



Creating Community Discourse: Moving From Debate to Dialogue
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Published in the Spring 2009 Issue of *The Granite State Planner*

- Building a new bandstand that is handicapped accessible
- Locating a new homeless shelter
- Developing plans for rural land use
- Widening a street to allow for more bicycle traffic
- Creating a new governance charter for a municipality
- Constructing a new school and/or renovating an existing one
- Determining whether or not a proposed construction project fits within the architectural character of the neighborhood

What do all these community projects have in common? Each one is undertaken with the intent to create a better future and expanded opportunities for the given community, and each one will face challenges to moving forward successfully. Undoubtedly, there will be someone for each of these projects who will raise questions and concerns about the appropriateness and/or intent of the project. It is at this point that progress is typically stymied.

We often hear that the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts, so why is it that we struggle so hard in our communities to move forward? Shouldn't we be able to reap the benefit of so many creative minds coming together to solve a problem? What is it that prevents us from moving forward constructively?

For starters, most of us are held hostage to a traditional, linear approach to problem solving – the idea that there is one right solution. Often a well-intentioned board or committee has toiled diligently to come up with such a solution. That “solution” is then presented to the public for feedback, and, more often than not, the public perceives it as a done deal. As a result, they fight back. The whole situation deteriorates into a win-lose debate or sometimes a lose-lose debate. As Meg Wheatley so succinctly put it in *Leadership and the New Science*, “People support what they create.... No one is successful if they merely present a plan in finished form to others. It doesn't matter how brilliant or correct the plan is. It simply doesn't work to ask people to sign on when they haven't been involved in the planning process.”

To be sure, involving community members in the planning process can be both frustrating and intimidating. Most of the people we want at the table often don't show up for a variety of reasons; those who do are often the same faces we see over and over again. I have heard many a board lament the fact that no one attends board meetings to provide public comment, and yet they continue to engage with the public in the same old way. What we need is to strike a balance between encouraging public participation and taking civic responsibility more seriously, and we need to do it more creatively.

Rather than using approaches that create debate, communities need to focus on fostering dialogue. Techniques such as Café Conversations, Study Circles, Open Space Technology, Future Search Conference, and Appreciative Inquiry are just a few of the methods designed to create space for dialogue in communities. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation can provide a comprehensive list of these techniques (http://www.thataway.org/exchange/categories.php?cid=105&hot_topic_id=1). The technique, however, is less important than the environment. Each of these techniques has the following characteristics in common:

Using inquiry rather than advocacy: The most effective method for creating productive and constructive dialogue is to ask about another's perspective before explaining your own. Most of us are accustomed to entering into a discussion with our defenses securely in place. What this means is that we often do not hear what others are saying. By balancing advocacy with inquiry, we take as much time to understand the points of view of others as we do in explaining our own point of view.

Testing assumptions: Assumptions about people's intent or what is going on often create reinforcing patterns of behavior that can hinder us from reaching the most effective solutions. In fact, they can be downright destructive. When people engage in dialogue that puts a human face on the issue, it becomes easier to recognize our assumptions and challenge them. In doing so, we begin to shift our thinking. Even the slightest shift opens up new possibilities, avoiding the "one perfect solution" trap.

Looking for common ground: Many of the issues communities deal with are highly emotional, so finding areas of agreement are critical to keeping a sense of forward progress. At times when it seems like there is a giant chasm between perspectives, the common ground that can be established becomes a ray of hope and the foundation upon which to build a sustainable solution. As the thinking begins to shift, the size of the common ground grows. It is critical to focus on agreements rather than on disagreements.

Focusing on outcomes: Success in any community dialogue effort means committing the time and resources to developing a sustainable solution, not an easy task in today's climate. It is all too easy to jump to the quick fix without clearly defining long term outcomes. However, communities must resist that sense of urgency and place their emphasis on the integrity of the process.

Is this an easy task? No. Does it take a lot of time and effort? Yes. Is it worth it? The community will have to answer that question. It appears, however, that the current

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approaches are taking their toll, so why not try something new? A community's ability to focus on the long-term and to engage their citizens in a constructive, open, and respectful process will enable them to reap benefits for years to come. Now that's a balancing act worth achieving!

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