



**Turning lemons
into lemonade**

Unit 14 Process Structures Instructor's Guide

Public Conflict Resolution

A lecture and discussion lays out the four basic group process designs and various techniques for public involvement in that process. A case study exercise is used to help the participants create a process blueprint.

Purpose

There are at least four ways to structure a group process for problem solving. These are discussed, as well as different techniques for getting the public involved in these processes. Citizen involvement in problem solving is of varying importance; identifying the public's role is crucial to the design of the process. This unit should be tied with Unit 13.

Objectives

As a result, participants will:

- Learn four ways that processes can be structured to accommodate the complexities of the issues and the desired level of public involvement.
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of each structure.
- Become familiar with several types of public involvement processes.

Time

30 minutes

Materials Needed

Flip Chart and Easel
Markers
Overhead Projector

Overheads

50 The Role of Task Groups Within Committees
51 Techniques for Citizen Involvement

Handouts

1. Citizen Involvement
2. Unhappy Trails from Unit 8

Directions

1. The trainer says that the organization of consensus-building programs varies from project to project and community to community. Four basic models for structuring a process have emerged from the study of hundreds of successful programs. They may be described as the committee/task group model, the negotiating team model, the conference/task group model, and the task group and public input model. The title of the four models should be written on the flip chart. The trainer asks the participants which of the public involvement techniques they've participated in. Under what circumstances were they employed?

Overhead 50

2. Committee and Task Groups. Mention that the most commonly used model for structuring a community consensus building process is a committee combined with task groups. The committee may have anywhere from 10 to 60 members and it represents the different interest groups concerned about the problem. The committee agrees on procedures, identifies issues, gathers information, generates options, and develops recommendations or seeks agreements. The larger the committee, the greater the reliance on task groups for dealing with substantive issues. The trainer posts **Overhead 50** to mention the role of task groups within the committee structure. Have the participants list the strengths and weaknesses of the committee and task group approach. Write these strengths and weaknesses from each model on the flip chart. If they're slow to make the lists, suggest that the diversity of perspectives in committee and task groups is a potential strength. Also, well-coordinated task groups can accomplish considerably more than isolated individuals. Possible weakness include the tendency of small groups of members to dominate the discussion and option-generation. Another weakness is the enlargement of bureaucratic structures—not every problem needs to be decided on by everybody all of the time.

3. Negotiating Teams. The trainer explains that representatives in a consensus program can be organized into teams. Each team decides on its goals and interests, and functions as a unit during problem solving sessions. Negotiating teams work well when the number of teams is small — three to five is a reasonable number — and when each team has well defined and compatible interests. Team members need time between sessions to talk among themselves about constituents, to discuss their progress and seek input from other people not at the table. Have the participants list the strengths and weakness of negotiating teams. Strengths you can suggest include: negotiating teams permit a more rounded perspective than that of a single person; team members can compliment one another's skills and knowledge. Possible weaknesses are that the negotiating team itself may not be able to agree on what decisions to make, and a dominant personality can intimidate others within their team.
4. Conference and Task Groups. The trainer says this model features a large conference that convenes interested citizens around a community problem, followed by task group work and later by additional conferences. The advantage of a conference model is that it enables many more people to become involved face-to-face in a program which increases the opportunities for participation and can build momentum. Conferences are a good forum for providing information, identifying issues and concerns and gathering suggestions for alternative solutions. Conferences are not a good format for achieving consensus agreements. Generally, conferences identify issues which become the basis for organizing task groups. These task groups perform similar functions as they do for committees. The task groups report their results to a second conference, usually held six to twelve months later. The task groups are maintained as long as necessary. Have the participants list strengths and weaknesses of conference and task groups.

As mentioned, a strength of this model is that it allows many people to participate. In this feature also lies a possible weakness: progress can be slowed or stopped by the "over-democratization" of an issue. If everyone is weighing in on a public issue, the group's time may be consumed with discussion, rather than decision-making.

5. **Public Input Model.** The trainer says that the public input model has a small 8 to 15 member task group that identifies issues and alternatives, evaluates alternatives, and makes choices. It does so by actively seeking public input from interested persons and interest groups at every step of the process. Public input can be in the form of workshops, town meetings, or public hearings and is often focused on a specific task. Ask the participants to list the strengths and weakness of the public input model. Strengths include the fact that this model is open—it allows people in the community to voice their opinions. It's also a flexible process, encouraging public participation at every step of the way. This flexibility however, can be detrimental to the larger process if once active citizens drop out of participation, breaking the continuity of the task group's direction.

Overhead 51

6. The trainer explains that the effectiveness of these models can depend on the level of citizen involvement. When a conflict is of widespread public interest, it is important to encourage the public to participate in the definition of the problem and processes leading to its resolution. There are many different tools for involving the primary and secondary stakeholders in a consensus-building process. The trainer uses **Overhead 51** to give a quick overview of several common approaches to citizen involvement. With each technique the trainer should paraphrase the definitions given on the handout "Citizen Involvement." Ask the participants to provide methods of their own and record these on the flip chart.

7. **No particular approach will successfully allow you to solve every conflict; you do what works best in each situation.**
8. Return the participants to the "Unhappy Trails" handout. Beginning with the committee and task group model, and on through negotiating teams, conference and task groups, and the public input model, ask the participants to discuss how each approach would be organized in the "Unhappy Trails" example. Which structure would be most effective for reaching an interest-based agreement between the parties? Why?



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Unit 14
Process Structures
Handouts



Citizen Involvement Handout 1

Public Conflict Resolution

Citizen Involvement*

There are many different tools for involving the primary and secondary stakeholders in a consensus-building process. The following list provides a quick overview of several common approaches. Feel free to invent your own.

- A. **Charrettes¹**: A charrette is an exercise conducted by bringing together a group of stakeholders for an intense session to work through issues. Charrettes are often scheduled for an entire weekend or other lengthier periods and require participation during the entire event. There are four key ingredients to conducting a charrette:
- 1) A definable problem to solve or work on.
 - 2) A group of people willing to participate in the process.
 - 3) Experts from within and outside the affected community or group (experts from within the community are more important to include than those from outside).
 - 4) A commitment from the power structure involved to put into effect the plans and/or recommendations of the charrette.

The basic idea is for the stakeholders and experts to sit down and spend the time and energy to lay out the dynamics of the problems and issues, and to develop a plan for action. Every stakeholder in a charrette is given a chance to offer their insights and alternatives. Although charrette's are traditionally centered around urban planning and architectural design issues, they can be used in other settings in order to spawn creative ideas about solutions to local issues. Charrettes can be conducted in a "fishbowl" to allow the greater public the opportunity to observe the work in progress. A pointed limitation to the utility of the charrette lies in the fact that it may be difficult to get key decision makers to attend charrettes because of the considerable time commitment required.

- B. **Community Meetings**: Community meetings include any type of venue that brings citizens together on a particular issue. Community meetings can be used to:
- Educate the public
 - Seek input from the public
 - Seek a reaction from the public
 - Make decisions

¹ Adapted from Riddick, W.L. 1971. *Charrette Processes: a tool in urban planning*. York, Pennsylvania:

George Shumway Publisher.

They can be large or small. Since community meetings vary widely, it is essential to clearly communicate expectations for the meeting. Community meetings often differ from public hearings in that the communication is multi-way. They can be used to promote lateral conversations. Large community meetings are commonly broken into smaller groups in order to increase the amount of "air" time available to each person.

C. **Focus Groups:** Focus groups have been used by market research experts for decades to assess consumer reaction to particular products, services, or messages. In recent years they have been adapted for use with citizens on public issues. In a focus group, a small group of people is brought together in a confidential setting to discuss an issue with the assistance of a skilled facilitator. Conversation is encouraged between members of the focus group rather than with the facilitator. A video or audio tape is kept of the proceedings. The content of conversation is analyzed in order to assess how people frame the issues, whether any words stimulate a strong reaction, whether any possible solutions emerge, and the strength of interest in the issues or any particular outcome.

D. **Hotlines:** Hotlines are used when a large number of people may seek to offer their input on a particular subject. They are especially appropriate when the stakeholder community is geographically dispersed.

E. **Interviews:** Interviews are often used to quickly gather detailed information from diverse perspectives on a specific issue. They can be used to understand how citizens might be engaged in a public involvement process on the specific issues. Since interviews are usually limited to a small number of people, they may not be representative of the broad public. The nature of the interviewing process does not allow conversation between adversaries and may encourage people to harden their positions.

F. **Polls and Surveys:** Polls and surveys, like interviews, can be used to quickly gauge public sentiment. Done properly, they are often very expensive, but can establish areas of concern, importance of the issues to the public, and potential framings of the issue. In order to be properly developed, administered, and evaluated, polls and surveys require persons with significant expertise in their use.

G. **Public Hearings:** Public hearings are usually formal meetings with specific notice requirements where members of the public are asked to provide input or reactions to proposals. They are the most commonly used form of public involvement technique. Public hearings can be used to involve small numbers of interested citizens or in conjunction with activities that promote lateral conversations.

H. **Referenda and Ballot Initiatives:** In some parts of the country, referenda are widely used to gain the broadest possible public involvement. The results may be advisory or binding depending on the nature of the issue. In Virginia, public balloting on issues is largely restricted to public consent for changes in taxation or issuance of bonds. When binding, they represent the ultimate sharing of decision-making with the public. Referenda tend to be an expensive form of public involvement.

I. Team Building Activities: While most citizen involvement activities are clearly designed to focus the attention of the public on a particular substantive task, occasionally fixed membership groups will need to clarify and strengthen their relationships through focused activities. Team building exercises are generally led by a person who specializes in these events. One of the typical strategies is to move the participants from their regular environment as the first step toward restructuring and improving relationships. Outdoor challenge courses, adult retreat sites, and hikes are typical focal points. Team building activities are sometimes limited in their long-term effectiveness because participants may experience a "retreat mentality," where they are open to changing relationships while in the non-workplace environment, but return to former attitudes and relationships once back in the office.

J. Workshops: Specific, task-focused, hands-on meetings are often used to bring together a working group to tackle an issue. Workshops are often used when the task involves some level of physical planning — siting, design, circulation, etc. They are often very successful because they encourage participants to share their ideas on how to make a project work. They can become colossal failures when they are used to engage stakeholders to design a project they do not want built.

K. Written Comments: More used at the federal government level than anywhere else, requests for written comment are a familiar and precise way of getting a detailed review of complex and technical proposals. Where resources are limited, it may also be one of the least expensive forms of public involvement.

*Adapted from: Program for Community Problem Solving, Involving Citizens in Community Decision Making: A Guidebook. Washington, D.C. 1992.