Building a Consensus for Addressing a Community’s Development Needs

Michael Patrick
CES CR & ED Specialist

One of the main challenges of bringing diverse groups together to address a community’s development needs is reaching consensus. Conflict is a natural product when diverse groups with different perceptions of the state of the local community and who have different ideas of what should be done are brought together.

Two common tools to bring about consensus are the Nominal Group Process and the Delphi Technique.

The Nominal Group Process is a structured problem-solving or idea-generating strategy in which individuals are brought together in a non-threatening environment to express and discuss their ideas. The process can help to clarify, prioritize, reach consensus, and make decisions on proposed alternative actions.

Step 1: Generate ideas individually and privately on paper. For example, have everyone list three to seven of the most important issues for continued growth and the local economy.

Step 2: Present ideas to group. This should be done one by one, in a round robin fashion so no one is considered or perceived to be more or less influential. All answers should be listed so that everyone in the group can see them.

Step 3: Talk through the different ideas for clarification. This is not the time for lobbying an idea, only clarifying for understanding. Combine like ideas, if possible, to reduce the total number of ideas on the table. Consider going through the different ideas in rounds, such as most important concerns, second most important concerns, etc.

Step 4: Reduce the number of ideas by having people select their highest priority(s); there is no voting at this stage. Strive to avoid the bandwagon effect where everyone conforms to the same idea or response—that is not consensus.
Step 5: Prioritize remaining ideas either by silent or public balloting.

Step 6: Discuss results. Make sure to ask, at the end, if people are satisfied with the results.

Advantages of the Nominal Group Process:

- Gives all participants an equal opportunity to express and clarify their ideas and opinions.
- Can generate several ideas in a short period of time.

Disadvantages of the Nominal Group Process:

- Can be difficult to implement with a large audience.
- Time intensive. It may take a significant amount of time to present and discuss each idea and reach consensus on the priorities.
- Participants are likely to change their minds as ideas are expressed.
- Participants may feel pressured to compromise their beliefs and views in order to reach consensus.

The Delphi Technique is another approach to building and reaching consensus. Unlike the nominal group process, the Delphi process does not require face-to-face participation. Rather it uses a series of questionnaires.

Step 1: Develop a questionnaire focusing on a specific problem, issue or need. The questionnaire should be sent to an appropriate respondent group, such as community leaders.

Step 2: Develop a second response/clarification questionnaire. This questionnaire should summarize the results from the first questionnaire and asks for feedback on those results (send to same respondent group). The process is repeated until the facilitating organizers feel they have a firm agreement or understanding of the issue at hand.

Step 3: A final summary report is then sent to the respondent group. For example, participants might be asked initially to identify or list their key concerns, needs, problems or opportunities related to the economic development of their community. The second questionnaire would then ask for clarification of the issues or additional information to understanding the impact of those issues on the community. A third questionnaire would ask the participant to prioritize those issues or needs.
Advantages of the Delphi Technique:

- Allows participants to remain anonymous allowing for greater freedom of expression.
- Inexpensive to administer.
- Can be used to reach consensus among disparate opinions or individuals.
- Participants can fill out the questionnaire when their schedule permits.

Disadvantages of the Delphi Technique:

- Tendency to eliminate extreme positions or ideas and force a middle of the road consensus.
- Time consuming.
- Requires participant commitment for continued participation.

References:


In communities across New Mexico, local leaders and citizens, often get together to try and make their community an even better place in which to live. The starting point for their efforts is often the elaboration of a community-wide needs assessment seeking input of local residents. In the end, what is produced is a list of problems being experienced by the residents of the community. The list might include concerns with the local school system, the lack of health services, transportation problems, inadequate child care services, limited availability of jobs that pay a decent wage, or the lack of good recreation programs for children. Once the needs have been identified, the common response of the community leaders is to immediately search for help and resources outside the community from government programs and other sources.

The approach to meeting local community development needs by looking outside the community can be viewed as “development IN the community” rather “development OF the community”. Development “IN” the community suggests the major interest is in attracting government resources, new businesses, new facilities or new services to the community. The focus is on the physical, service and economic infrastructure of the community.

Development “OF” the community, however, does not have the physical, service and economic infrastructure as its major focus, at least not at first. Rather, it seeks to uncover and expand the knowledge and skills of people in the community. The belief is that community-wide improvements (be they physical, service or economic infrastructure) cannot be fully realized unless the people representing all parts of the community are involved in deciding and contributing to the future of the community. So, the emphasis is on finding the talents that exist in the community and locating people with the potential to be community leaders. Building on the skills that people already possess and the strengths of local organizations and institutions serves as the best foundation for dealing with the variety of concerns that exist in the community. As such, asset mapping represents an essential step in promoting the development “OF” the community.

Community “asset mapping” develops an understanding of what exists in the community right now—the abilities of local residents, associations, and institutions. Strategic planning efforts to address the community’s needs focus on mobilizing local assets found in the community first and seek external resources to supplement local resources when necessary. The development OF the community is based on several principles:

- Every person has talents, skills, and gifts important to a community.
- Each time individuals use their abilities, the community in which they live is strengthened and these people feel a sense of empowerment.
• Strong communities are places where the capacities of local individuals are identified, valued, and used.

• The development “OF” the community is built upon the talents and resources of its members

References
