

PUBLIC DECISION MAKING: GOVERNMENT'S CHANGING ROLE

Consensus is a goal, not a mandate in public decision making. Public policy is a mixture of our values and opinions, technical knowledge and abilities, and our political systems. We find that these views often conflict with one another, and when they differ from our own views, there is often a disregard for the opinions and perspectives of others.

By using approaches such as consensus building and collaborative problem solving, we can create structures to handle complex public issues in systematic, manageable, and less emotional ways. These approaches can provide the ability for us to be “tough on the problem, and easy on the people,” so that even when individuals disagree with each other, they keep focused on the problem—not on each other. It provides a place at the table for those affected by a decision, as well as the ground rules to work constructively together so that even when disagreements exist, respectful behavior is present.

GOVERNMENT'S CHANGING ROLE

What is government's role in synthesizing and bridging the gap among diverse opinions? For many years its role has been to seek comments, sort through and try to balance opinions often in conflict, make a decision, and then let the public know what was decided. This process, commonly known as Decide-Announce-Defend (D-A-D), is still the norm for many public decisions. Fortunately, this is changing, largely because of the public's dissatisfaction with government's decisions and because gridlock so often occurs with the D-A-D approach.

Officials are finding that rather than balancing differing perspectives, involving those who are affected by the decision to create mutual or collaborative learning opportunities holds the greatest promise to make decisions that are implementable. The premise is that citizens actually prefer to be constructive, but when there is no place for their hands-on involvement and little appreciation for their abilities and ideas, they prevent decisions from going forward.

ADVOCATES AND DECISION MAKERS ROLES

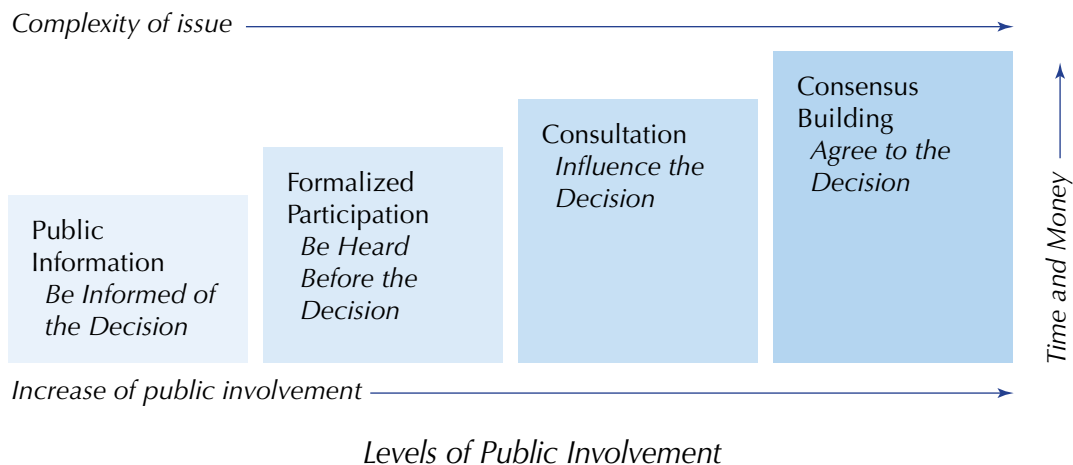
Conventional decision-making structures create two distinct roles—advocates and decision makers—this sets up win-lose confrontations. The advocate's job is to present the strongest possible case to decision makers. The responsibility, and often the blame, for the ultimate political choice, rests with an agency and public officials. These adversarial structures where “winners take most” cause advocates for all parties to be less willing to work with each other and build an agreement, because each is appealing to the decision maker.

Each advocacy group spends most of its time refining and distilling its best positions in ways that distinguish and separate it from the other side, rather than spending time, energy, and resources—using a collaborative approach—to determine where they agree and how they can resolve their differences. Advocates have little incentive to create a solution that satisfies all

parties and, unlike decision makers, are not required to struggle or try to work together to reach agreement on competing interests.

THE PARADOX OF COLLABORATION

The greater the disagreement, the greater the need for constructive public involvement and collaborative problem solving. Dr. Robert Heifetz of Harvard University describes in his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, why collaborative or facilitative leadership is required in today's world. His research reflects on leadership styles and their effectiveness, and he draws the conclusion that except in a time of crisis, a collaborative or facilitative process is necessary in order to bring divergent perspectives together to successfully make and implement decisions. These collaborative approaches increase understanding about hoped-for outcomes and constraints, and allow individuals to think together to overcome hurdles, rather than resting both the responsibility and blame on public officials.



Adapted from articles by James L. Creighton, Ph.D., President, Creighton & Creighton, Inc.

NEW SKILLS ARE NEEDED

In order for government to involve citizens rather than balancing their perspectives, it needs new procedures, processes, and skills to change these frequently adversarial relationships into ones that solve problems. Slowly, government's role is changing from D-A-D to that of a facilitator and convenor. Across the nation, government is frequently acting as the convening party, bringing affected and often competing interests together, and providing the resources to enable them to find areas of agreement. This change is not easy, and it's probably slower than many would like. When we consider the large part government plays in our society and the numerous levels of government—local (cities, unincorporated communities, boroughs), state, and federal—each with its own myriad of agencies and often competing missions, we can understand why change occurs incrementally.

PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

The following core values are the esprit de corps of constructive public participation and collaboration.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING AND CONSTRUCTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The following core values were developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) with broad international participation to identify those aspects of public participation that cross national, cultural, and religious boundaries.

- The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.
- Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants.
- The public participation process actively seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.
- The public participation process involves participants to define how they participate.
- The public participation process provides participants with information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

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