

Issues Forum

An Issues Forum is used to facilitate deliberative dialogue between people on a particular issue. This technique has been developed extensively by the National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI) in the USA. The process is designed around democratic forums used to explore public issues. It is based on the simple notion that people need to come together to reason, talk and deliberate about issues, interests and opportunities to help them determine a common public direction for decision making.

What is to be achieved?

In an Issues Forum the dialogue and deliberations are centred around an issue that the public has a stake in and can contribute to the resolution. A discussion guide is designed to present a number of options for dealing with an issue such as climate change, or job creation, or child protection, to a broad range of the community. The Issues Forum design helps people see that even the most complex issues can be approached, understood, discussed and deliberated on when you are given the information and time needed to consider all the factors contributing to an issue. They can be used as a starting point for broad community exploration on an issue to inform a group of strategic thinkers (eg. Citizen's Jury) in decision making.

Issues Forums provide a way to include large numbers of people in communities of diverse views and experiences to seek a shared understanding of a problem and to search for common ground leading to a democratic option for resolution.

What is the format?

Issues Forums are led by trained, neutral moderators who use a discussion guide that frames the issue from the viewpoint of all stakeholders and presents three or four broad options to consider for resolution of the issue. Forum participants consider each option; examining what appeals to them or concerns them, and also what the costs, consequences, and trade-offs may be for each option. At the conclusion of the Forum participants are asked to reflect on;

- whether they have changed their point of view on an issue
- whether they felt there was a shared sense of direction among participants
- what trade-offs they were willing to make or not make
- how they felt about the consequences of actions proposed
- what they still needed to talk about
- which option they recommend for resolution of an issue, and
- whether they need to meet again

A report is prepared on the preferred option and a copy is distributed to stakeholders and decision makers.

On-line use of the tool?

Issue Forums on-line are still in the early stages of development and practice. Skilled moderation of forums on-line is critical to the successful use of the tool. For example, the variation in the mix of participants may result in conversations at various levels of knowledge which can be intimidating for less knowledgeable people and discourage them from participating.

Case Study

Health Care: “How can we reduce costs and still get the Health Care we need?”

(International example)

The issue guide clarified this difficult challenge and offered three options to address issues through changes in the way hospitals and doctors’ function, end-of-life-care, unhealthy lifestyles, smoking habits, employee wellness, health insurance, childbirth procedures, the pharmaceutical industry and reforms in Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act (USA). It’s a balanced, open-minded look at the entire healthcare system—one that moves the discussion beyond the current political debate.

The options put forward in this Issues Forum were:

- As a Nation and as Individuals, We Need to Live within Our Means
- Make Health Care More Transparent, Accountable, and Efficient
- Take Responsibility for Lowering Health-Care Costs by Focusing on Wellness

[See reference](#)

What to consider?

Diverse viewpoints

Issues Forums are a technique to use when there are diverse viewpoints on an issue and people need support to engage in a conversation that uncovers all the factors contributing to the issue.

Consider choices

This technique helps people to consider the choices they make may have consequences and they may need to make trade-offs to get what they want.

Trade-offs

The technique can be used to demonstrate to communities that decision makers cannot meet the needs of everyone and some trades-offs may have to be made.

Not a quick fix

The Issues Forum technique is not useful when a decision maker wants a quick fix to an issue. Time is needed to prepare for and conduct an Issues Forum.

Gathering all stakeholder views

The views of all stakeholders need to be gathered for inclusion in the Issues Forum Guide and this can involve the use of considerable resources.

Case Study Soccer in the suburbs

(Local example)

www.acef.net.au

Pennington oval has been the home ground for the Western Toros Soccer Club for a number of years. Over this period of time a number of issues emerged for the club, the local residents and the local Council. These issues were having impacts on the wellbeing of local residents, on the management and function of the club, and on Council's administration of the reserve license. Council initiated a process to support resolution of these issues for the benefit of all concerned.

The process included separate meetings with Ward Councillors, club administrators and a group of residents to listen to their experiences of living with the issues. The meetings were led by a trained mediator. Following the meetings, the information gathered was developed by the mediator into an issue discussion guide in preparation for a joint meeting between the residents, the club and council staff to

explore three possible approaches to the resolution of the issues.

The key question in the issue guide was, "How can we reach agreement on the use of Pennington Oval?" To facilitate a way forward, three approaches were provided for discussion and consideration:

1. Approach 1 - Focus on working relationships
2. Approach 2- Create a culture of accountability
3. Approach 3 - Wait for things to change

A number of the issues raised were resolved during the joint meeting held in December 2013. A key issue about temporary fencing remained unresolved at the end of that meeting, however as proposed in Approach 3 – "Wait for things to change"; things did change when the club shifted their adult games to another oval and the temporary fencing was not longer required.

How to use the Issues Forum tool?

Before the Issues Forum

- clarify the issue to be explored
- gather views on the issue from all key stakeholders through hardcopy and/or on-line surveys, or face-to-face interviews
- use the data gathered from the stakeholders to frame the issue (eg. “What can we do about excessive drinking” or “What future do we want for our City” and prepare a discussion guide on a range of options
- distribute the guide to stakeholders for pre-reading prior to attending an Issues Forum
- manage registrations, organise catering and venue arrangements, set up venue.

During the Issues Forum

- Participants are asked to fill in a pre-Forum questionnaire when they get settled at a table to establish a benchmark for their views on the issue
- The lead moderator welcomes everyone to the forum and goes through the session ground rules
- A summary presentation of the options in the Issue Guide is provided on PowerPoint
- Table moderators invite people to introduce themselves and tell how their lives and concerns are connected to the issue
- Participants then spend 65% of the time allotted for the Forum in dialogue and deliberation on the options – each option is given equal time so no one option is allowed to dominate
- The lead Moderator then engages participants in an open session to discover a shared sense of purpose, i.e. is there a preferred option? Are there ‘sticking points’ and what might need to happen to deal with them, eg. add an element from another option to the one preferred by the majority
- Participants are asked to complete a post-Forum questionnaire to identify any shifts in views on the issue

After the Issues Forum

- Data from the pre and post Forum questionnaires is collated and analysed
- A report on the outcomes of the Forum is prepared which includes a summary of the results from the questionnaires, a summary of the themes that have emerged, and the preferred option or a combination of options (depending on the outcome)
- Distribute the outcome report to stakeholders and to decision makers for further action, eg. a panel of citizens (25 – 35) to use the preferred option from the broader community as the basis for their deliberations and decision making.

Resource Required?

- data gathering tools such as hardcopy or on-line survey, face-to-face interviews
- skilled moderators and support staff including note takers
- moderators guide and training program
- drafting of Issue Guide and printing of copies for distribution to target audience and for participants in the Issues Forum
- pre and post Forum questionnaires
- large meeting space with tables and chairs
- pens, paper, data projector/laptop/screen/whiteboard
- catering requirements
- collation and reporting of results
- additional resources for people who need support to participate
- an evaluation form for participants and one for the organising team

How to Evaluate?

- ask participants for verbal feedback at the end of the Forum
- add evaluation questions to the post-Forum questionnaire
- contact participants after the session and ask for feedback
- debrief with the moderators and supporting staff and use the feedback to make improvement to future sessions
- review the responses to the topic question to identify any imbalances across the options, eg. did participants find little to discuss on any one of the options? Did the majority of participants have a lot to say on one of the options?
- measure the effectiveness of the process for indentifying common themes, areas of divergence or specific actions for each option

Support References

**National Issues Forum Institute,
Australian Community Engagement Foundation**

www.acef.net.au

Tips and helpful hints

Recognise a shared sense of purpose

Recognise that forums seldom end in total agreement or total disagreement, they do frequently end in discovery of a shared sense of purpose or recognition of how interests are interconnected; which is why Issues Forums are suited to initial exploration of an issue

Perspective shifts

People's perceptions do shift during forums in response to better listening, supported reflective practice through the moderators and in acting together to generate a shared understanding

Rules from the start

Always establish basic ground rules around engaging respectfully at the beginning of a forum

Moderators support everyone

Let everyone know that the moderators role is to support participation from everyone and they may need to manage that by asking a participant to listen while someone else speaks

Moderators give everyone a fair go

A moderator monitors the equal discussion on each of the options during an Issues Forum, making sure no one option gets more time than another and no one participant dominates the discussion

Moderators start the discussions then sits back

Once a moderator has helped with the introductions and posed a question to start discussions on the first option, he/she needs to sit back and allow/encourage the participants to speak to one another rather than through the moderator as might happen with a facilitator – the aim is for participants to take responsibility for the discussion and to feel the outcomes are what they have made together

Silence is thinking time

Allow for silences – it gives people time to think and observe what is going on in the meeting space

Use the Issues Guide as a reference

Participants to be encouraged to fairly consider all the options and fully examine all the trade-offs and consequences – this is not something people are used to having to do, so refer them back to the trade-offs and consequences as outlined in the Issues Guide

Moderator remain impartial

Check your awareness of how you feel about the options so you can focus on remaining impartial in your role as moderator

Summarise the options at the start

Always do a summary presentation of the options at the beginning of a forum to establish a standard level of understanding as even though stakeholders receive the discussion guide, very few will read it from cover to cover no matter how readable you make it