

Upgrading the Way We Do Politics

by **Sandy Heierbacher**, Director of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation

Town hall meetings being held on healthcare legislation across the country are exploding with emotion, frustration, and conflict. Citizens are showing up in throngs to speak out about health care as well as dozens of other topics, but it seems the louder voices get, the less people are actually heard.

The meetings have become a vivid demonstration of what's missing in American democracy.

So how can officials hold better open meetings with their constituents? Dozens of effective public engagement techniques have been developed to enable citizens to have authentic, civil, productive discussions at public meetings—even on highly contentious issues. Techniques like National Issues Forums, Study Circles, 21st Century Town Meetings, Open Space Technology, and World Cafe, to name just a few.

When done well, these techniques create the space for real dialogue, so everyone who shows up can tell their story and share their perspective on the topic at hand. Dialogue builds trust and enables people to be open to listening to perspectives that are very different from their own. Deliberation is often key to public engagement work as well, enabling people to discuss the consequences, costs, and trade-offs of various policy

options, and to work through the emotions and values inherent in tough public decisions.

Given a diverse group, good information, a structured format, and time, citizens *can* grapple with complicated issues and trade-offs across partisan and other divides. Perhaps most importantly, the legislator hosting the meeting must genuinely be open to learning from what his or her constituents think should be done to address the issue at hand.

Though it may not seem like it when we watch clips from recent healthcare town halls, the truth is that people can come together to have a positive impact on national policy—not only in spite of our differences, but because working through those differences allows us to make better decisions. Citizens have higher expectations than ever for a government that is of, by and for the people, and it's high time for an upgrade in the way we do politics.

Sandy Heierbacher is the co-founder and director of the *National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD)*, a network of 1200 groups and professionals who bring together Americans of all stripes to discuss, decide and act together on today's toughest issues.

We recommend the following resources:

NCDD Members Directory

www.thataway.org/ncddnet

Find a facilitator or convening organization in your region. Or contact ncdd@thataway.org for help finding someone.

NCDD's Engagement Streams Framework

www.thataway.org/?page_id=1487

Helps practitioners, community leaders and elected officials decide which public engagement methods fit their circumstances and resources.

Millions of Voices

www.americaspeaks.org

Offers a plan for national discussions that will engage more than one million Americans in substantive deliberations about public issues.

Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need?

www.nifi.org

A National Issues Forums discussion guide.

Citizens Survival Kit on Health Care

www.publicagenda.org

A Public Agenda discussion guide.



Some Tips for Political Leaders

These ideas and others posted at www.ncdd.org were developed by members of NCDD.

Provide balanced and detailed information about the issue at hand, and put a fairly-framed spectrum of possible policy choices on the table for attendees to discuss. Consider co-hosting with a legislator from the another party.

Use a facilitator. Take yourself out of front and center. Skilled facilitators are neutral and know how to translate conflict and anger into specific interests, needs and concerns—so what's behind the emotion can actually be understood and addressed.

“Ground rules” or “agreements” establish a kind of golden rule for everyone present. With these agreements, participants are more likely to be heard and to hear each other.

Get different interests to talk to each other through a structured process. There are many ways to accomplish this. For example, organize participants into smaller groups to ensure each person gets the chance to speak and to make it unlikely that one person or interest group will dominate the meeting.

Diligently record what citizens say, and be clear about how you plan to use their input. Throughout the meeting, “reflect back” the concerns, values and desires you are hearing.

This handout is based on an article recently featured on the Yes! Magazine website. For more details, please visit:

yesmagazine.org/democracy/upgrading-the-way-we-do-politics/