

# Effective Issues Forums: Catalysts for Public Judgment

Written by Dr. Craig Paterson  
Revised February 2004

Legitimate public policy is built on intellectual, emotional and ethical common ground that includes the values and hopes of a vast majority of society. Daniel Yankelovich has proposed a predictable 7-stage process for understanding the movement of a civil society from public opinion to public judgment. The end product of this process is a “responsible judgment morally and emotionally.” [Yankelovich, Fortune, 1992] The purpose of the attached chart is to clarify the role of issue framing and public deliberation through issues forums in society’s quest for legitimate and responsible public policy.

Yankelovich is clear that this 7-stage process applies specifically to issues that include emotional and ethical concerns. He writes that “stages 3, 4 and 5 can be grouped under the heading ‘working through’ a term borrowed from psychology.” He sees that ‘working through’ has several additional components that ‘thinking through’ does not have. “It (‘working through’) encompasses thoughts but also feelings and ethical concerns.” [Yankelovich, Fortune, 1992] The issues we deal with in the public deliberation of issues forums then confront us with intellectual, emotional and ethical challenges. The content of ‘working through’ is both simple and complex, focusing on the complex and interconnected choices of the issue to then uncover the basic values that can guide future actions.

Public deliberation in issue forums is not just involved in the content of an issue, however—it also involves a respectful and inclusive method of public discussion. Sometimes how we get to a goal is just as important as actually achieving that goal—the transparent and public nature of ‘working through’ issues reduces the influence of hidden agendas and special interests, building confidence in the best directions for public action and creating trust among neighbors. Yankelovich adds, “People are quicker to accept change in their minds than in their hearts.” In public deliberation, ‘working through’ identifies some of the deeply-held, shared values that can create a foundation for legitimate public policy—a foundation that resolves public anxiety and inspires wide-spread public support. Public deliberation in issue forums creates a safe and respectful environment for the critical task of ‘working through’ the competing choices of emotional and divisive public issues.

Now let’s look at the chart itself. During *Opinion Formation*, the public moves from a dawning of awareness that change is needed to a shared sense of urgency. During this phase of Yankelovich’s model that includes both stages 1 and 2, people become increasingly unsettled about existing public policies and about how the issue is being discussed. When some issues are discussed, emotional and ethical questions immediately appear and it becomes obvious that simple solutions will only resolve the issue for specific segments of the population, neglecting the hopes and needs of other groups. During this phase, the subject is opened for public discussion in more and more settings, so the dimensions of the issue can be explored from more and more perspectives. An issue is framed for public deliberation because people are already talking about it as an urgent and identifiable public priority for change.

Effective issue framing starts with an issue where public discussion is inevitable, because a shared sense of urgency will not leave it alone. Issue framing seeks to identify several major ‘value poles’ that create intellectual, emotional and ethical tension. An effective issue framing captures the urgency of public discussion and mirrors public awareness that the issue must be resolved before the people will once again feel settled and balanced.

During *Working Through* of Stages 3, 4 & 5, the public deliberates—people discover and explore several relevant approaches for resolution and learn together what is most important—intellectually, emotionally and ethically—in a civil society. During this phase, an issue is approached from a variety of perspectives, each one describing the reasons for public anxiety. Similarly, potential actions are identified from the unique perspective of each approach. A range of choices is proposed and then the benefits, costs and consequences of these choices are weighed and balanced. According to Yankelovich, a civil society must ‘work through’ these various perspectives in order to discover its own public knowledge, finding the foundation of shared values that is broad enough to include all the major stakeholders and deep enough to inspire a long-term commitment of resources and support. All voices must be heard. Choicework focuses public attention on those values and actions that meet a high standard of intellectual, emotional and ethical confidence—simultaneously.

Effective issues forums provide people with an experience of public knowledge in a safe environment. National or local issues framings provide the ‘value poles’ for deliberation within a small set of approaches. During forums, each person is asked to experience the intellectual, emotional and ethical tensions that exist in the issue and to be affected by them. Forum deliberation mirrors public dialogue with its many voices, highly charged emotions and ethical dilemmas. At the conclusion of each forum, participants are challenged to identify critical ‘common ground’ public knowledge that is capable of resolving the issue.

During an effective issue forum, people are energized to take their deliberation beyond the forum. Why? The experience of a forum takes participants through a range of emotions and dilemmas, but ends with a few points of public knowledge. This public knowledge is capable of rebalancing society and resolving each person’s unsettled feelings about the issue. Each person who recognizes this ‘common ground’ also experiences a new hope for a civil society. Many people feel momentarily more settled at the conclusion of effective issue forums, because they have a personal experience of intellectual, emotional and ethical resolution. They are ready and eager to act, because their hope has been renewed that resolution is possible for society as it was for the forum community.

How can an effective forum make a difference? People who have experienced resolution first-hand are an essential catalyst for a civil society. Like yeast in bread dough, forum participants can spread their newly discovered ‘common ground’ in every relationship and contact they have. If the experience was profound, indeed, forum participants cannot keep their hope for resolution a secret. Forum participants can be catalysts in a civil society to encourage others to discover their own intellectual, emotional and ethical priorities. When the number of people who experience and understand this public knowledge reaches critical mass, resolution is inevitable.

During *Resolution*, decision makers hear from the public that change is essential. Once again, options are opened—this time the foundation of ‘common ground’ public knowledge defines the range of action choices for resettling society. This is not the work of issue framing or forums, but this process in the public arena emanates from newly discovered public knowledge. Because this ‘common ground’ public knowledge includes emotional and ethical components, resolution comes through responsible, moral and emotional judgment. As the whole process concludes, the public demands that decision makers at many levels resolve the issue so the public can feel settled once again, satisfied that public policy is doing the right thing in the right way.