



## **CPRN and Deliberative Dialogue – A Primer**

### **Public Involvement Network**

Meaningful public involvement needs to inform decisions makers around defining the public interest; on another level it is needed in order to achieve the public interest, through policy delivery or implementation, especially where acceptance for behavioural change is required (e.g. health prevention, environmental impact).

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) describes the public participation spectrum as: Inform → consult → involve → collaborate → empower.

- Information – one way passive delivery of information from government to interested citizens
- Consultations – typically expert focused, individual ideas
  - Polling / focus groups – top of mind opinion, no or little opportunity for social learning
- Engagement (involve, collaborate, empower) – interactive social learning, participant focused, collective wisdom
  - Requires sharing information and power, mutual respect and reciprocity between governors and citizens

Deliberative dialogue brings people together from all walks of life and encourages them to work through tough issues, learning from each other as they listen to and understand perspectives different from their own. Dialogue facilitates the creation of “shared meaning ... and broadens the understanding of the issue before moving into more formal decision making.”<sup>1</sup> It promotes the legitimacy of public decisions, encourages public spirited perspectives on public issues, promotes mutually respected decision-making processes and helps to correct mistakes.<sup>2</sup>

It is especially useful when issues are at a crossroad, or where there are deep, ethical challenges and difficult choices among values-based options have to be made. Decisions on these issues must broaden beyond the elite, the technical experts and key stakeholders and reach out to the public – the unaffiliated citizens who do not show up at formal, public hearings – giving them an opportunity to reflect on the values that should frame the decisions eventually made.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard, Glenna and Linda Elinor. 1995. “Dialogue.” Peggy Homan and Tom Devan , eds. *The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future*. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers Inc. Pages 218-229.

<sup>2</sup> Gutman, Amy and DenisThompson. 2004. *Why Deliberative Democracy*. Princeton University Press. Pages 10-12.

Our work is designed to insert public values into the policy process and help decision makers understand the policy space within which decisions should be made, if they are to be sustainable and effective. Deliberative dialogue offers profound insight into what matters most to people and why:

- What values underlie their choices
- What tradeoffs they will or will not accept
- What conditions they put on decision makers.

Deliberative dialogue approaches used by CPRN<sup>3</sup> are designed to encourage a process of learning and working through, by giving participants the opportunity to absorb the facts, connect the dots, face up to conflicting values and shift from an individual to a broader community-based point of view. It probes how citizens' views evolve as they work through difficult policy choices in conversation with each other and seek to reconcile these views with their deeper values. The results of this kind of engagement exercise are intended to influence policy development by providing decision makers with a deeper understanding of citizens' value-based policy preferences and choices on important public issues.

The CPRN citizen dialogues differ from polls and focus groups in three ways: 1) depth of inquiry, 2) advance preparation and 3) purpose.<sup>4</sup> First, polls and focus groups can provide an accurate snapshot of people's current thinking on issues where they have already made up their minds or have reasonable knowledge. They do not offer opportunities for people to engage with each other in in-depth discussion about issues on which they have not yet formed a firm opinion. Deliberative citizen engagement processes are designed to provide such opportunities and are intended to provide deeper insights into how people understand, assess and make public policy choices.

Secondly, citizens' dialogues require significant advance preparation. Participants are randomly recruited by a professional polling firm, and are as representative of the population as possible. They are given special workbooks which formulate a number of research-based approaches or scenarios (providing factual information), based on a series of values-based choices with arguments for and against each scenario. The workbook and dialogue design enable people to learn about the issues under consideration, work through how they think and feel about the various approaches and identify common ground and differences. Focus groups and polls do not provide people with these tools nor do they offer settings for interactive social learning. Citizens' dialogues are usually day-long, structured sessions using highly trained facilitators, whereas focus groups are two to three hours in length and polls anywhere from two to 30 minutes.

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<sup>3</sup> CPRN's deliberative dialogue processes have adapted Viewpoint Learning Inc's ChoiceWork dialogue methodology, which is based on the research of its Chairman, Daniel Yankelovich, author of the groundbreaking book, *Coming to Public Judgment* (1991). Syracuse University Press, New York.

<sup>4</sup> This explanation draws on Viewpoint Learning's methodology description provided in *Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21st Century Social Contract* (MacKinnon, 2003: vi).

The underlying premise of CPRN citizen dialogues is that ordinary citizens, when given the tools and opportunity for meaningful and respectful group learning and reflection on public policy issues, can usually find common ground or at a minimum, identify and understand their differences (i.e., there is more agreement than disagreement on fundamental value-based choices). This does not mean that there is 100 percent unanimity but there is significant agreement on the value basis for certain policy positions or directions.

Outcomes of a dialogue for decision makers include:

- Framework of values and principles to guide policy decisions
- Understanding of why citizens think what they do, and what sticking points prevent progress
- A more informed public, as the groundwork for consensus building – they will better understand the final decision, even if it is not their preference.

We think that good deliberative dialogue serves as a catalyst for improved civic literacy. By engaging citizens in thinking through policy choices, they take a more collectivist orientation to public issues, they better understand the broader implications of those choices, and that their personal choices and actions make a difference to the successful implementation of policies. This is vital in so many areas in the public domain where citizen cooperation and action is required – from protecting the environment to our personal health to the act of voting. This leads to a cooperative relationship to achieve a common goal, and shared accountability for action.

***Deliberative processes require that:***

***Governments commit to:***

- Objective, respectful listening
- Transparency – clear expectations and feedback
- Opportunities for learning and contribution
  - Balanced information to fill gaps in public knowledge
- Resources and realistic timeframes
- Sharing power

***And citizens commit to:***

- Public interest perspective and listening to other points of view
- Respect roles and responsibilities
- Time and energy
- Deliberate on tough trade offs and choices (not a wish list)
- Support policies / act on commitments

Honest engagement helps to build trust between citizens and governments. The corollary is also true. Engagement without a commitment to be transparent, taking into account what people have said and providing feedback, risks breeding greater distrust and cynicism.

Participants in CPRN's citizens' dialogues have indicated that they yearn for more meaningful opportunities to influence public policy decisions. They see this not only as their right, but their responsibility. They are not seeking direct democracy, but do want a reinvigorated representative democracy that gives them a larger space to play their role alongside the experts and other stakeholders.<sup>5</sup> Public policy decisions and the public interest would be well served by creating that space in our decision-making processes.

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<sup>5</sup> Abelson, Julia and Francois-Pierre Gauvin with Mary Pat MacKinnon and Judy Watling. December, 2004. *Transparency, Trust and Citizen Engagement: What Canadians are Saying about Accountability*. CPRN. Page vi.