Fostering Deeper Deliberation

Set-Up/Introduction

The introduction is an integral part of the forum experience, as it sets the tone for the entire conversation. The facilitator or convener should spend five to seven minutes setting up the discussion and covering the following items:

- Purpose of the forum
- What deliberation is
- The role of the facilitator
- Structure of the conversation
- Ground rules

Kettering research indicates that when participants have an understanding of what deliberation is and the act of reconsidering your perspective is normalized before a forum begins, the forum is likely to be more deliberative than when participants are asked to engage without this set-up.

Being clear about the role of the facilitator at the start of the forum can help mitigate potential problems later. The facilitator is meant to be impartial about the subject matter while simultaneously pushing the group to be as deliberative as possible and guiding participants through the forum process. Because participants should take ownership over their own deliberation, it can be helpful to request that participants direct their comments to one another, rather than to the facilitator. This simple direction at the beginning can help de-centralize the role of facilitator and enable a more organic deliberation.

Establishing ground rules and asking everyone to commit and hold one another accountable to them is also key to mitigating potential issues that may arise later in the forum. Ground rules should be reflective of the community that a facilitator is working with and participants should understand the purpose of each rule and feel ownership over them.

Personal Stake

The personal stake portion of the forum grounds the deliberation in the experiences of participants and serves two primary functions. The first is simply to increase participation and set the tone of the discussion. When participants share their personal stories or perspectives on the issue at the beginning of the forum, they are far more likely to engage in the discussion later on. The second is to generate a set of stories for the group to refer to as policy choices are deliberated. Ensuring there is sufficient time for personal stake is incredibly important component of a successful forum and the forum schedule should be adjusted to allow for more time if the topic is particularly personal/salient.

Option Discussion

Perhaps one of the most important jobs of a deliberative facilitator is to ask good questions. Every time a facilitator intervenes in any way, she or he is essentially taking some power and control from participants, so each intervention should be purposeful. Questions should serve specific, intended purposes and should push participants to engage more deliberatively. Below are several types of questions that encourage deliberation


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- Questions that connect the policy issue to the lives and concerns of real people
- Questions to ensure a fair and balanced examination of all potential effects
- Questions that ask participants to weigh the costs they are willing to accept in order to achieve the results they want
- Questions that probe each participant’s statement until others can understand what she or he believes should be done and why she or he thinks it should be done
- Questions that discourage groupthink and allow for different perspectives to be considered in homogenous forums
- Questions that give the participants an opportunity to identify what they have heard and/or acknowledge common ground for action

Common Ground Reflection

The reflection portion of a forum serves many important functions in a deliberation and should not be cut short due to time constraints. When facilitating an APV forum, the following areas for reflection should be prioritized.

1. How the group prioritized different options and actions in relation to how the approaches addressed the group’s concerns
   a. Did it seem like there was an option or blend of options that we could support?
   b. Do the actions that we found common ground on address our most serious concerns about this issue?
   c. Where did we find common ground?
   d. What did we value about that option/action?
   e. Were there any actions that were universally accepted or opposed? Why?

2. The limits of common ground
   a. When push came to shove, what were we not willing to give up? Why?
   b. What areas could we potentially have found more common ground had we had more time?

3. Changes in thinking
   a. Are you thinking about this issue differently than before we began?
   b. Were there moments where someone said something that gave you pause?
   c. Were there moments where you began to reconsider your perspective?

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i See Deliberative Facilitator Cheat Sheet for suggested ground rules
ii See Recognizing and Supporting Deliberation handout for a more complete list of questions