
DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LEADERS

PARTICIPANT'S PACKET

MANAGING CONTROVERSIAL PUBLIC ISSUES: SOLVE A PROBLEM OR CREATE A RIOT



Renée A. Daugherty, Ph.D.

Professor
Human Development and Family Science
Extension Specialist - Leadership Development
and Educational Methods
Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service
Oklahoma State University
233 Human Environmental Sciences
Stillwater, OK 74078
(405) 744-6282
renee.daugherty@okstate.edu

Sue E. Williams, Ph.D.

Professor and Head
Human Development and Family Science
233 Human Environmental Sciences
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078
(405) 744-5057
sue.williams@okstate.edu



Introduction and Background

Strong leadership is vital to the well-being of families and communities. Citizens need capable people to effectively guide and direct citizen groups, schools, governments, and public service organizations. Such leaders can encourage the best use of resources and motivate others to find answers to critical local needs.

There are many ways for individuals to be leaders in their communities, but sometimes these individuals need help. This module is designed to assist those interested in participating in public decisions with the knowledge and skills to enhance their effectiveness as public leaders.

Objectives

As a result of participating in this module, you will learn to:

- Identify elements of a community issue.
- Distinguish between myths, facts, and values.
- Appreciate the importance of naming an issue.
- Understand the “alternatives and consequences” approach to public decision making.
- Understand the elements of issue framing.
- Recognize styles of issue resolution.
- Identify roles that leaders can take in working on community issues.

What is a Public Issue? Elements of an Issue

First, an issue is a topic of public concern with fairly widespread public interest. Community leaders are challenged to accept the responsibility of helping people identify and resolve public issues, rather than promoting their own agendas.

Second, an issue can be acted on, meaning leaders and other citizens could possibly make changes to affect the issue. Generally an issue is broader than a problem or a specific set of problems. Also, an issue can be resolved; it can have a solution.

A third element of an issue is controversy. There are many ways to address an issue. Controversy can occur when different individuals and groups promote their own solutions.

Questions for Community Leaders

When identifying and analyzing issues, community leaders need to determine whether there is a problem, and if so, what it is. As a leader, you need a clear understanding of the problem at the root of the community issue. You may need to do some investigating, such as listening carefully to what people say about the issue and studying the newspaper. Make sure the problem really is a problem, rather than a solution you or others wish to promote. For example, a community might be talking about “school consolidation,” but that is actually just a possible solution to the bigger issue of providing quality education.

Is there controversy?

There are many ways to address an issue. Controversy can occur when different individuals and groups promote their own solutions rather than focusing on the public good.

Is it a public issue?

Is the issue a concern for both community leaders and the people who live in the community? Is there widespread interest? You might get a sense of the answer to this question by looking at if or how the issue is talked about via the newspaper, radio, and local coffee shops.

What are the different points of view on the issue?

How do those people who are often missing from public discussion feel about the issue? Remember, there are usually more than two sides to an issue, so look for all sides.

Can the situation be meaningfully discussed and resolved?

You should be able to list a range of perspectives on the issue and a range of possible solutions. The need for public discussion should be clear. Also, be careful not to look at your issues too broadly. For example, a question such as “What is happening to our community?” might be a good one to get a discussion going, but it probably won’t push people to consider the options for addressing the issue.

Are people and decision makers of that community ready to discuss the issue and make changes?

If people are not ready to discuss the issue, community leaders may need to educate the public to prepare them for discussion and problem solving. Also, keep in mind there must be time for community members to discuss the issue, meaning it has not already reached crisis level.

What resources are needed to resolve the issue?

To resolve just about any public issue will require a mix of resources such as money, people, skills, talent, and contacts. Remember that money isn’t the only solution.

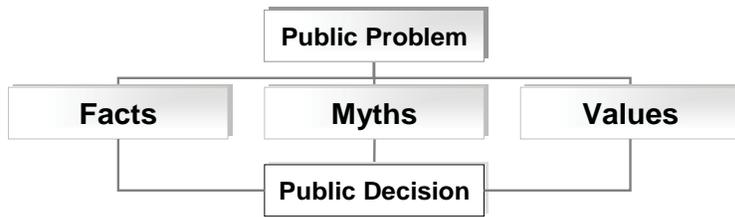
The key to community problem-solving is identifying and evaluating a variety of alternatives to make things better. Are you willing to be objective in this process? Objectivity is crucial if you want to solve a problem, and not create a riot.

Potential Controversy

When analyzing and resolving community issues, the potential for controversy is usually near at hand. What is truly valuable to people grows out of their everyday experiences, and it’s in those differing values that lurks the potential for controversy. For example, you may differ from others in your views on what’s important in life, the role of government, or personal health and safety. What are some specific examples of controversies related to the following topics *in your community*?

TOPIC	COMMUNITY CONTROVERSY
Quality of life/standard of living	_____
Personal health/safety	_____
Environmental risk	_____
Justice/equality	_____
Role of government	_____

The Public Decision-Making Process



How do people make their decisions about a public issue? Some may base their opinions on facts, while some base their opinions on myths that they think are facts. People are also influenced by their values. As a community leader, it’s important that you sharpen your skills at separating facts, myths, and value judgments.

A **fact** is a verifiable statement of what is. For example, 17 people died last year in vehicle wrecks in Smith County and none were wearing their seatbelts. Another way of describing facts is that the evidence is generally accepted in the scientific community. A **myth** is what people think is fact. It’s what people think is true but, in reality, is inaccurate, incomplete, or false. For example, “Seatbelts cause more deaths than they prevent,” is a myth.

On the previous page, you gave some examples of potential controversial issues in your community. What are some myths community members may have about those issues?

ISSUE	MYTH
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Values are standards of desirability—what people believe “should be” and what people hold valuable. They’re often stated in terms of good or bad, beautiful or ugly, or in similar opposite terms that can’t be proven right or wrong by scientific methods. One person’s “ugly” is another person’s “work of art,” and there is no objective way to choose between them.

Major Challenges to Community Leaders

- To establish facts and debunk the myths in the public decision-making process.
- To create a safe environment which recognizes and respects that people bring a variety of values to the decision-making process that will help to shape the public decision.
- To get people to say what they are willing to do to work on local issues.

Activity: Who Gets the Heart?

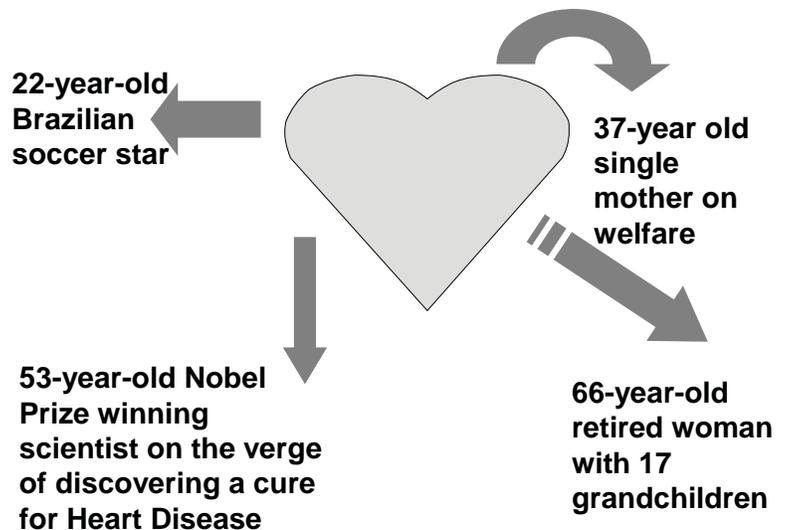
Your task:

You are a community member who serves on a transplant committee at a local medical center. These four candidates desperately need a heart transplant and only one heart is available. Your committee must decide who will receive the heart.

Instructions:

1. Each person in your group is to choose one candidate and present a case for that choice. Each candidate must have an advocate.
2. When the instructor says "Prepare your comments," you have one minute of silence to prepare your case for your candidate.
3. When the instructor calls "Present the first candidate," the first person in your group has one minute to present a case to your small group without questions or interruptions. The instructor will call time when that minute is up and the next person has one minute and so on until all four group members have presented their cases.
4. When the instructor says, "Decide who gets the heart," your group has two minutes to make a decision.
5. The instructor will ask each group to report their decision and their reasons for choosing that candidate.

Who Gets the Heart?



Issue Resolution

The process begins by listing possible solutions, and there are two common ways of doing this.

Let's think about one familiar way—pros and cons. In this process, a list of solutions is made then, for each solution, two lists of consequences are developed—the advantages and disadvantages, the pros and cons. The words “pros” and “cons” violate objectivity. They are value judgments in and of themselves. What is pro to one person may be con to another.

The preferred approach is a method known as **alternatives and consequences**. With this method, the problem is defined in terms of the actual issue, not the symptoms, in order to get to the real underlying issue and put it in a decision-making framework. The alternative solutions are listed. Because each alternative has consequences, a list of consequences is generated for each alternative. This establishes a cohesive environment for public decision making. The people decide which alternatives and consequences they're willing to live with.

Styles of Issue Resolution

The table on the next page, “Styles of Issue Resolution” has styles for four categories: principles, assumptions, step, and techniques. Each column in the table lists ways (Traditional and Issue-based) of resolving an issue.

As you look at each column, you'll notice that some of the ways are more appealing than others. In fact, some are clearly unappealing, even destructive. Maybe you've even found yourself in one of these situations and felt like you were caught in a riot when you really wanted to be working for a solution.

Using the alternatives and consequences approach helps to set the stage for the Win/Win style of issue resolution.

The “Styles of Issue Resolution” table can be a useful reference tool as you develop your personal skills in addressing controversial issues. It's a great reminder to focus on issues rather than people or personalities.

Traditional	Issue Based
BASIC PRINCIPLES	
	
<p>Attack individuals to discredit their position by discrediting them.</p>	<p>Attack the issue, not the people.</p>
<p>Promote rigid adherence to positions. Search for one best solution.</p>	<p>Focus on interest, not on positions.</p>
<p>Focus on previous encounters; how much can one party extract from the other.</p>	<p>Focus on possibilities and opportunities.</p>
<p>Focus on self-interest</p>	<p>Help satisfy other party's interest as well as your own.</p>
BASIC ASSUMPTIONS	
	
<p>Results in winners and losers; zero sum game.</p>	<p>Process can result in mutual gain.</p>
<p>Goal is victory and not the well being of the organization. Obtain as much of your predetermined solutions as you can.</p>	<p>Can produce creative solutions, contributing to the success of the organization.</p>
<p>Parties become polarized. Reliance on power; gamesmanship produces compromises satisfying neither party.</p>	<p>Can produce solutions the parties are motivated to uphold.</p>
<p>Relationship is not a critical concern. Objective is the resolution of issues. Often damages party's relationship.</p>	<p>It can improve the relationship between the parties.</p>

Traditional	Issue Based
BASIC STEPS	
	
<p>Seek input from constituents and learn all you can about any weaknesses/strengths of the other side that you may use later.</p>	<p>Educate yourself and your constituents on the process. Seek their input.</p>
<p>Present your demands to the other side and information to support your position. "Never show your hand."</p>	<p>Develop a list of issues, the interests behind them, and an opening statement.</p>
<p>Insist on your position and discredit the other side's people and their position.</p>	<p>Present your opening statement and your list of issues to the other party.</p>
<p>Act in only your own interest.</p>	<p>Discuss your interests with the other party.</p>
<p>Use whatever pressure/power you have to achieve your solution.</p>	<p>Generate options to satisfy interest.</p>
<p>Compromise only if you cannot achieve total victory.</p>	<p>Establish criteria/standards to judge options.</p>
BASIC TECHNIQUES	
	
<p>Take a firm position</p>	<p>Listen to what others hold valuable.</p>
<p>Discredit other's position.</p>	<p>Brainstorm.</p>
<p>Explain and defend your position.</p>	<p>Engage in problem solving.</p>
<p>Use power and threats and attain victory.</p>	<p>Build consensus.</p>
<p>Compromise as necessary to get the best deal you can.</p>	<p>Find common ground (public deliberative forums).</p>

Source: "Interest-based Bargaining." Federal Mediation & Conciliation Service, P.O. Box 720416, Norman, OK 73072

Naming the Issue

It's important to name an issue in a way that is meaningful to many different people in your community. In other words, the name should reflect people's concerns, and help them see that they have a role in the resolving the issue.

The terms that are used to name the issue need to appeal to the public, not just to experts or a small group of people already concerned about the issue. Public decision making can only occur when people identify with and "buy into" the issue. Remember the news media will pick up on terms that are easily understood by the public and could be negative or divisive. As a community leader, your challenge is to be proactive in how the issue is named, rather than allowing it to be named in sensational terms. It's more productive to name an issue in terms that lead to decision making rather than terms that fuel controversy.

The name chosen for the issue should reflect broad interest and perspectives. Many individuals and groups must believe that something should be done to make change regarding the issue, and that their ideas will be considered in the decision-making process.

Consider the following names for issues:

Divisive	Cohesive
Public School Consolidation	Improving Educational Opportunities for Public School Youth
Government Health Care	Improving Health Care Access
Abortion; Family Planning	Preventing Teen Pregnancy

The issue names in the left column use divisive terms that inflame controversy and prematurely offer a single solution to a larger issue. The issue names in the right column do the following:

- Reflect people's concerns
- Use terms that show that the issue is a public one, rather than a limited one
- Allow for varying perspectives to be offered as solutions

Framing Issues for Public Decision Making

Too often when public problems arise in communities, they are laid out by experts in a series of competing “solutions.” Those solutions (many of which are very narrow in their approach) get batted back and forth by politicians and amplified by the news media. Much of the time, the battle between competing parties takes over, as if it were what matters most. Unfortunately, the real nature of the problem can get lost. Framing an issue in “public terms” is one way to break this pattern of inflaming and polarizing public problems.

Framing issues for deliberation introduces a way of thinking about and presenting issues for public discussion and problem solving that is based on what people really care about. This approach is based on the idea that the starting point for building public ownership and support is to get people talking about challenging public issues. It is an outgrowth of the “alternatives and consequences” concept discussed earlier. Framing the issue is the first step on the path toward making decisions about public problems that consider the needs and values of individuals and families impacted by these public decisions.

Issue framing for deliberation is based on the philosophy that democracy depends upon people making choices together about how to deal with problems in their communities. The process of issue framing involves examining a problem from many different perspectives using the voices of a wide range of people to **name the problem** and **suggest alternative solutions**. Framing for deliberation presents a variety of approaches for dealing with a problem. Once perspectives have been considered and possible solutions identified, the information is united into what is called a “framework” often in the form of an “issue book” to guide public deliberation on the issue framed. A well developed framework challenges people to discuss the issue and possible alternative solutions while considering the consequences, trade-offs, and tensions associated with making a public decision on the issue.

Community leaders create and use issue frameworks in a variety of ways. Examples include the following:

- Articles in newspapers and on websites
- Public deliberative forums
- Town hall meetings
- Brochures, flyers, and handouts
- Speeches and public commentary
- Media interviews

Context for Framing Issues

The process of framing issues comes from the belief that citizens are responsible for setting basic direction for policy. Beyond voting “yes” or “no” at the polls, citizens give shape and vision to their communities and to the country.

Creating that shape and vision requires some work. A community cannot hire someone to conduct a citizen survey, add up the results, and draw up a vision. Community direction and vision are the kinds of things that citizens can only create together because they require people to take on a public perspective. In order to gain that sense of what is good for the community as a whole, the people must listen to each other, talk about their different ways of looking at common problems, and weigh the consequences of different solutions to public problems.

Part of the difficulty related to this approach may be that people rarely get a chance to talk about what really matters to them in a way that increases the likelihood of constructive political action. It is not just that people get a chance to talk that matters; what counts is what people talk about and how they talk.

Goals and Steps in Issue Framing

Framing issues helps people learn how to present community problems in a way that resonates with the deepest concerns of people in the community. The aim is to create a structure for community discussions that steps back from arguing over solutions. These discussions encourage people to consider different viewpoints and take on a public perspective as they weigh options from the standpoint of what is good for the community.

The goals for issue framing are:

- To encourage people to learn about public issues and to grapple with choices about how to address them.
- To help people identify and understand the deep concern that underlies public issues.
- To move communities toward **common ground** about how to move ahead on issues. Common ground is the area between total agreement and total disagreement.
- To engage people in a way that is meaningful to them.
- To offer a way of looking at complex issues that does not try to oversimplify them into “yes” or “no” questions.
- To empower people to talk about and act on public issues.

- To strengthen problem-solving skills among citizens and their leaders.
- To improve the quality of public talk in communities across this nation.
- To make sure that public discussions reflect a broad range of views.

The steps in issue framing include the following:

- Identify the issue.
- Research the issue.
- Name the issue in public terms.
- Identify concerns.
- Identify possible actions.
- Cluster actions into policy directions.
- Identify alternatives and consequences.
- Identify potential tradeoffs.

Attributes of a Successful Issue Framework

1. The framework is based on a problem suitable for public deliberation and decision making:
 - The problem impacts a broad cross-section of the targeted “community,” however your community is defined.
 - The central question is well-defined and understood by people living in the community.
 - There is a clear sense of urgency about the issue among the people and the personal impact of the issue is clear to everyone.
 - There are multiple and viable views on what can be done about the issue – it is not a “yes/no” type of problem.
2. The issue framework reflects input from a wide range of community perspectives.
 - Reflects perspectives that people are hearing on the issue within the community—the language used in printed materials “rings true” with members of the community.
 - Community members, regardless of their perspective will find “their voice” in one or more of the alternative policy directions.
 - The content and language of printed material reflects the language of the community, not only the language of “experts.”

3. Uses tension to stimulate thoughtful consideration of policy approaches.
 - For each policy approach, there are distinctly different remedies that flow directly from the view of the problem-behind-the-problem and the values that motivate that view.
 - Some values are shared across policy approaches so that no one approach is just the opposite of the other, creating tension between them.
 - Each approach incorporates values that many people can identify with, but also has consequences that may give one pause, creating tension or dilemmas within each approach.
 - Balanced presentation of policy approaches so each approach puts its “best foot forward.”
 - Leads to public discussion where people consider what is important to the group across the approaches rather than settle on just one alternative.

Roles of Community Leaders

Sometimes we think there is only one way to be a leader in community decision making, but there are really several roles from which you can choose. When selecting a role best suited to you, keep in mind your skills, talents, and leadership style. Your goal is to resolve community issues successfully while reducing community conflict and personal stress.

You may see your strength in being a **forecaster or futurist**. This person reads, listens, and analyzes what’s happening around the community and predicts emerging issues. The **advisor or consultant** sorts out information, verifies reliability, and applies that information to the situation at hand. **Framework developers** describe a public issue in terms that reflect people’s concerns and offer alternative approaches to resolving the issue. **Facilitators** help others work in groups effectively. They get citizens together and ensure a “safe place” to discuss the various sides of the issue. The **information provider** can serve as an expert or collect information on the issue. This person can also write reports on outcomes from public meetings about an issue. The **project developer** organizes people and resources to plan the project and get things done.

These are just examples of community roles you can take. The most important thing is to choose a role that plays to your strengths and enables you to work constructively with your group for positive change in your community.

Ten Actions for Solving Public Problems

As a review of this module, consider these ten guiding principles for community leaders.

- Tell it like it is.
- Be available.
- Offer predictions to challenge people’s thinking.
- Admit mistakes.
- Trust the people.
- Get acquainted with other leaders.
- Capture the “teachable moment”.
- Do your homework.
- Work within the system.
- Be objective.

Conclusion

The potential for controversy resides in most public issues. People who care enough about their communities to become involved soon learn this lesson. This module provided several strategies to help caring community members take productive steps in addressing such issues.

In one of the most well known quotations of the 1960s, Eldridge Cleaver said:

“You’re either part of the solution or part of the problem.”

So what is the message you’ll take away from this module? Leaders working with community issues can use their time and talents to solve a problem or create a riot. The choice is up to you.

References

- Penny, C.L. and Clark, S.S. (1999) *Issue Framing Workshop Handbook*. Davis, California: University of California.
- Belcher, E., Kingston, R.J., Knighton, B., McKenzie, R., Thomas, M. Wilder, J.C. and Arnone, E. (2001). *Framing Issues for Public Deliberation*. Dayton, Ohio: Charles Kettering Foundation.

EVALUATION

1. Overall, how would you rate this module?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
I learned something new	1	2	3	4	5
I learned something I can use	1	2	3	4	5
Materials were clear	1	2	3	4	5
The module met my needs	1	2	3	4	5

2. What did you get from the module? (Check any that apply)

- Answers to questions
 Insight and support from others
 Resource materials
 Other (specify) _____
 Help in decision making

3. As a result of this module, I	Not At All	Slight Extent	Fair Extent	Great Extent
• View managing controversial public issues as an opportunity for effective community deliberation and cooperation.	1	2	3	4
• Understand that there are different styles of issue resolution and problem solving.	1	2	3	4
• Have a better understanding of the definitions of myth, fact, and value in relationship to public decision making.	1	2	3	4
• Appreciate the importance of naming issues in relation to managing controversy.	1	2	3	4
• Have a better understanding of the variety of roles leaders can perform.	1	2	3	4
• Have a better understanding of how managing controversial issues is imperative to the cooperation of my community.	1	2	3	4

4. As a result of this module, I be better able to turn challenging situations into positive action.

Definitely Not Probably Not Undecided Probably Will Definitely
 1 2 3 4 5

Please Explain:

5. Further needs or comments:
