with different ways of making issue frameworks available. We will be sharing aspects of the background research that goes into issue framing in ways that, we hope, others will be able to adopt and adapt for their own purposes. Here again, we are motivated by a question about what is necessary to spark deliberation.

Questions, Concerns, and Strategies

Less noticeable, but perhaps more important, is how the issue frameworks themselves (not just the guides) have changed over the years. This again reflects Kettering’s evolving understanding of how people make choices. The kinds of issues that require deliberation are ones that pit things held deeply valuable against one another, so that there are trade-offs to any course of action—otherwise the issue would have long since been addressed and solved. The deliberative framework needs to make these trade-offs clear. For instance, many issues tend to expose a fundamental tension between security
and freedom: more security entails restrictions on movement and therefore less freedom.

Early issue books in the 1980s were intended to be “briefing books for citizens”—similar to the briefing books that policymakers often get, which lay out the top experts’ views on issues. This paradigm can result in issue frameworks that have elements of exactly that approach: Here are strategy A, strategy B, and strategy C. Pick one. This is one way to approach difficult problems, but it can make some of the trade-offs between things held valuable less apparent and may provoke conversations that reflect the dominant expert view of the competing options.

Recent neurobiological research suggests that, when human beings make decisions, they weigh the likely outcomes of a chosen course of action against the likely downsides. (Some research indicates that this is hardwired.) In other words, it appears that decision making fundamentally involves consideration of trade-offs. This is especially true when it comes to certain kinds of public problems.

There are different kinds of problems that people face in communities:

- Some are technical and can be solved unilaterally—for example, how to build a new jail,
- Some are difficult yet straightforward or with solutions with known consequences—for example, how to increase police presence and enforcement, and
- Some are wicked; the problem is disparately located and has tensions between things held valuable that must be worked through—for example, what should we do about a growing sense of personal vulnerability in our community.

While, in this taxonomy, “difficult” problems are usefully deliberated over, “wicked” problems require such deliberation.

This insight has led us to focus more strongly on rooting issue frameworks in things that are held deeply valuable (for instance, the need for security, the desire to be treated fairly, the desire to have freedom to act) by starting with the concerns held by the public. Our initial research when developing an issue framework focuses most importantly on gathering an understanding of people’s concerns when they consider the topic at hand.

Taking into account what we have learned about how people decide, three key questions drive the development of a framework for public deliberation:

1. What concerns you about this issue?
2. Given those concerns, what would you do about it?
3. If that worked to ease your concern, what are the downsides or trade-offs we might then have to tolerate?

Responses to these questions, together, can generate a framework that makes clear the drawbacks of different people’s favored options. Facing these drawbacks is the ultimate concern of public deliberation.

The practical effect of this is that, over time, it is possible to see issue guides move from a “policy-centered” approach to a more “concern-centered” one.

This leads to questions that Kettering is continuing to pursue. When people deliberate together on an issue that is named and framed in public terms—that is, the issue expresses the things held deeply valuable and the options are rooted in the concerns people bring to the table, along with expressing the drawbacks—the resulting conversation can be at odds with the dominant conversation taking place among policymakers. In fact,
this is often the case. This gap is of interest to us. How do policymakers view a public voice when it can be different than how they view the same issue? And vice versa? These questions lie at the heart of the broader NIF experiment.

**Issue Framing as Practice**

Kettering has engaged in research to develop many issue frameworks and guides and has exchanged insights with others who are also doing similar work. These partnerships and exchanges, in particular, have led to an insight that the work of issue framing is best thought of not as a technique to be mastered but as a practice to be pursued.

Our research suggests that there is no perfect way to frame issues. Even more strongly, it suggests that there is no book or article that one can read that will guarantee one can create a useful issue framework. Like any practice, doing this work yields new learning, and doing it repeatedly yields insights that don’t come from one-off efforts.

We can learn most by exchanging insights with others as they go about doing their public work. Sometimes, however, partners believe Kettering has a specific process that they need to be trained in before they can move forward. Other times, we get questions about how “our process” differs from others. The answer is that we don’t have a process at all; we are studying the practices people engage in as they go about public work. As we learn with others, we try to keep in mind: What is helpful in conveying the practices of deliberative politics? What kinds of things get in the way?

What Kettering tries to do is share insights about alternative ways to go about the same tasks. Our chief aim is not to spread the word about a particular insight, but to learn more so that we might have new insights to share. As you learn from your own experiments with naming and framing in your communities, we hope that you will share what you are learning as well.

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