Community Based Decision Making

A model of engaging citizens and stakeholders to discuss or make decisions around issues that affect their lives is a vital part of a healthy community. A process that focuses on understanding the issues and the people involved allows stakeholders to become more effective participants in decision making and can lead to building consensus and creating solutions. A variety of effective public engagement processes exist. Almost all use facilitators and involve, ground rules to create a safe environment for discussion, engaging participants on all sides of an issue in a community forum, and using the information generated in decision making agree to by all.

UF/IFAS Extension Can Help

UF/IFAS Extension has a number of faculty trained in the science and art of public issues, and meeting and conflict management that can assist local governments better engage their stakeholders in a more productive, efficient, and cost effective manner.

I. Facilitation of Public Issues

*Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.* -Laurence J. Peter

UF/IFAS Extension can enhance community civic engagement by designing processes and facilitating meetings that help diverse stakeholders reach common ground and find solutions to complex issues. Extension has worked with cities, counties, federal, state, regional and local agencies and citizen groups to help them deal with complex community issues.

Benefits of Using UF/IFAS Extension as Facilitators

- Trained UF/IFAS facilitators can help where an un-biased broker is needed to conduct group business
- A UF/IFAS facilitator can foster inclusive solutions, encourage full participation, promote mutual understanding and cultivate shared responsibility between stakeholders
- A UF/IFAS facilitator helps the group focus on the problem at hand and avoid unproductive tangents
- UF/IFAS facilitators with process expertise help groups concentrate on intelligently solve problems

UF/IFAS Extension can work with government employees to help construct an integrated and shared understanding of the issues existing in their communities. It is imperative that your staff call on Extension faculty early in the process as considerable time is needed to ensure a valid and successful process is implemented. This is particularly true when dealing with intractable or “wicked” issues. Conklin and Weil define a wicked problem as:

- One with an evolving set of interlocking issues and constraints, perhaps without a true definition that can be agreed to.
- One with many passionate stakeholders making the problem solving process fundamentally social. Getting the right answer is not as important as having stakeholders accept whatever solution emerges.
- One with changing constraints on the solution, such as limited resources, political ramifications, indecisive stakeholders.
- One with no definitive solution. The problem-solving process ends when you run out of time, money, energy, or some other resource, not when some perfect solution emerges.
A process that truly engages a community to solve wicked problems relies on key principles. The following are adapted from the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation 2010 Resource Guide on Public Participation.

### Core Principles for Public Engagement

1. **Careful Planning and Preparation:** Plan carefully and with input from participants to ensure that the design, organization, and convening of the process serve both a clearly defined purpose and the participants’ needs.
2. **Inclusion and Diversity:** Bring in participants from diverse backgrounds representing all groups that have a stake in the outcome of the process.
3. **Collaboration and Shared Purpose:** Support and encourage participants, government, and community institutions, and others to work together to reach consensus or find common ground to move forward.
4. **Openness and Learning:** Help all involved listen to each other, explore new ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes, learn and apply information in ways that generate new options, and rigorously evaluate the process.
5. **Transparency and Trust:** Be clear and open about the process, and provide a public record of the organizers, sponsors, outcomes, and range of views and ideas expressed.
6. **Impact and Action:** Ensure each participatory effort has real potential to make a difference, and that participants are aware of that potential and their role in the outcome.
7. **Sustained Engagement:** Ensure there is adequate time to move through the process, plan as many events as needed and keep everyone engaged.

To engage a trained UF/IFAS Extension faculty member to lead a public input process please contact us at least 12 weeks prior to the desired date of the first meeting. This will give us adequate time to conduct a situation and stakeholder assessment, design a process with input from the stakeholders and requesting agency and ensure a well thought out process to lead to inclusive decision making.
II. Facilitation Skills Training

UF/IFAS faculty can provide trainings for government staff on a variety of skill sets necessary to increase their ability to design, conduct, and manage meetings with employees, colleagues, and/or the community to ensure a cooperative and participatory outcome. Workshops typically last a day and a half and consist of a mixture of presentations, group brainstorming, case studies, and small and large group exercises to give participants the experience of using the tools provided. Extension faculty can work with county staff to tailor trainings to meet the specific needs of participants. By participating in these trainings, staff will gain a better understanding of the collaborative process, reaching consensus, and developing the skill sets, knowledge, and competencies needed to plan and conduct effective meetings.

Examples of Training Topics

- Core principles of facilitation and facilitation skills
- Group decision making dynamics
- Creating a process that encourages full participation in decision making
- Convening stakeholders
- Summarize and framing issues
- Facilitative or active listening skills
- Addressing feelings, values, interests and positions
- Dealing with difficult dynamics

Where appropriate, Extension faculty can design mock facilitation events for employees to practice their facilitation skills and/or work in tandem with county employees to facilitate real meetings as a means to strengthen employee confidence in utilizing their skills and provide further feedback and assistance.

For more information on how UF/IFAS Extension can help and a fee structure for facilitation please contact any of the following faculty:

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