

The Study Committee and the Community

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A community study committee will undergo change in knowledge, feelings, thinking and enthusiasm as it explores a community problem. When the time arrives for the committee's report and recommendations, there may be a gap between the knowledge, thinking, feelings and enthusiasm of the committee and that of the citizens and appointing body.

A study group exploring a problem may be headed for serious disappointment when it is unable to gain acceptance of its findings. Facts, as important as they are, do not necessarily change opinions. Education of the community is not achieved by sales techniques.

Influential people appointed to the study committee may lose influence when the community fails to understand the report. In fact, influentials may lose influence with people who have an interest in the issue, but who have been bypassed by the committee. Good citizens with a reputation for honesty, good judgment and integrity are vital to a study committee. However, their reputation may undergo change in a rapidly changing community, especially if the report is sprung on the people.

A committee working behind closed doors to work out things before disclosure may create suspicion in those concerned, but not involved, with the study of the issue. Committee members may be hurt when they feel they have lost the confidence of their neighbors. Who you are and what you are may be of decreasing importance when attempting to put over an issue.

Reports through newspapers, radio, television and public meetings are often used to get the facts before the people. These one-way methods of getting the information out to the people are helpful if well done. However, they may fail to convey the message that is intended. If an air of suspicion or distrust exists, one false rumor may dissipate the efforts of the study committee quickly.

How can the study committee gain consensus among citizens?

Capitalize on the grapevine

Representation and participation are two sides of the coin. In the small community, reports of last night's study committee meeting may spread via conversation quickly. In such informal reporting, distortions usually increase as the message is relayed from the original source.

Study committee members may have opportunities to clarify distortions as the message is circulated, as long as they are an integral part of the circulation process. It is best not to try to keep the committee work secret.

Study the distortions and opinions for guidelines

Distortions, plus added opinions, may discourage the study committee members from giving out information. The talk of the town is an indicator of public interest.

Opinions expressed by townspeople may be excellent guides for the study group. Loose talk may act as a guide, as target feedback is to a guided missile. The target in this case is the thinking and feeling of people. However, it is important to remember and take into consideration that the people of the community are also in process of changing as they are exposed to different ideas and opinions.

Two-way contacts are most productive for change

When an individual's thoughts and feelings are verbalized to make sense to himself, he desires to get the same across to his listeners. Opinions have a way of getting into the process. When opinions that are verbalized fail to be consistent with thoughts and feelings, the individual (speaker or listener) seeks knowledge and information to give balance and meaning to the issue.

Hear them out

A study committee member is a source of the desired information. A citizen may want to present new information he or she considers reliable to the committee. If he is heard when he contacts the study committee, his dignity is respected.

Both citizens and committee members increase their understanding of the issue through this process of interaction.

Feelings (emotions) are ten times more difficult to change than thinking (mental/rational). Personal feelings are influenced most favorably in a warm, informal and permissive climate. Norms are more easily influenced in small face-to-face groups.

Involve large numbers

In larger communities, citizens become involved by other methods, including those used in the smaller community. Most issues being pursued by a study committee are advantageously subdivided and assigned to subcommittees.

A community study committee in a town of 6,000 had 12 study subcommittees during the study phase and 15 committees disseminating and gathering new information during a later stage prior to a bond election. More than 300 people were actively involved in committee work, but these 300 related to and gathered feedback (and often new ideas) from numerous other citizens in the community. This was a community educational program. A new comprehensive school — junior high, senior high and junior college — developed out of this activity and became the pride of the community because they felt it was theirs!

Involvement through participation means more than getting people to a meeting to answer roll call. Active personal and group participation means the people attending are engaged, feeling and thinking. As the group develops, it becomes easier to reach group consensus.

In a developing community, some measure of consensus does exist. The community functions rely upon consensus.

Not everyone has to agree on all details of an issue for consensus to be effective. It is necessary that citizens be in general agreement and a substantial portion are aware of the issue and its ramifications and have a sense of community responsibility.

Often, what appears to be disagreement turns out to be differences on minor details. Working relationships involve some give and take to get what is desirable for the whole.

Involve the senses

Presentations that require the use of the senses (hearing, seeing and feeling) may increase understanding. A discussion on a street improvement program becomes much more meaningful when city street maps, pictures or illustrations of completed streets are displayed with a verbal presentation. Tours, slides or movies also add to understanding.

Have the vested interests participate

Representation through participation by those whose interests will be affected helps develop community consensus. Involvement of citizens whose homes will be razed for a community improvement may be willing to make a sacrifice for community progress when they have explored the problem and its implications. When it is sprung on them as the final plans are announced, the loss of a vested interest becomes a great threat.

Summary

Community consensus is a result of interaction between people in a social process. Both the psychological part of the individual and the sociological parts of groups become involved in community development. Community improvements (physical, economic or other tangibles) are worth more when people's wants and feelings are considered in a community development program. Things are secondary to people. And the product is secondary to the process in the development of the competencies of people.

References

Books

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- Charles Levy, *Decision-Making and Self-Determination*, Adult Leadership, September 1963.
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- For additional information, contact your local MU Extension center or the Department of Regional and Community Affairs, MU, Clark Hall, Columbia, Mo. 65201.

Related MU Extension publications

- DM403, Developing Effective Study Committees
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM403>
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