

## LET'S NOT HAVE A PUBLIC MEETING! – TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT

There are a range of alternative ways to involve groups of people in consultations and making decisions and recommendations about the future of their community. Below are a few that can offer an alternative to a traditional public meeting.

### **OPEN SPACE**

- is an intensely democratic framework which enables an unlimited number of participants to create their own programme of discussions around a central theme.

It is particularly effective in generating high-energy participation, learning and commitment to action. Open Space is extremely flexible and needs minimal organisation. It can cater for almost any number of people.

Open Space works particularly well when:

- there is an urgent issue needing quick action;
- large and diverse groups are involved;
- there are complex and potentially conflicting issues.

Open Space is unsuitable when:

- the course of action has already been decided on;
- someone wants to control the meeting or event;
- there is inadequate follow-through after an event.

Everyone starts in a circle - 'the fundamental geometry of human communication' - and is invited to identify issues that they are passionate about, and willing to take responsibility for. They write each of their issues on a sheet of paper and sign their name. Saying 'My issue is.... my name is....', each person announces the topic on which they want to convene a workshop session and sticks their sheet of paper on the wall. This continues until all the topics (sometimes over 150!) have been announced.

Similar topics are grouped together. Everyone then gathers around the wall, and signs up for whichever topics they wish to discuss. The sessions take place and a specific action planning process can follow

The fundamental principles of Open Space are:

- Whoever comes are the right people. (Participation is voluntary);
- Whenever it starts is the right time. (Be relaxed about time);
- When it's over it's over. (If there's no more to say, move on);
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen. (Let go of your expectations);
- The Law of Two Feet: If you are in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, it is your responsibility to go elsewhere

One facilitator is all that is necessary - even for events of several hundred people or more. The nature of the facilitation is crucial to the success of the event: the hands-off approach needs the right kind of temperament, and benefits from experience. In practical terms the facilitator guides the opening and closing sessions, explaining the procedure and the guiding principles, and then stands back as far as is possible.

## DELIBERATIVE OPINION POLLS

Deliberative opinion polls allow the public to arrive at a modified view/opinion, after hearing the views of others. In effect, they are opinion polls undertaken after a public hearing, so that voters are more likely to make an informed choice. They involve the use of evidence, asking questions, having discussions and filling in questionnaires. The number of participants can range from a small group to hundreds of people selected at random.

Participants in a typical deliberative opinion poll fill in a questionnaire on the issue at hand. They then listen to briefings and talks by a number of people putting forward a variety of opinions and arguments and are allowed to question the speakers. They are split into groups to debate, ponder and discuss the issue at hand in detail, taking into consideration the arguments put forward. Following this, the respondents complete the same questionnaire again to see if, or how, opinions have changed. This stage can even be done a week or month later.

### Strengths

- promote informed citizenship - influencing in an even-handed way public opinion about some issue
- can compare opinions over time
- show how opinions can be developed, swayed or influenced by putting forward different arguments and opinions (but this could be a disadvantage as well)
- outcome is based on facts rather than perceptions

### Limitations

- the output will be inconclusive if the briefings and talks are not well prepared and insufficient information is given to the participants

## FUTURE SEARCH

- generates action by building a shared vision among a diverse group of people.

A Future Search conference is a way for a community or organisation to create a shared vision for its future. It enrolls a large group of stakeholders, selected because they have power or information on the topic at hand or are affected by the outcomes. Ideally there are 64 people, who form eight tables of eight stakeholder groups. Examples of such groups are health, young people or shopkeepers.

They take part in a highly structured process covering five stages:

### 1. Review the past

Each participant writes key events in the history of themselves, the community and the world onto three parallel time lines.

### 2. Explore the present

- An enormous mind map is made of trends affecting the local community;
- Stakeholder groups identify important trends and what they are and would like to be doing about them;
- Groups share what they are proud of and sorry about in their community.

### 3. Create ideal future scenarios

- Mixed small groups develop visions;
  - Barriers to the visions are identified;
- 4. Identify shared vision**  
First the small groups, then the whole group, work out: what the shared vision is; what potential projects would achieve it; and any unresolved differences.
  - 5. Make action plans**  
Self-selected action groups plan projects and publicly commit to their action.

Several features of the Future Search process are designed to empower participants:

- The principle is that people are the experts in their own lives. There are facilitators, but no other experts;
- The emphasis on self-management in small group work;
- The openness - everything is written up on flipcharts and displayed.

A future search is worth considering when:

- There are influential people within the sponsoring body (e.g. a local authority) who are prepared to support the idea strongly;
- There is (or there can be) a steering group of local people representing all parts of the community;
- There is plenty of time to prepare for the event - especially to recruit people;

## GUIDED VISUALISATION

- is the use of a script to take a group on an imaginary journey into the future.

Guided visualisation has several advantages. It can:

- be adapted and used with a variety of groups of different sizes;
- be easily recorded;
- fit into a limited time slot of an evening/half a day;
- access people's deepest hopes and dreams, which are not often shared with others;
- be done without using too many resources;
- fit into a longer term programme to inspire action.

### 1. Setting the scene

The facilitator sets participants at ease by outlining what is going to happen, and works with the group to agree group guidelines. These are: confidentiality; the need to be non-judgmental; and encouragement to people to listen to each other.

### 2. Where we are now

A brief mapping exercise on current concerns and trends is conducted.

### 3. The guided visualisation

The facilitator reads a script that involves travelling forward into a year in the future. The facilitator then slowly talks the group through 'a day in your life', starting with waking up and finishing with going to bed -- allowing enough time for people to build up their pictures of the future. The day is kept as open to individual interpretation as possible, with the facilitators careful not to bring in their own values or assumptions.

### 4. Describing and recording

Participants take time on their own to record their imagined visions. They then share their images of the future with first another person and then a small group, recording essential elements on post-it notes. These are displayed to help create a collective vision among the whole group.

#### **5. Taking action**

The facilitator helps participants to take the first steps towards realising their visions by becoming involved with a project.

**WORLD CAFÉ TO BE ADDED**

