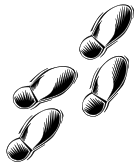




A Path to Issue Framing

This guidebook will take us through the various components or steps of framing an issue for public deliberation. It is not quite as neat and clean as these pages suggest. You may experience some moments of “one step forward, two steps back.” If you’re patient and persistent, however, it is highly likely that you will end up with a publicly-framed issue that you can use in your community.



Step 1: Select a frameable issue

Step 2: Conduct initial research

Step 3: List people’s concerns about the issue

Step 4: Group like concerns and identifying choices

Step 5: Develop the problem statement

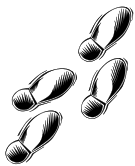
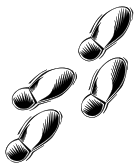
Step 6: Write a summary of the framework

Step 7: Identify benefits and drawbacks,
actions, and trade-offs

Step 8: Compose questions for closing the forum

Step 9: Develop a post-forum questionnaire

Step 10: Test the discussion guide



A Guidebook for Issue Framing, prepared by Julie Pratt, is based in part on *Framing Issues for Public Deliberation: A Curriculum Guide for Workshops*, Kettering Foundation, 2001.



Beginning with the End in Mind

*“There is such a big muddled world, so much to be done,
so much that can be done, if we increase in depth of understanding,
in learning to care, and in having a hospitable mind.
-- Eleanor Roosevelt, 1959*

Issue framing is rooted in the belief that democracy depends upon people making choices together about how to deal with problems in their communities. Framing an issue for public deliberation requires us to examine a problem from many angles. It encourages us to be curious about – and even compassionate toward – ideas that differ from our own, so that our deliberations may help us discover common ground for action.

The immediate goal of issue framing is to come up with a discussion guide or booklet that helps us examine choices in light of what matters most to us. A well-framed issue will be inclusive of differing perspectives and will be framed in *public* terms that citizens can relate to.

When you conduct issue framing in your community, it becomes a powerful force to build public capacity and political will by:

1. *Promoting the practice of public deliberation.* Many people find that the framing and deliberation of local issues is a valuable tool for improving the way community members talk to each other and address problems.
2. *Deepening the understanding of an issue.* A well-framed issue serves an educational function by informing people about the nature of the problem and various perspectives on how to approach it.
3. *Encouraging individual and collective action.* Thoughtful framing and deliberation of a local issue are likely to give people ideas about actions that they might take, and to connect them with other people who want to act together on the issue.
4. *Informing public policy.* Deliberation on a locally-framed issue offers rich insights that go beyond typical public opinion polls by asking people to examine the values and beliefs that underlie their thinking, to weigh the trade-offs of different approaches, and to consider the perspectives of others in order to find common ground.

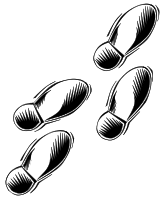
You may have other purposes as well. Whatever they are, it is important to begin and work through the issue-framing process with your desired ends in mind. Your particular goals will help you think strategically about the following questions:

- What perspectives need to be represented “at the table” in order to develop a framework that will resonate and have credibility throughout your community?
- How can you engage officeholders early on? How can you take advantage of their expertise during the framing process, as well as engage their interest in the forums and their outcomes?
- What timing issues should you consider? What else is likely to be happening in your community around this issue, and how should you schedule your work in order for it to have the most useful effect?
- Who will do the work of issue framing, convening and moderating forums, and sharing the findings? Does your issue-framing team or group include people with the time and skills necessary to get the job done?

This guidebook is organized around ten steps. For each step, it provides the rationale, the objective, and the task to be completed. Upon completion of the process, we hope you will have developed a discussion guide that meets the following criteria:

- The framework reveals what people hold valuable, and you understand the motivations that underlie their different points of view.
- The statement of the problem matches up with the choices you developed. Each choice addresses that problem directly.
- The framing makes a strong case, or puts the “best foot forward,” for each of the choices.
- There is tension between and/or within the choices to facilitate true deliberation on the issue.
- Potential actions and trade-offs are clearly spelled out for each choice.
- The potential actions feel reasonable and doable, and suggest ways in which people might act together on the issue.

There are some approaches to issue framing that may work better than others, but *there is no one “right way.”* As you use this guidebook in your communities, pay attention to what works well and what could be improved. As you experiment, share your learning with others.



Step 1: Selecting a frameable issue

Rationale:

Before we begin the task of framing an issue for public deliberation, it is important to think about *why* that issue—or any potential issue—is one that could and should be framed.

Objective:

To understand the common characteristics of frameable issues.

Task:

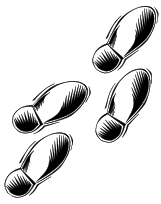
Think about public issues that are important to people in your community. Test them against the following criteria to decide if they are appropriate issues for public deliberation.

An issue that is appropriate for public deliberation will be one for which:

- broad concern exists within a community;
- choices must be made, but there are no clear “right” answers;
- a range of people and groups must act in order for the community to effectively move forward;
- new approaches may help the community to move forward;
- citizens have not had the opportunity to consider the different courses of action and their long term consequences; and
- the decision-making of officeholders and other leaders needs to be informed by public judgment, as well as experts’ views.

An issue doesn’t really lend itself to public deliberation if it:

- is highly technical and requires a technical solution;
- needs only a “yes” or “no” answer;
- has a specific solution that’s already been decided and the public’s role would only be as a “rubber stamp;”
- requires an immediate response;
- is relevant only to a narrow interest group; or
- is one for which your group has a particular approach to advocate.



Step 2: Conducting initial research

Rationale:

A well-framed issue is inclusive of differing perspectives and assures that everyone can see themselves in the choices they're asked to consider. That is why the initial research stage of issue framing is so important. If done well, it captures the wide range of concerns, perspectives and values that the public holds about the issue. If the initial research is incomplete, if it leaves out certain points of view, the final framing will also be incomplete.

Objective:

To understand how people connect with the issue and to collect background information that will help create a context for the deliberation.

Task:

Once the team has selected an issue to frame, it should consider the following research questions from a citizen perspective. Keep in mind that anyone can do this kind of research. The only requirements are a curious mind and good listening skills.

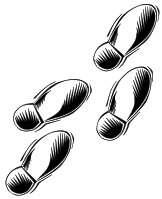
- What matters to us most about the issue?
- Who else cares about the issue and how do they see it?
- What studies have been done?
- What public laws and policies apply?

To accomplish this, the team should:

1. *Make a list of all the people who care about this issue.* Who is affected, either directly or indirectly, whether they realize it or not?
2. *Develop questions to help discover what concerns people have about the issue.* How do they see the issue? What really bothers them about it? How does the issue affect others they know, and what concerns do those people have? What should be done about the issue and by whom?
3. *Use the questions to interview a wide variety of people.* This can be done in a variety of ways, such as one-on-one interviews in person and by phone and formal and informal focus groups. As you do the interviews, be sure to (a) pay attention to how people think, feel and talk about the issue, and (b) seek out differing perspectives, including (or especially) those you may not agree with. While there is no hard and fast number of people you should interview, it is probably wise to talk with 50-100 people, individually and/or in groups.
4. *Review available studies and statistics about the issue.* Find out what is known about the issue locally and nationally. There are usually plenty of sources, and many of them are available on the

Internet. Talk to people who are knowledgeable about the issue for recommendations on reliable sources.

5. *Involve policymakers early on.* They can be an invaluable source of information about public policies that apply to the issue. It is also helpful to get their support early on so that they are more invested in outcomes of the forums.



Step 3:

Listing people's concerns about the issue

Rationale:

In order to successfully frame an issue, we must rely on our own real-life experiences and concerns and on the initial research we did to discover other people's concerns.

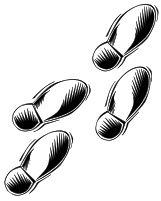
Objective:

To record the full array of concerns that we and others have about the issue.

Task:

Ask yourselves the following questions and note all responses on flipchart paper. Keep listing concerns until you can't think of any others. List all possible concerns, regardless of how you personally feel about them.

1. What concerns you, personally, about this problem in our community? What bothers you?
2. What concerns do you hear from friends and neighbors?
3. Think about our earlier research and others we've talked with-- What are their concerns?
4. What concerns did you hear from officeholders?
5. Who is not in the room? Who haven't we visited with? What would they say?
6. When you consider this issue, which people are most affected by it? Who is affected indirectly?
7. Who else would say they are affected by this issue? What would their concerns be that aren't already captured? Can you think of anyone else who would say this issue affects them? Their concerns?



Step 4:

Grouping like concerns and identifying choices

Rationale:

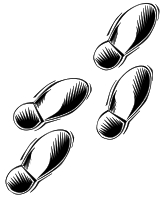
At this point, we have listed all the possible concerns we can think of. Now we need to dig deeper and examine the underlying principles and values that drive the different concerns. This step is like peeling back the layer of the onion to look for "the concern behind the concern." It will form the foundation of the choices or approaches of our framework.

Objective:

To group like concerns - those that are founded on the same values or principles - into categories to create choices.

Task:

1. Start by picking a concern from your list and ask: "What is the deeply held belief or concern that drives this concern? What really matters to people when we peel back the layers?" Pick several other concerns and go through the same process. Note that we will want to group the concerns according to their underlying values and beliefs.
2. Now step back and look at the entire list of concerns. What 3 or 4 groupings or choices emerge based on different underlying values and beliefs? Have each team member work individually for 10-15 minutes on this. Then have all team members share their choices. Agree on 3-4 choices for which:
 - The choices are distinctly different, not just opposites of each other;
 - There are tensions within and/or between the choices;
 - Each choice is presented "best-foot-forward;" and
 - Each choice captures something truly valuable to people.
4. Write a statement that describes each grouping as a choice or approach. Use action-oriented words that suggest the direction that should be taken for each choice. For example, concerns about economic development may include a cluster regarding the availability of skilled workers. The choice statement might read: "Educate people for jobs in today's economy."



Step 5: Developing the problem statement

Rationale:

By now, we have examined the issue from many different perspectives and gone down several different paths. At this step, we will work to find the main path or common thread that connects the different perspectives or approaches. In order for our framework to work, all of our approaches need to address the same problem that our community wants to address.

Objective:

To develop a statement that identifies the common problem shared by each of the approaches.

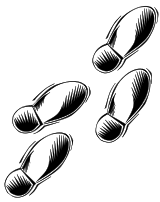
Task:

Look at your choices and the summary statement you've written about each. What is the common problem they all address? How would you identify or name the problem?

A good way to get started is for each person to try to finish this statement:

"The common problem I see is..."

After listing many answers, the group needs to decide: Which sentence says it best? Which embraces the full range of concerns?



Step 6: Writing a summary of the framework

Rationale:

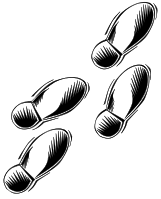
At this point, you have the main pieces of your framework – a statement of the problem and the choices that address that problem. Now is the time to make sure that the pieces fit together properly and that the overall framework includes tensions that call upon people to examine their values and priorities.

Objective:

To write a one-page summary that names and briefly describes the problem and that briefly describes 3-4 choices or approaches to the problem. (See attached “Sample Framework Summary.”)

Task:

1. Review your problem statement and write one paragraph that offers evidence of the problem and reasons why it needs to be addressed.
2. Review each of your choices and write one paragraph that describes and makes a strong case for that particular choice.
3. Examine each choice and revise as necessary to make sure that:
 - The choices are distinctly different, not just opposites of each other;
 - There are tensions within and/or between the choices;
 - Each choice is presented “best-foot-forward;” and
 - Each choice captures something truly valuable to people.
4. When you are satisfied with your work, compile a one-page summary of the problem statement and choices.
5. Finally, write a title for the framework that:
 - Captures the essence of the issue;
 - Draws everyone into the conversation;
 - Reinforces the idea that citizens are actors in the political process; and
 - Does not prejudice forum participants in favor of one choice over another.



Step 7:

Identifying benefits and drawbacks, actions and consequences

Rationale:

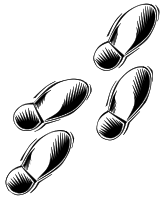
With our basic framework in place, we now need to flesh out the different choices in a way that will help forum participants recognize what they like and don't like about each choice, consider what actions might be taken under each choice, and come to terms with the trade-offs each choice requires.

Objective:

For each choice, identify the advantages and disadvantages, actions that could be taken, and trade-offs or consequences.

Task:

1. *List benefits and drawbacks for each choice.* Spell out at least five or six of the best reasons for approaching the problem from each perspective, as well as the strongest reasons to oppose it. Answer these questions:
 - Why should we move in this direction? Why is this a sound idea?
 - Why isn't this a good idea? What challenges does this choice present?
2. *Identify potential actions.* For each choice, ask the following questions. (Don't be vague. Be very specific about who should do what.)
 - What might individual citizens do?
 - What might groups of citizens do together?
 - What might elected officials and government agencies do?
 - What might others (schools, businesses, churches, etc.) do?
3. *Recognize the trade-offs that each choice requires.* Ask:
 - If you believed that this choice was the best, what trade-offs would you have to accept?
 - What would we have to give up if we followed this course of action?
 - What might be the result of following this approach?



Step 8: Composing questions for closing the forum

Rationale:

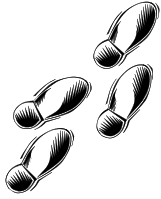
A very important, but sometimes overlooked part of a forum is the closing. A thoughtful closing will help people reflect on what they've heard others say and to think about what they've learned. It will also help identify where people have common ground and what actions they might be willing to take on the issue.

Objective:

To compose several questions that encourage reflection at the end of the forum. (See attached "Sample Closing Questions.")

Task:

1. Brainstorm a list of possible questions to close the forum.
2. Narrow the list to 4-6 questions that are most likely to help the participants reflect on the forum, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and consider actions they might take.



Step 9:

Developing a post-forum questionnaire

Rationale:

The real meat of a forum is the rich conversations that occur among the participants. Forums are different from public opinion polls in that they ask people to listen to each other when formulating their opinions, versus "shooting from the hip." Questionnaires can provide supplementary information about how people think about the issue after participating in public deliberation. Some people like to use pre- and post-forum questionnaires, especially if they want to specifically measure the effects of deliberation on how people think about the issue. If that is not your particular goal, then a post-forum questionnaire will probably be sufficient.

Objective:

To develop a post-forum questionnaire that helps to verify the opinions and ideas shared during the forum. (See attached "Sample Questionnaire.")

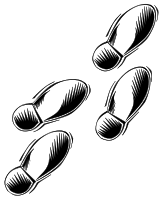
Tasks:

There are many ways to develop a questionnaire, and the following is simply one of them.

1. *Develop questions to discover how people view the issue.* Go back to the choices in your framework. For each, write one or two statements that capture the point of view behind that choice or what people see as the real problem. For example, in a forum about how to improve public schools, one of the choices might be to "increase community involvement in schools." Possible statements include "Community involvement improves the quality of public education," and "Parents and other citizens are not as involved with public schools as they should be." Then create multiple choices to apply to each statement, such as strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and not sure.
2. *Develop questions to identify what kinds of actions people do or do not support.* Now go back to your framework and pick a couple actions under each choice that you feel are good examples of what could be done. Using the choice about community involvement, possible actions include "Expect parents and the public to raise funds and volunteer for their schools," and "Create citizen councils to help set policies and priorities for the school." Develop multiple choices, such as strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose, and not sure.
3. *Develop questions to probe what trade-offs people are or are not willing to make.* These questions push people to consider what they're willing to give up under each of the choices. Hopefully, the forum also elicited this kind of deliberation. For each choice, come up with at least one statement like "I support more community involvement in schools EVEN IF this requires time and resources

that the school could be directing to students in the classroom," or "I would personally be willing to donate an hour or two a week to help improve public schools." Develop multiple choices on a continuum of agreement/disagreement.

4. *Develop questions that elicit feedback about how people felt about the forum experience.* These should help you assess what happened to the participants as a result of the forum. Possible statements include "I have developed new insights as a result of participating in this forum," and "The forum has given me some ideas about actions I might take on the issue." Develop a multiple-choice continuum, but also leave room for people to give specific examples of new insights or actions they might take.
5. *Develop questions to collect demographic information about the forum participants.* Think about demographic differences that might contribute to different perspectives on the issue, such as age, gender, race, education, and income. You may also want to gauge the participants' previous awareness of the issue and their main sources of information (e.g. friends, newspaper, church, etc.) about it. Collecting this information will help you identify trends and will also help determine whether or not your forums engaged a representative cross-section of the community.
6. *Test the questionnaire.* The best way to test the questionnaire is to try it out during your test forums. With diverse participants, a good questionnaire should elicit a diversity of responses. You should re-evaluate your questionnaire (or even your framework) if most people answer most of the questions the same way, which might suggest that you haven't really captured the tensions (or that your group was not diverse enough). Also, if large numbers of people answer "not sure" to a question, it may be because the question is not clear enough.



Step 10: Testing the framework

Rationale:

At this point, your team has invested a lot of time and energy in developing the framework. There's an understandable – but premature – desire to "wrap things up" and get on with your forums. But before you do, it is worth your time and effort to make sure that your framework really encourages the kind of public deliberation you are hoping for. The only way to do this is to try it out.

Objective:

To pause, test your framework, and make adjustments as needed.

Task:

1. *Revisit your list of people who are affected by this issue.* Your test forums should reach a variety of the stakeholders you identified.
2. *Schedule several test forums.* You can do this by using existing groups, such as an adult education class at a local church, and/or by convening a group of people who are willing to deliberate on the issue. It's ideal to have diversity within the groups. If this isn't possible, make sure that there is sufficient diversity between your groups.
3. *Conduct forums.* Try to have at least one member of your issue-framing team at each forum to observe the process and take notes on how well the framework seems to work.
4. *Revise your framework as needed.* When your test forums are completed, reconvene you team to review what you learned about the framework and to make revisions as needed. If major changes are made, you will probably want to test the framework again.



