

Unit IV:

Community/Public Policy Leadership Skills

2. Public Issues

Do you have an idea that could benefit your community? Is there a concern in the back of your mind that keeps nagging at you? Is there a law that needs updating, or a community problem that someone should do something about? Could that someone be you?

Public concern about a policy issue develops over a period of time. Frequently, people become disturbed by a particular situation, which results in discussion, tension, and conflict that leads to a search for solutions. Many issues often surround a problem or concern.

The terms “public issue” and “public policy” can be defined in several ways. A private problem or issue becomes public when consequences of individual or group action go beyond those directly involved. An effort by others to influence those consequences is also present. As more people become involved, leaders and interested citizens become aware of the concern. Discussion clarifies and defines the problem or opportunity—the gap between “what is” and “what could be.” The issue then emerges as different ideas about what could be done are developed (Barrows 1993; Dale 1993).

Public issues are controversial because various groups of people are affected in different ways. Even when a goal is agreed upon, different ways of reaching the goal and/or financing the new outcome may be favored by different individuals or groups. An advantage or benefit for some may be a disadvantage or cost for others. For example, the problem may be a

community's high rate of illiteracy in adults. The policy options might include reading programs, parent education, or school policies to reduce dropouts. Doing nothing (maintaining the status quo) is also an option. The school district may favor increasing money for in-school programs, while the local community college may prefer adult education classes. Local human service providers may prefer programs that use their services.

Public policy consists of statements or principles underlying government action. Policy is expressed in local, state, and federal government action as legislation, resolutions, programs, regulations, appropriations, administrative practices, and court decisions. Less formal policy also includes customs and traditional ways of doing things.

Facts, Myths, and Values

When dealing with public issues, understanding the difference between facts, myths, and values is extremely important because they affect people's interpretation of an issue and what they feel is an appropriate response.

Facts

A fact is a verifiable statement of what is. The sales tax in Pennsylvania is 6 percent—that is a fact. Social security is partially funded out of current tax dollars; it is not a long-term pension fund. Current workers are paying the bill for those who are drawing retirement benefits. These are all facts that can be verified using an objective standard.

Myths

A myth is something that people think is a fact or is true but in actuality is false. Using objective measures, myths can be disproved. In community decision making, a very important role for leaders is to help people learn which perceptions of the issue are facts and which are myths because it allows people to better understand the issue and possible responses.

Values

Values are beliefs about what *should be* and are based upon individuals' morals, values, and experience. They reflect the individual's perception of what is good or bad. Values allow us to interpret and act upon the facts surrounding an issue. "Pennsylvania's sales tax is too high" is a value judgment. It cannot be proven right or wrong.

The distinction between facts, myths, and values is important because it clarifies why reasonable people can agree on the facts of the issue ("the sales tax is 6 percent"), but yet disagree on how to respond to the issue ("the sales tax should be

lowered," "it should remain at 6 percent," or "the sales tax should be increased"). Because values within a group and within a community vary among the members, people's interpretation of the appropriate response to an issue will also vary even though they may all agree upon the facts of the issue.

Most of the friction over public issues occurs because of value conflicts. Understanding the role that values play in resolving such issues, a leader can work to ensure that people discuss the value differences between them as a way of finding common interests and concerns. It provides a way for the community or group to develop a consensus about the facts of the issue, and then focus on developing a way to resolve value differences about the response.

The Issue Evolution Cycle

Public issues and policies can be examined from many perspectives. They have consequences that affect society, either directly or indirectly. The effects may include social, economic, and environmental impacts and are felt by all individuals, families, industries, management, laborers, consumers, producers, and tax payers.

Issues usually evolve gradually over time, although sometimes a crisis may precipitate a need for rapid action (Barrows 1993; “Issues Identification” 1988). The issue resolution cycle generally includes these stages:

1. Growing concern and interest.
2. Involvement of officials and/or citizens.
3. Specification or framing of the fundamental issue (not just a list of symptoms).
4. Identification of alternative solutions (including maintenance of the status quo).
5. Determination of consequences of each alternative.
6. Selection of one alternative (or combination of several).
7. Implementation of the choice.
8. Evaluation.

Issue Analysis

Public issues can be studied in many ways. You must learn the facts—there is no substitute for information. You must distinguish between facts, myths, and values. You must also learn about other people’s points of view. Remember that people with different values and goals can reach different conclusions from the same facts. In many cases not all facts can be discovered. This is particularly true when the impacts of a choice will not be known for many years. The following suggestions will help guide your study (“Issue Analysis and Resolution” 1988; Stevens and Vance 1995).

1. Define the problem.

Identifying the problem is the foundation of issue analysis. Try to state the basic problem in neutral terms or as a question, rather than in terms of a symptom or proposal for change.

Then, determine the issues that relate to the problem. They may originate from many sources such as citizen groups, educators, consumer activists, governmental bodies, business groups, or combinations of these groups.

2. Find out who will be affected by the issue.

Is the issue local or does it affect a large segment of society? Who has the most to gain or lose with respect to the issue? How does it affect you as a consumer, taxpayer, and citizen? Are citizen or consumer activist groups, professional associations, or other organizations working on this problem?

3. Explore the possible alternative solutions and their consequences.

Controversial issues are accompanied by strong opinions. Gathering as many facts as possible in order to make a thorough evaluation is important. Make a complete list of alternatives and consequences so that the data you gather will provide the balance you need for objectivity. Avoid classifying the consequences as advantages and disadvantages since an advantage for some people may be a disadvantage for others.

Some possible consequences or impacts are listed below. Depending on the particular situation, some will be more important than others to different groups of people. Ask yourself about the effects or consequences of a policy choice on:

- Family
- Health or safety
- Freedom of choice
- Quality of life
- Environment
- Taxpayers
- Employees
- Employers
- The role of government

Be sure to consider the long-range implications of the consequences to avoid costly mistakes and reduce the need for a future reversal. Also remember that there are many individual variations within categories, such as families and employees.

4. State your position.

Think through all of the choices very carefully. Your decision will be based on facts as well as your values. Then, go on to examine the issue in terms of the policy-making process. When you have reached your conclusion, write it in your own words with your own reasons for reaching your decisions. Writing helps you clarify your thoughts and makes it easier to discuss your opinions with others. Dialogue with others who have different viewpoints is helpful at this stage.

As an educator, you provide information as neutrally and objectively as possible. As a citizen leader, you may advocate for a particular choice of action or for support of your organization or group. Whether your goal is to get a law passed or to establish a community project or program, your position will be strengthened if you can provide information about the human, financial, and physical resources available, as well as possibilities for obtaining or developing other resources that may be needed (Barrows 1993; Dale 1993; Stevens and Vance 1995).

5. Determine the current status of the issue.

Become involved in an issue as early as possible. The further an issue progresses from discussion to action, the more difficult it is to make a substantial contribution.

Find out if the issue is in the discussion stage or what action may have been taken. Has a resolution been passed or a regulation proposed? Has legislation been introduced?

6. Determine where and when the issue will be decided.

Will it be decided at a local, state, or national level? Who has the authority and jurisdiction to make the decision? Will it be decided by a legislative body, commissioners, or a regulatory agency? Is this an issue that will be decided in the near future or over a period of time? This will determine your schedule of action. All too often, people do not register their opinions until a decision has already been made. What opportunities are available for public input?

7. Recheck the status of the issue.

Before taking action, recheck the status of the issue. During your study process, the issue might have advanced further along the route to a decision. Knowing the current status of an issue is important so that your opinion is directed to the proper source.

Moving toward Action

Citizen participation means that individuals exercise their freedom of choice to decide when, where, and how they might become involved in community decision making. This choice is fundamental to a democratic society. Individuals participate when the issues are important to them. People get involved in different issues, activities, and groups that appeal to and meet their personal needs and interests.

Most citizens are willing to become more involved in the decision-making process but may hesitate because they don't know how to get started (Walker 1985). Factors that promote participation include:

- Learning how the government or policy-making process works.

- Developing leadership and communication skills.
- Analyzing issues and finding possible solutions.
- Building networks and coalitions.
- Mobilizing human, financial, and community resources to accomplish goals.

A citizen who wants to be more effective in analyzing issues and influencing policy decisions has many choices. First, get information and decide how to participate. Everyone who votes or attends a fund-raising event for a favorite candidate, cause, or political group is initiating an impact on public policy. Attending meetings and discussion groups is a good first step, particularly for the person who is somewhat hesitant to become involved.

You can join and support an organization that is working to establish or support the activities you favor, lobby on your own, or work for candidates who share your views. Lobbying is influencing other people's ideas. This can be done anytime, anywhere—it need not be a formal action only at the capital. The self-confidence to influence others is gained through study, practice, and experience.

What's Your Style?

Some people enjoy being “center stage,” others prefer “building the sets.” Both make important contributions. Citizens with experience in basic organizational skills offer valuable services to any study group or political action group. Those who are willing to share information (names, contacts, phone numbers, community backgrounds) can make and follow through on a time and task commitment and are able to meet changing deadlines and to pitch in where needed are essential to most volunteer citizen groups.

Think about the type of activities you like to do. For example, if you like to read and do research, you can provide a service by pulling together data to develop an issue and possible solutions. If talking on the telephone is your favorite occupation, you might volunteer to call people to set up meetings, interview others about their ideas and opinions, or get the word out about the vote.

Once you have identified an issue that interests you, moving from ideas to action involves getting your suggestions into the decision-making process. What steps can you take? What can you do to make your efforts effective? Find out who else is working on or is interested in that issue. This often leads you to a group that might support your work. You may find others with similar interests in an existing organization or in an important group that works together on the issue.

Some groups are interested in solving problems, while others only want to discuss or complain about the issue. As you look for support, encouragement, and resources to bring about change, remember that diversity and dialogue usually lead to a stronger and more widely accepted plan or project. If differences of opinion occur—as they will—make sure the process of conflict resolution and reaching consensus is carried out.

Join a Group

Ask the mayor's office, county clerk's office, or state agencies for lists of citizen advisory boards, terms of office for current members, and when and how new appointments are made. You can form a group (such as a task force, committee, or study group) by initiating a meeting of people interested in a particular issue. If your group has an issue that no existing mechanism is set up to handle, ask that a city or county committee be appointed to study and make recommendations, and ask that you or some of your group's volunteers be appointed. Before joining an existing group, make sure that your interests are similar and productive.

Summary

When issues are identified in a community, leaders need to step forward as public educators. Sometimes they may be advocates with a specific solution in mind, but, more importantly, they are needed to analyze the issue, look at options for resolution, communicate effectively with citizens and policy makers, and be aware of different methods for public policy involvement. With the proper training and desire, the public issues educator can make a difference in the community where they live.

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One of the most critical needs in Pennsylvania is strong local leadership for the future well-being of communities. This includes leadership for civic and nonprofit organizations, youth, the business community, elected officials, and citizens.

The *Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow* leadership curriculum was developed to help individuals develop and strengthen their personal leadership skills so they can play active and constructive leadership roles in their communities. The program focuses on developing and strengthening personal and interpersonal leadership skills, group and organizational leadership skills, and community leadership skills.

The curriculum is designed for use as a comprehensive, multiple-session leadership training program, taught by trained Penn State Cooperative Extension educators. Individual modules can also be used for stand-alone training within existing groups or organizations who want training on specific leadership or group process issues.

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- 1: Productive Groups
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- 1: Dealing with Change
- 2: Public Issues
- 3: Understanding Pennsylvania Local Government
- 4: Active Leadership

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