

Issue Framing

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Objectives

The purpose of this module is to introduce the concept and technique of framing an issue for problem solving.

Participants will...

1. understand the difference between positions and interests,
2. understand how understanding stakeholders' interests can lead to problem solving, and
3. learn how to use stakeholder interests to frame public issues in ways to engage people in a collaborative problem-solving process.

Total Time Required

75 minutes

Materials Needed

- Background documents
 - ❖ *Interests and Positions*
 - ❖ *Framing an Issue*
- PowerPoint or overhead slides
 - ❖ *Interests, Positions and Reframing*
- Group exercise
 - ❖ *Catamount Island Bridge*
- Handouts
 - ❖ *Interests and Positions*
 - ❖ *Issue Framing*
 - ❖ *Catamount Island Bridge: The Setting*

Audio/Video Equipment

- LCD projector/Overhead projector
- Two flip charts and markers

Directions and Training Tips

1. Begin the session with a presentation and discussion of the session objectives.
2. Ask class participants to consider a public issue that was controversial in some way, and in which they were involved either as an educator, decision-maker or some other capacity that brought them into contact with stakeholders. Ask for two volunteers to describe their public issue using the following outline:
 - a. Describe the substantive issues - what was going on?
 - b. What made the issue controversial?
 - c. Generally identify the people and organizations with a stake in the issue (for example, farmers, county government, etc.) - who was involved?
3. For each issue, record on a flip chart the following information:
 - a. Issue: a brief (3 or 4 words) description of the issue.
 - b. Stakeholders: people and organizations with a stake in the issue.
 - c. Arrange the information on the flip chart in the following way:

<u>Issue</u> : (Brief description of the issue)		
<u>Stakeholders</u>	<u>Positions</u>	<u>Interests</u>
1. Stakeholder 1		
2. Stakeholder 2		
3. etc.		
4. etc.		

4. Introduce the concept of positions and interests (Slide 2).
5. Define the term "position" (Slide 3).
6. Ask the group, "What were the positions taken by the various stakeholders in the examples we just heard?" Periodically check for accuracy with the participants who volunteered these issues. Record the responses on the flip chart under the Positions column for each stakeholder.
7. Discuss the problems with positions when dealing with a public issue (Slide 4). Point out competing positions in the examples given.
8. Define the term "interest" (Slide 5).
9. Ask the group, "What were, or might have been, the interests of the stakeholders in our examples?" Periodically check for accuracy with the participants who volunteered these issues. Record the responses on the flip chart under the Interests column for each stakeholder.



10. Discuss the benefits of using interests for resolving public issues (Slide 6). Ask participants to consider how, in the examples recorded on the flip charts, a discussion of the interests, rather than a debate over the positions, could lead to an outcome that the stakeholders could agree to.
11. Introduce the concept of issue framing (Slide 7).
12. Use the school consolidation issue as an example of competing positions and potentially compatible interests (Slides 8-11).
13. Lead the group in a discussion of this issue using (Slide 12). "If you were to hold a public meeting to discuss the school consolidation issue..."
 - a. Who would likely attend?
(Preferred answer: Those who are either for or against school consolidation).
 - b. Who might not attend?
(Preferred answer: All those in the middle on this issue).
 - c. Is this problem likely to be resolved in a public forum? Why or why not?
14. Illustrate the problem solving framing statement (Slide 13).
15. Illustrate a way of framing the school consolidation issue to invite collaborative problem-solving (Slide 14).
16. State to the group that you will give them an opportunity to frame an issue in an exercise called *Catamount Island Bridge*.
17. The exercise has three parts:
 - ❖ *The Setting*
 - ❖ *John (Joan) Rhodes, Catamount Island Mayor*
 - ❖ *Marvin (Marge) Birdwell, Catamount Island Citizens Association*
18. Hand out *The Setting* to all participants. They may read the setting silently to themselves (or the setting can be read aloud, one paragraph at a time by several volunteers).
19. Select two volunteers to come to the front of the room and read each role aloud, in turn, to the rest of the group. Ask the participants to listen for two things: the positions of each stakeholder, and the interests behind those positions. Encourage the participants to take notes.
20. When the role players finish, label two flip charts:
 - ❖ John (Joan) Rhodes
 - ❖ Marvin (Marge) Birdwell.
21. Start with one of the roles and ask the whole group to identify the stakeholder's position. This is recorded on corresponding flip chart.



22. Ask the participants to list the interests they heard. Record responses on the flip chart. You may have to remind the participants that interests are the reasons why the individual holds a particular position. When all the responses are recorded, the instructor again reminds participants of the definition of interests. The list is then reviewed and items not identified as interests are removed. Repeat the procedure for the second disputant.
23. Divide the group into teams of four or five. Each team works independently to create a reframing statement. Teams have 10 minutes to construct a framing statement.
24. Remind the group to use the reframing construction, "How can we... while at the same time..." Instruct the teams to avoid listing interests, but rather, they should attempt to be concise and inclusive.
25. All teams share their statements with the rest of the group, withholding discussion until all statements have been read. Suggested discussion questions:
 - a. What do these statements have in common (other than their construction)?
 - b. Which statements seemed most reasonable to you? Why?
 - c. [If some statements did not mention the bridge] Some statements didn't mention the bridge. What do you think about that?
 - d. Is it important which interests are listed first in the "How can we..." construction?
 - e. Ideally, who should be doing the work to reframe issues in a public context? (Preferred answer: the stakeholders).

Additional Background Readings

Carlson, Chris, ed., (1998). "Conflict Management and Building Consensus in Communities," special edition of the *National Civic Review*, 76(4): July-August.

Carpenter, Susan. (1990). *Solving Community Problems by Consensus*. Washington, DC: Program for Community Problem Solving.

Fisher, Fisher and William Ury. (1991). *Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, 2nd Edition*. New York: Penguin Books.

Gray, Barbara. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Sacarto, Douglas M. (1985). *Economic Development Conflicts: Model Programs for Dispute Resolution*. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures.

Susskind, Lawrence, E. and Jeffrey Cruikshank. (1987). *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*. New York: Basic Books.



Catamount Island Bridge

A Read-Aloud Role Play

Objective

Catamount Island Bridge is, at first glance, a dispute about the construction of a bridge to an island. The issue is posed as: “Should a new bridge be built to Catamount Island?” But it is really more than that. Listen to two of the disputants, John (Joan) Rhodes and Marvin (Marge) Birdwell, as each talks about his or her position on the issue. Identify the interests behind each position. Based on the interests that you hear, reframe the issue to find a common definition of the issue that is acceptable to all parties.

Procedure

The role play has three parts: the setting and two roles. All participants read the setting silently to themselves (or the setting can be read aloud, one paragraph at a time by several volunteers). Two volunteers then read each role play aloud, in turn, to the rest of the group. The instructor asks the participants to listen for two things: the positions of each disputant and the interests behind those positions. Participants are encouraged to take notes.

When the role players finish, the instructor starts with one of the roles and asks the whole group to identify the disputant’s position. This is recorded on a flip chart. Next, the instructor asks the participants to list the interests they heard. Responses are also recorded on the flip chart. The instructor may have to remind the participants that interests are the reasons why the individual holds a particular position. When all the responses are recorded, the instructor again reminds participants of the definition of interests. The list is then reviewed and items not identified as interests are removed. The procedure is repeated for the second disputant.

After the interests are tabulated for both disputants, the instructor divides the group into teams of 4-5. Each team works independently to create a reframing statement. The statements are shared with the rest of the group and discussed.

Total Time Required

45 minutes

Equipment

Two flip charts and markers



The Setting

The Town of Catamount Island is a resort community on the mid-Atlantic coast. Despite its misleading name, the town consists of both an island and a mainland area. Connecting the two parts of the town is a single lane, swing-span “pontoon” bridge. The bridge spans the Intracoastal Waterway, a major route for pleasure craft and small commercial boats that ply the coast. It also bisects a high quality estuarine wetland and is the only means available for crossing to and from the island.

The island and much of the mainland property was owned by a developer who purchased the land 40 years ago for less than \$8,000. Since the 1980s, residential development has boomed at Catamount Island. Both the island and mainland sections of town have undergone considerable growth. Ocean-front lots which originally sold for \$600 in the early 1960s now fetch upwards of \$500,000. The developer has since passed away, but his son, Cal Fiore, inherited the undeveloped lots, including the wetland area. Cal also serves on the Town Council. Cal wants to see the bridge that his father built in the 1950s replaced by a modern structure.

Catamount Island Bridge is actually a floating barge that swings open to allow traffic on the Intracoastal Waterway to pass. The State acquired the bridge from Cal’s father in the 1960s. The State Department of Transportation (DOT) maintains the bridge and staffs it with a bridge operator 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The bridge opens on demand for commercial traffic and on the hour for everyone else.

The DOT has sought to replace the bridge with a new structure for the past 20 years, noting concerns over safe and efficient transportation. It takes about 10 minutes to open and close the bridge and can usually handle normal, off-season traffic from the 270 mainland residents and the 250 island residents. However, during peak summer days when the average daily traffic over the bridge is about 10,000 cars and the town population swells to 8,800, routine openings and closings can cause seemingly endless traffic delays. The bridge has also broken down on occasion, posing long delays for people wishing to leave the island. Although the Town employs both a fire department and an emergency medical service crew, no services exist on the island side of the bridge.

According to DOT engineers, there are two alternatives to the current bridge. The first is a high-rise fixed span structure. The high-rise would require drainage of Blaine Creek, and relocation of Big Narrows Channel. Nine acres of wetlands would be filled in. The second option is a mid-level draw bridge. This option involves less environmental damage – only 3 acres of wetlands would be sacrificed – but requires a bridge operator. DOT’s preferred option is the high rise.

The bridge issue has split the town. Many on the mainland, including the mayor, John (Joan) Rhodes, believe that a high-rise bridge is necessary to unite the two areas. Most island residents, represented by Marvin (Marge) Birdwell of the Catamount Island Citizens Association, like the pontoon bridge and want to keep it. At worst, they’d settle for the mid-rise option.



John (Joan) Rhodes, Catamount Island Mayor

I am John (Joan) Rhodes, the mayor of Catamount Island. I am concerned about the limited access to the island part of town. As mayor, I oversee management of town services on both island and mainland. The old bridge is a major impediment to the provision of efficient and effective services. We need a new bridge. In fact, of the two bridge options, the only one that makes sense is the high-level span.

The high-level span will save taxpayers money. Can you imagine how expensive it would be to keep someone employed 24 hours a day to continue to operate a draw bridge? No, the state doesn't need to be spending money like that.

I really care about the safety of our school children. I have two children in our school system. The old bridge structure is a hazard to our school children. School buses have been stranded on the island for long periods while the bridge is open for commercial traffic. What if something happened to one of those children while the bridge is open and they can't get across? Also, on many, many occasions, children are late for school because the buses are stranded on the island while the bridge is open.

One of my worst fears is that a major catastrophe could occur on the island at a time that fire and ambulance services are blocked from crossing. All we could do in that case would be to wait. Someone could die needlessly. Also, because of our town's growth, we need to buy a larger fire truck. But a larger truck won't be able to get across that bridge! We won't be able to trade in our older truck for a newer one. Without a new bridge, we'll have to own a smaller truck at the expense of our tax payers.

I feel that a good bridge would unite the community. I'm a resident of the mainland. I see the island as an isolated enclave where mainlanders hardly venture, and in fact, we are unwelcome. By enabling easier access, I see opportunities for the island and mainland parts of town to begin to act like one town, not two.

The Catamount Island Citizens Association say they are concerned about the environment. If they are so concerned, why don't they want to do something about the pollution caused by all the boats that have to wait in the channel for the bridge to open? I have seen more than 20 boats at one time backed up waiting to cross. Every one of those boats was running its engines. You could smell the diesel fumes for miles. And you can bet that when their toilets were full, they were dumping those things right in the channel... not twenty yards from peoples' front yards!

Most of those people in the Citizens Association are just complainers, really. They have their little piece of heaven and want to deny it to anyone else. Why, Marvin (Marge) Birdwell even fought the development of the Food Town Grocery on the west end of town. Before we had the Food Town store, we had to travel 15 miles to buy groceries. And you know what? I saw Marvin (Marge) buying groceries at the Food Town last week.



Marvin (Marge) Birdwell, Catamount Island Citizens Association

I'm Marvin (Marge) Birdwell, a member of the Catamount Island Citizens Association (CICA), a group of island homeowners. We created the CICA as a way to respond to many of the threats facing our island, largely as a result of development pressures. I am firmly opposed to the development of a high-rise span.

The biggest problem is that bridge construction would destroy estuarine wetlands on the west side of the island. To build such a massive bridge, DOT will have to drain and fill in over nine acres of wetland. Coastal wetlands are the breeding grounds for shrimp and other fish species that our commercial fishermen depend on for their livelihoods. I am just not willing to sacrifice another acre of wetland for one of DOT's grandiose public works projects!

This island is a special place. The large wetlands on the west end are a refuge for wildlife as well as for the soul. Did you know that this barrier island is unique in that it is actually gaining rather than losing its beach? We have too much at stake to allow developers to plunder.

DOT has been dishonest in its representation of the facts. We proved that in court eight years ago when we stopped the bridge the first time. The judge agreed with us that their finding of no significant impact from the proposed structure was balderdash. So now they have to undergo a full-fledged environmental impact study. But still, they are playing fast with the facts. Do you think that the impacts will be any less severe than they were a decade ago? Absolutely not!

Right now, the island's west side is largely undeveloped, as it should be. Cal Fiore would love to sell those lots, but they won't perk. They're too wet. He knows as well as we do that those west side lots are part of the overall wetland ecosystem. If they get that bridge, you bet you'll see a sewer line connected to that span. Once sewer is in, this island will be no different from every other barrier island along this coast – a barren strip of sand stacked end to end with houses, condominiums, and bikini shops.

The mayor and her (his) friends are pushing for development. I've seen a lot of people around here get rich as land prices have spiraled in the past 15 years. But we have too much of a good thing here. Let's not spoil it! We can't keep building and developing without suffering from the damage it is causing. Sure, we can push for strict zoning to protect the "sense of place" that this island provides. But I don't trust the folks in city hall. Any protection policy that can be constructed can just as easily be dismantled. Look, I'm a realist. I know that we'll eventually have to update the pontoon bridge. The shipping and boating interests are just too strong to hold off forever. But we don't need a high rise span. In fact the mid-level draw bridge proposal that DOT is touting could be scaled back considerably. The tall-masted sail boats would still have to wait for the bridge opening, but most other craft would be able to get through. In fact, most of those pleasure boaters would be happy to trade an hour-long wait for the preservation of pristine wetlands.



Interests and Positions

Position: A particular stance taken by a party; a preferred solution to a problem. *What we want.*

Interest: An intangible motivation (need, desire, concern or constraint) underlying the preferred solution. *Why we want it.*

Often when discussing an issue, individuals focus their attention on only one or two solutions. As they move toward evaluation they view the discussion as a choice between alternative positions and quickly take sides. Because all their energies are concentrated on the two positions, no effort is made to understand the interests behind the two positions. In such a contentious atmosphere, the choice they face will likely lead to a win/lose outcome, an impasse, or a compromise that satisfies neither side.

By focusing on positions, parties in a dispute:

- ❖ see only a predetermined way to solve a problem;
- ❖ spend time staking and defending extreme positions rather than dealing with the heart of the matter;
- ❖ tend to settle with a compromise rather than getting what they really need;
- ❖ limit creative options; and
- ❖ risk damaging ongoing relationships.

In contrast a discussion that allows for an understanding of interests underlying positions...

- ❖ moves people away from contending positions;
- ❖ promotes mutual education;
- ❖ allows a cooperative atmosphere to develop;
- ❖ sets the stage for reframing the issue;
- ❖ encourages the generation of multiple options; and
- ❖ permits the search for a creative solution.

Identifying Interests

Positions tend to be fixed, tangible and easily expressed. Underlying interests may well be intangible, difficult to put into words, and even inconsistent. How do you go about helping people reveal their interests, and indeed, putting words to your own?

- ❖ Ask “Why?” Put yourself in their shoes and think about why others may hold a particular position. Ask directly, but make it clear you are asking not for a justification of the position, but for an understanding of the needs, concerns, fears and aspirations that lead the individual to the particular position.
- ❖ Ask “Why not?” Think about why they have not taken another position. What interests of theirs stand in their way?
- ❖ Realize that people have multiple interests. Moreover, public issues often involve coalitions of interests, some of which coincide, and some of which do not. One needs to understand the variety of interests that may shape positions.
- ❖ Realize that the most powerful interests are basic human needs. Look first for the fundamental interests that motivate most people. These include personal security, economic well-being, a sense of control over one’s life, and personal recognition.
- ❖ Help people articulate their interests in clear and understandable language. Draw them out. Have them tell their story. Remind them to be as specific as possible and use details.
- ❖ Help people acknowledge others’ interests as part of the problem to be solved. As a facilitator you can ask people to paraphrase what others have told them before responding to what they have just been told.



- ❖ Remind people to state their reasoning before their answer. When people state what they want, and then why they want it, others are too busy formulating a defensive retort to the stated position and don't hear the underlying interests. Stating the interests first, followed by a suggested option will help others hear the interests.
- ❖ Keep the discussion moving forward, not backward. When people argue, they often look backward to a cause. When they problem-solve, they look forward to a solution. In backward-looking arguing, interests become rationale for causes. In forward-looking problem solving, interests become the foundation for solutions.



Framing an Issue

In problem solving, the term “reframing” refers to directing the parties’ attention away from positions and toward the task of identifying interests, inventing options, and discussing criteria for selecting an option.

Reframing is used in two ways. In a broad context, public issues can be reframed to increase the level of abstraction and bring diverse interests to the table. Issues framed in an either/or context often attract only those people who hold polar positions.

The second use of reframing is used within the context of deliberating a particular issue. Reframing an issue or a statement can move people off a position and get them refocused on interests. Many times it involves using active listening skills, asking questions to probe for interests, or using other techniques for producing win-win outcomes. This type of reframing is treated more completely in the section on facilitation techniques.

Framing That Invites Conflict

How an issue is initially framed will greatly affect the parties’ problem solving perspectives and level of conflict. Many community issues are initially framed as a debate. One of the most powerful ways of redirecting perspectives is to frame or reframe the initial issue. Consider the following example in which the parties are forced into polar perspectives:

Should our county continue to grow at its present pace and risk harming the qualities that make this area special?

Reframing to Reduce Conflict

Once interests are known, the issue may be reframed to reflect the parties’ key interests, thus helping to move attention away from the two positions. Reframing the issue involves finding a common definition of the issue that is acceptable to all parties.

It is achieved by substituting the initial closed-ended question with an open-ended question. It also must reflect the key interests of the parties who are affected by or can affect the issue. By substituting a “how to...” question for a “should we...” question, the disputants are moved from debating the relative merits of their positions to focusing on a collaborative problem solving venture.

Reframing a public issue for collaborative problem solving will require a working knowledge of all the interests. By reflecting key interests of the disputants, the reframed issue not only encourages collaboration; it signals what must be satisfied if the issue is to be resolved.

Consider the following reframing of the above issue:

How can we achieve the economic development potential of our region while preserving and protecting the amenities that make our area such a great place to live?

Consider how would you reframe the following potentially contentious public issues.

❖ *Should forests be clear cut?*



- ❖ *Should we have county-wide zoning?*
- ❖ *Should commercial hog operations be required to use more advance waste treatment processes?*

Caution: Not all issues are amenable to reframing.

You will discover when exploring some issues that the parties will not agree to reframe the issue. If the issue cannot be reframed from a “should we...” question to a “how can we...”question, the issue may very likely not be a candidate for collaborative problem solving. Issues that focus primarily on basic differences in values, or rights cannot easily be reframed. In these cases, you may wish to investigate ways to reduce the level of conflict and increase opportunities for dialogue but not search for collaborative resolution.

