

Transforming the Public Conversation

By Jim Rough

To address the really big issues in our society like wars, poverty, environmental damage, discrimination, and peak oil, we must elevate the quality of our thinking. It's not enough to just raise the level of thinking for all citizens, where they are more informed, intelligent, and involved. We must also raise the quality of our collective thinking, our intelligence together

The best way to do this would be to have a new social invention that, like turning on a light switch, transforms our thinking both as individuals and as "We the People." Without being coercive in any way, it would facilitate us to break out of our collective denial, see problems as they really are, work on them collaboratively and creatively, and determine real answers. Sometimes using this process we might need to invent new solutions but mostly we will just need to become clear about solutions that already exist.

This facilitative light switch would positively affect all problems. Just by thinking in this new way together, we would be transforming issues like crime, wars, discrimination, and citizen apathy. By getting clear on our shared vision, government and the market would operate more efficiently



and we'd become more democratic. On top of this, of course, through this process, we'd also address and solve specific issues.

Indications are ... this magical-seeming, "light switch" already exists.



Different qualities of public conversation

Key to raising our level of collective intelligence is to recognize different qualities of talking and thinking. Consider these five possible forms of public conversation:

- 1) "Power struggle" where whoever is strongest or in a position of authority gets their way and everyone else is judged by how loyal they are. If we do nothing, this is the default form.
- 2) "Reasoned debate" where ideas compete, are "rationally" evaluated, and voted on. This is the goal of our current Constitutional, rule of law, representative, market-based, process.
- 3) "Deliberation" where experts, wise elders, or informed citizens investigate selected problems and

carefully weigh the available options so that better policies are determined.

- 4) “Dialogue” where people explore topics open-mindedly and open-heartedly, growing in their understanding of issues, tolerance of one another, and feelings of connectedness to all people. Dialogue often results in shared understandings but rarely specific decisions.
- 5) “Choice-creating” where diverse people address difficult issues collaboratively and creatively, determining unanimous, win/win conclusions. If we can reliably facilitate choice-creating as the primary mode of public conversation, we’ve found the “light switch.”

Choice-creating is a quality of thinking that can arise naturally in crises, when people realize there are no answers, and that they must change. They drop their roles, become authentic, pull together, and start getting creative. Often they overcome a problem that seems impossible to solve.

Choice-creating is similar to deliberation in that people reach specific decisions but the progress happens more through shifts and breakthroughs than through dispassionate, rational weighing of options. It’s similar to dialogue because it transforms people and their feelings. However, with dialogue the group usually investigates topics and doesn’t solve problems. People in dialogues do not advocate for ideas, but in choice-creating they do.

The difficulty with choice-creating is that it is usually difficult to establish and maintain. While most people have some experience with it in the face of a crisis, they don’t experience it in their normal meetings ... or expect it to be part of our system of governance. Yet, this is what’s needed, all of us respectfully coming together to figure out what works for everyone? Do we need to

wait for a crisis in order to think this way? Can’t we facilitate this style of thinking before things get that bad?

Our regressive public conversation

At the beginning of the United States, during the Constitutional Convention and for five years or so thereafter, there was a choice-creating moment when people sought the common good. In the spirit of “We the People,” the enfranchised citizens determined a system that eventually earned almost unanimous support.

Besides setting up institutions of government, the new Constitution also structured a new form of public conversation. It shifted styles from the old aristocratic “power struggle” to “reasoned debate,” where ideas compete within the rules. This competition-within-the-rules, sparked entrepreneurial thinking among individuals and sustained growth.

Today unfortunately, the quality of our public conversation is regressing back to “power struggle.” Now, it is less a rational weighing of ideas than a broadcast of advertising sound bites or fear mongering to sell ideas and products. It’s a battle for supremacy among transnational corporations turning people into perpetual consumers, dictating the actions of legislators, and distorting our understanding of what is happening through the media.

Some people seek to head off this regression in the quality of our thinking through systemic changes like campaign finance reform, term limits for elected officials, or denying legal “personhood” to corporations. While these steps may help stave off the ravages of “power struggle,” they do not elevate our quality of thinking to where it needs to be. “Reasoned debate” is not good enough for addressing today’s issues. We need another “light switch” like what happened in the Constitutional period, to leap our thinking forward once again.

Comparing: Dialogue, Deliberation, and Choice-creating

By Jim Rough (www.ToBe.net)



	Dialogue	Deliberation	Choice-creating
It is a conversation where people...	Open-mindedly and open-heartedly explore topics. The process yields individual growth and transformation but doesn't necessarily reach a group conclusion or build a group identity.	Decide issues thoughtfully by analyzing and weighing options. People gather information, discuss values, set priorities and make decisions. The process is transactional more than transformational	Address high-care or "impossible" issues creatively and collaboratively. Group progress happens via shifts and breakthroughs. Conclusions are emergent, "co-sensed" without judgment.
It can be reliably established because ...	Each person aims at inquiry rather than advocacy. Sometimes a talking stick or group guidelines are used to encourage this orientation.	Extrinsic factors structure the situation. A moderator helps the group evaluate options using an agenda, guidelines, information, and a logical procedure.	A dynamic facilitator assures this quality of thinking. He or she helps people speak spontaneously and authentically, where all comments are appreciated.
The "content" of the conversation is ...	A topic, issue, or rich question to be explored but not necessarily decided by the group.	An issue that has been framed for a decision, often with specific options, explanatory information and a procedure.	An ill-defined or "impossible" issue having energy— that "bothers" people or they care about and want to solve.
The facilitator's role is...	Minimal. Skilled people, a set of guidelines or a talking stick is often enough.	To hold people to the accepted agenda and assure progress through each step.	Key. He or she helps people speak naturally but assures that each comment contributes to the group.
The participants...	Choose to enter into dialogue. Each manages him/her self.	Are given information and guided to stay rational by a neutral party.	Care about solving a particular issue. They just speak naturally.
The "result" of the conversation is ...	Individual growth, shared meaning and a sense of connectedness to all of humanity.	A thoughtful decision and feeling of accomplishment. The aim is for unanimity but in the end there is a vote.	A unanimous "co-sensing" of what is best, where people feel involved and empowered to take joint action.
It's related to other modes of talking because ...	People often switch to deliberation after dialogue in order to reach group conclusions.	Dialogue is often used before deliberation to build trust, to flesh out the situation and to add a transformational aspect.	Choice-creating often happens naturally within "dialogue" or "deliberation," where people figure out what's best for all.

(*See www.ToBe.net for more information.)

Deliberation and Dialogue

There are some innovations to help us take the next step. The advent of cell phones, television, and the Internet are just a few of the technological advances impacting our public conversation. Now, people have more direct access to information and to other people than ever before. The rise of “organizational development” as a field of study and the use of facilitators in meetings have demonstrated that higher forms of talking and thinking can be achieved.

Many governments are now seeking to facilitate more citizen involvement. They provide forums for people to thoughtfully examine issues, weigh available options and influence policy. In Denmark for instance, the government regularly convenes small groups of randomly selected citizens who meet over time and consider the dangers and benefits of new technologies, weigh options for how to handle them, and suggest policy options. The conclusions of these citizen advisory boards make it easier for legislators to act reasonably in the public interest rather than serve the special interests.

In one powerful example the province of British Columbia, Canada, gathered 161 randomly selected citizens who evaluated, over the course of a year, different options for how elections can be conducted. This group acted independently of special interests and recommended a strategy directly to the citizens in an initiative.

These deliberative democracy innovations have made important impacts on the overall public conversation but ultimately they are sub-conversations. The ultimate conversation is a battle of special interests.

The field of dialogue also offers new possibilities. This is a mode of thinking and talking where people inquire into difficult topics in an open-minded way, change their minds and hearts, and grow in their positions. Often, non-profit organizations convene networks of citizen groups to meet in dialogue on topics like racism, and encourage a change of heart. If enough

people are involved and the process continues long enough, people feel transformed by these meetings. The culture can be affected and maybe policy too.

Conceptually, deliberation and dialogue fit together beautifully. Dialogue can be used to open people’s minds and hearts on issues. Then deliberation can be used to help them reach specific decisions. Presumably this combination would be the “light switch” to shift the system of thinking, but it doesn’t work that way. It’s difficult to meld the two. Many people don’t want to be “transformed” so they don’t show up for dialogues. Or with deliberation people often ask distrustfully, “who’s in charge of determining the topics and how did they get that role?” The needed shift is to involve everyone in one choice-creating conversation, where “We the People,” seek what’s best for all. If the public conversation can be shifted to that level, then dialogue and deliberation become more commonplace.

The essential public conversation

Two social inventions make it possible for all of us to engage in choice-creating, for “We the People” to come into being, and to “flip the switch” on our way of thinking together. They are: 1) “Dynamic Facilitation,” through which a skilled facilitator assures choice-creating in a small group. (See www.DynamicFacilitation.com; and 2) the “Wisdom Council,” which uses Dynamic Facilitation to generate choice-creating throughout large systems of people. (See www.WiseDemocracy.org)

A meeting facilitator is a kind of “light switch” already. He or she assures a shift in the quality of talking and thinking within a small group of people. The traditional facilitator usually aims to help people shift from “power struggle” or “reasoned debate,” to “deliberation” or “problem-solving,” helping them to focus on what is solvable, stay on the topic, break big problems into

smaller ones, mute passions, and proceed step by step down a logical path.

The dynamic facilitator helps people shift to “choice-creating,” where they find and address the key issue no matter how big and impossible-seeming, and to “co-sense” unanimous conclusions. He or she assures that each comment is heard and appreciated by the group, framing it as a solution, concern, item of data, or new statement of the challenge. This way, no matter what comment is made or how it is said, the group benefits.

The dynamic facilitator goes “with the flow” of energy in the group. Rather than keeping people on track, he or she encourages authenticity by helping participants voice their deep concerns or half-ideas, and protects them from receiving any judgment. Group conclusions emerge through shifts and breakthroughs in the form of solutions, a new sense of what the real problem is, or a change of heart. Unanimous conclusions result.

A Wisdom Council uses the power of Dynamic Facilitation to spark choice-creating throughout a large system of people. It “flips the switch” for a city, corporation, or nation allowing all people to address the most pressing issues creatively and collaboratively and reach near-unanimous positions. If this can be done, it is the Holy Grail of democracy. It’s where the people take charge in a way that accentuates and supports individual differences and that results in wise conclusions.

Here’s how it works:

Every four months twelve people are randomly selected from the community, city or nation. They meet for two or three days where they are dynamically facilitated to choose issues to address, develop unanimous positions, and then present their conclusions

back to the community. The whole community is invited to hear and consider the Wisdom Council's statements in face-to-face dialogues, informal conversations, or over the Internet. Over time, an ongoing choice-creating conversation evolves throughout the system that evolves near-unanimous views.

Experiments with this concept in cities, counties, government agencies, corporations, schools and cooperatives indicate that it works. When you randomly select people and dynamically facilitate them, they choose important issues and determine unanimous conclusions. All are excited about the conclusions and the process. In fact, many report that the experience was life-changing to them personally.

Key is for the small group process to resonate among community members. Many must hear the report of the Wisdom Council. Then they must talk with others in a similar spirit building support for both the conclusions and the process. Those not on the Wisdom Council and not directly in the



audience must eventually be drawn into the conversation. They already participate in the lotteries that determine Wisdom Council members and they symbolically involved. Key is that they express their views on the topics to someone. Consider for example, if

an expert hears about the Wisdom Council conclusions and disagrees, his or her views will draw the attention of people interested to know about these unusual views.

When people first hear about the concept of the Wisdom Council, they often can't imagine how it would influence policy. Certainly, it would inform and involve more people, help build the political will for general-interest positions, and inform legislators about people's views. But more important than its legislative influence is the new way of thinking, talking and making decisions it engenders that can cause all sorts of intractable issues to become solvable. If we can all participate in one creative conversation and reach shared decisions, then we've transcended policy as our primary way of addressing problems and making decisions.

A plan for going forward

There are four stages to "flipping the switch," and transforming our system.

First, your community needs to experiment with the Wisdom Council. Since Wisdom Council statements come from (1) randomly selected citizens (2) who choose their issues and (3) reach unanimous perspectives, they are a legitimate expression of "We the People." It would be nice, but you don't need the support of elected officials to initiate the process. Then, each Wisdom Council says, "hey, this is a great process and needs to continue" so that the next Wisdom Council is chartered by the voice of "We the People" from last time.

Second, the Wisdom Council process needs to be demonstrated at the national level in the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, Brazil, and elsewhere. This isn't much harder to do for a nation than it is for a small city.

Third, as Wisdom Councils demonstrate their ability to confront real issues and generate near unanimous results, legislatures and courts will find it difficult to ignore this voice of "We the People."

Legislators will realize that a strong voice of the "general interest" is an asset to them, freeing them from the domination of special interests, enhancing their ability to serve the public and where they get acknowledged for their good work. We predict that the Wisdom Council process will eventually be enshrined into national and state constitutions.

The fourth step is to establish a global Wisdom Council. Despite many different languages, levels of education and nationalities, the Wisdom Council offers the prospect of facilitating all the world's people to transcend their differences and come together in a way that is respectful of differences.

Call to action

The global mind-shift from "power struggle" to "all of us working together" will probably not be started by official leaders. Ordinary citizens with imagination and a spirit of inquiry are likely to take the lead. Small groups of people are beginning to start Wisdom Councils in their organizations, communities, and associations. As people experience personal and collective empowerment from these experiments, they will spawn examples in large cities, states, and nations.

Our nonprofit organization, the Center for Wise Democracy, is available to support your interest in furthering this vision and to link with other nonprofit organizations. (See www.WiseDemocracy.org) If you choose to explore this exciting development further you will discover that ordinary people *do* care, *are* wise, and *can* work creatively together to solve the thorny problems that confront us. We just need to give them the chance.

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