



Sent: August 11, 2009

Subject: Importance and Timeliness of Good Democratic Processes

(Sorry for the lengthy missive, but recent events prompted many thoughts we wanted to share with you . . .)

Perhaps you are also following and are disappointed by the shrill discourse and hyperbolic nature of some citizens at the health care [town hall meetings](#) taking place across the country. We know we are preaching to the choir, but at a time when Congress needs sound, thoughtful input from citizens on a critical issue, it is exasperating to see a vocal minority pursuing tactics that diminish the process and detract from the real issues. We all know examples of exemplary democratic practices, particularly how to manage incivility at such public forums. Communities across the country are well-versed in this.

We think it's time to interrupt. And we call upon you, our members, to help. Here's what you can do:

First, catch up with what's going on, and read the thoughtful comments posted on the [NCDD list serve](#).

Second, look for a community forum in your area and get involved. Some NCDD members are convening their own public forums on the issue. (See Alexander Moll's [post](#).)

Third, contact the organizers and offer to help manage the process. For the No Better Time conference in July, we (TDI and DDC) worked hard to empower and engage participants and to create spaces for productive dialogue and respectful dissent. The approaches aren't new to experienced facilitators and conveners, but the conference does provide a recent, live, case study.

By the way, someone noticed and appreciated our efforts in designing the conference. Writing in [CityWatch LA](#), Greg Nelson commented that, "They [TDI/DDC] established a gold standard for how such events should be organized. The organizers sought to truly involve the participants as much as possible in shaping the event."

Our approaches stand in stark contrast to what we are now witnessing in the health care town hall meetings, and we want to share with you some of those strategies.

1. We framed the topic, but participants shaped the content: we announced the conference and suggested a few things to consider, and eventually our original ideas gave way to far better sessions, learning exchanges on topics of interest to the participants. Our framing and the development of the conference content was transparent, and participants (and people who could not attend) had ample opportunity to contribute to the content and make suggestions about the conference goals and process. About three months before the conference, we heard from several

people that there was not enough on the agenda about justice. We not only encouraged those people to propose learning exchanges, and we reached out to people we knew who would add that dimension and asked them to organize sessions on justice-related issues.

2. We posted advance readings on a wiki site and encouraged participants (not just session leaders) to contribute more.

3. We established ground rules for the conference which were published in the conference materials. These lay the foundation for respectful, productive conversations.

4. We crafted "job descriptions" for session leaders. One rule for session leaders was, "you don't get to go first." Speeches, grandstanding, and wearisome sage-on-stage patterns had no place at this conference.

5. We took dissent and critique seriously. At one point, some participants questioned the commitment of leaders in this work to equity, justice, and inclusion not as a process goal, but as an objective/outcome of this work. In response, we added sessions and made it one of the primary topics for the closing plenary.

6. At every step, we encouraged both reflection and results. That's not easy. We asked all learning exchange leaders to move their conversations "from the descriptive to the strategic." We collected summaries that will be posted on the web site.

7. We were accountable for both the process and the outcomes. We invited participants before and (repeatedly) during the conference to tell us what we can do better. One concern, for example, was that people could not attend all of the sessions that interested them, so we created time during breakfasts for over-flow interest and new topics.

8. We established a tone that was both serious and playful. This is serious work, but it's grounded in relationships that need a different kind of environment to flourish.

We made mistakes and have plenty of room for improvement, which is why we surveyed participants and made careful notes should there be a next No Better Time. The point is that respect and genuine interest in the views of others - and caring for and trust in those who expressed those views - are what made this conference unique. We recognize that a quasi academic conference is different than a public town hall meeting, however, we think many of the above efforts would translate well to the health care forums.

Colleges and universities are places where dissent is not just tolerated, it's invited. It's critical that public deliberations be intentionally designed to welcome opposing perspectives. There is a difference, however, between expressing a contrary perspective and attacking the organizer/facilitator personally or disrupting the process. Can we insist that dissent be relevant, grounded in knowledge and reason, impersonal, and substantive? Absolutely. What about free speech or, in the context of a campus, academic freedom? This would require an entire law review article, but in short, speech that is disruptive to the educational process is not protected on a campus. For this reason, universities are the ideal setting for difficult dialogues. This is not time for the timid university, the university that avoids political, cultural, ethical questions. It's our job.

You, the choir, need to demand of our public officials and peer citizens adherence to the same principles and practices. Let's interrupt uncivil, unproductive public processes. If we don't, then we won't make progress toward a more just and deliberative democracy.

