

Transforming the Public Conversation

By Jim Rough

To address the really big issues in our society like wars, poverty, environmental damage, discrimination, and peak oil, we must elevate the quality of our thinking. It's not enough to just raise it for all citizens, where they are more informed, intelligent, and involved. We must also raise the quality of our *collective* thinking, our intelligence together.

The best way to do this would be to have a new social invention that, like turning on a light switch, transforms our thinking both as individuals and as "We the People." Without being coercive in any way, it would facilitate us to break out of our collective denial, see problems as they really are, work on them collaboratively and creatively, and determine answers for everyone. In using this social invention we might invent new solutions, but in most cases the needed solutions already exist. It's just a matter of helping us to choose them and act on them.

By turning on this facilitative "light switch" we would transform ourselves and build the spirit of community throughout our system. The trust and involvement generated by the process itself would positively affect crime, wars, discrimination, citizen apathy and more. By getting clear about our shared vision and values, government and the market would operate more efficiently and we'd become more democratic. In addition, we would identify and solve issues, outlining



specific strategies that all of us would support.

Sound impossible? Indications are ... this magical-seeming "light switch" already exists.



Different qualities of public conversation

Key to raising our level of thinking and our collective intelligence is to raise our quality of talking and thinking. Consider these five possible forms of public conversation:

- 1) "Power struggle" where people seek to influence the outcome of the conversation by using their status, emotion, or strength beyond as well as their words. Others learn to defer.
- 2) "Reasoned debate" where there is a competition of ideas. This form of conversation is the goal of our current Constitutional, rule of law, representative, market-based, process.
- 3) "Deliberation" where experts, wise elders, informed citizens, or

legislators themselves investigate selected problems and carefully weigh the options before deciding.

- 4) “Dialogue” where a wide network of people explore topics open-mindedly and open-heartedly, growing in their understanding of issues, tolerance of one another, and feelings of connectedness to all.
- 5) “Choice-creating” where diverse people address the most pressing issues collaboratively and creatively, determining unanimous, win/win conclusions.

If we can reliably spark choice-creating as the primary mode of public conversation, we’ve found the “light switch.” Choice-creating is the quality of thinking where all of us work together on the most important issues, creatively and collaboratively seeking answers that work for everyone. It can arise naturally in crises, when people realize that known answers are not going to work. Or it can be facilitated. When it happens people drop their roles, become authentic, pull together, and overcome issues that seemed impossible, while at the same time they build a deep connection to one another.

Choice-creating is similar to deliberation in that people determine specific conclusions about what to do. But with choice-creating the progress happens more through shifts and breakthroughs than through a weighing of options.

Similarly choice-creating is like dialogue because it is transformational to each person. However, with dialogue the group investigates topics and generally does not solve problems. People in dialogue do not advocate for ideas nor seek decisions.

Choice-creating is usually seen as difficult to establish and maintain. Most people have some experience with it, but it is not a part of most meetings. Yet, it is the core quality of thinking and talking that we need in our society—where we solve the big issues

together. Do we need to wait for a crisis in order to think this way? Or is there some facilitative “light switch” to instill it in our public conversation?

Our regressive public conversation

Historically, the public conversation has shifted from “power struggle,” where the old aristocracy was in charge, to “reasoned debate.” By instituting Parliamentary Procedure, voting, representatives, and “rule of law” we have structured this form of talking and thinking into the public conversation. Unfortunately today, the quality of our public conversation is in danger of regressing back to a “power struggle,” as democratic processes are being subverted by money. It is becoming less a weighing of ideas than a broadcast of fear-mongering sound bites promoting ideas and candidates that serve special interests.

Some people seek to stem this regression through systemic adjustments like campaign finance reform, term limits for elected officials, or denying legal “personhood” to corporations. While these actions might help sustain “rational debate” as our preferred style of thinking, they do not elevate the quality of thinking to where it needs to be. “Reasoned debate” is no longer adequate for solving today’s issues. We need a facilitative “light switch” to facilitate our thinking to a higher level, like what happened when “we” started governing ourselves by a constitution instead of by a king.

Deliberation and Dialogue

The advent of cell phones, television, and the Internet are a few of the technological advances that can help shift the quality of our public conversation. Now, people have more direct access to information and to one another than ever before. The rise of “organizational development” as a field of study and the use of facilitators in meetings have demonstrated

that it is possible to achieve higher levels of talking and thinking.

Many governments now seek more citizen involvement. They provide forums for people to thoughtfully examine issues, weigh available options and influence policy. In Denmark for instance, the government regularly convenes small groups of randomly selected citizens who meet over time and consider the dangers and benefits of new technologies, weigh options for how to handle them, and suggest policy. The conclusions of these citizen advisory boards make it easier for legislators to act reasonably in the public interest rather than just serving the special interests.

In one watershed example the province of British Columbia, Canada, gathered 161 randomly selected citizens who over the course of a year, evaluated different options for how elections might be conducted. This group acted independently of special interests to develop and recommend a new strategy to the citizens, who then voted in a citizen initiative.

These innovations in “deliberative democracy” have made important impacts on the overall public conversation. But ultimately they are only sub-conversations seeking to influence the larger discussion and vote.

Also, the field of dialogue offers new possibilities. Dialogue is a mode of thinking and talking where people inquire into difficult topics in an open-minded way, change their minds and hearts, and grow in their positions. Networks of citizen dialogue groups can be convened on topics like racism, where people experience a change of heart. If enough people are involved and the process continues for long enough, people are transformed by these meetings. The culture can be affected and hopefully, these changed views will affect policy too.

Conceptually, deliberation and dialogue fit together beautifully. Dialogue can be used to open people’s minds and hearts on issues. Then deliberation can be

used to help them reach specific decisions. Presumably this combination could be the “light switch” to shift the system of thinking, but in practice it doesn’t work that way. It’s difficult to meld the two. Many people don’t want to be transformed in their views so they don’t show up for dialogues. In deliberative settings people often ask distrustfully, “who’s in charge of determining the topics and how did they get that role?” The needed shift is to involve everyone in one conversation, where “We the People,” seek what’s best for all. If the public conversation can be shifted to this choice-creating level, then dialogue and deliberation become natural and commonplace.

The essential public conversation

Two social inventions make it possible for all of us to engage in choice-creating, for “We the People” to come into being, and for us to “flip the switch” on our way of thinking. They are: 1) “Dynamic Facilitation,” through which a skilled facilitator assures choice-creating in small groups. (See www.DynamicFacilitation.com and 2) the “Wisdom Council,” which uses Dynamic Facilitation to generate choice-creating throughout large systems of people. (See www.WiseDemocracy.org)

A meeting facilitator is a “light switch” for a small group of people. He or she assures a shift in the quality of conversation from one level to another. The traditional facilitator usually aims to help people shift from “power struggle” or “reasoned debate,” to “deliberation” or “dialogue,” or “problem-solving.” They help them focus on topics that are solvable, stay on the topic, break big problems into smaller ones, mute their passionate advocacy, and proceed step by step down a logical path.

The dynamic facilitator helps people shift instead to “choice-creating,” where they find and address the key issue no matter how big and impossible-seeming, address it creatively and collaboratively, and “co-sense” unanimous conclusions. He or she

assures that each comment is heard and appreciated by the group, framing it as a solution, concern, item of data, or new statement of the challenge. This way, no matter what comment is made or how it is said, the group benefits.

The dynamic facilitator goes with the flow of energy in the group. Rather than keeping people on track, he or she encourages authenticity by helping participants voice their deep concerns or half-ideas, and protects them from feeling any judgment. Group conclusions emerge through shifts and breakthroughs in the form of solutions, a new sense of what the real problem is, or a change of heart. Unanimous conclusions result.

A Wisdom Council uses the power of Dynamic Facilitation to spark choice-creating throughout a large system of people. It promises to “flip the switch” for a city, corporation, or nation allowing all people to address the most pressing issues creatively and collaboratively and reach near-unanimous positions. If this can really be done, it is the Holy Grail of democracy. It’s where the people can take charge in a way that accentuates and supports individual differences and results in wise collective decisions.

Here’s how the process works: Every four months twelve people are randomly selected from the community, city or nation. They meet for three days or so, are dynamically facilitated to choose issues to address, develop unanimous positions, and then present their conclusions back to the community. The whole community is invited to hear and consider the Wisdom Council's statements in face-to-face dialogues, informal conversations, or over the Internet. Over time, an ongoing choice-creating

conversation evolves throughout the system where near-unanimous views emerge.

Experiments with this concept in cities, counties, government agencies, corporations, schools and cooperatives indicate that it works. When you randomly select people, when they choose the issue, and when they reach unanimity then they are a legitimate symbol of “We the People.” When they report their conclusions and their stories of how they determined them, people resonate with the group and their conclusions. All are excited about the conclusions and the process. Many report that the experience in the group and in the audience is life-changing.

The key at this point is to learn how to involve the whole system. Many must hear the report of the Wisdom Council, talk with



others, and help spark building support for the positions and the process. To the extent that the conversation reverberates and all people feel involved a “We the People” emerges. The lottery, media, the internet, and neighborhood gatherings are some of the ways to reach this larger community.

When people first hear about the concept of the Wisdom Council, they often notice that the Wisdom Council has no official authority and wonder how it would influence policy. It would inform and involve more people, help build the political will for

general-interest positions, and inform legislators about people's views. But even more important than its affect on legislation is the new way of thinking, talking and making decisions it engenders. This offers the prospect of solving all sorts of seemingly intractable issues.

If all of us can participate in one creative conversation and reach shared conclusions, then we have transcended our current adversarial, coercive political system. We have created for ourselves a new system, a "true democracy," where the people are thinking wisely and truly in charge.

A plan for going forward

There are four stages to "flipping the switch" and transforming our system.

First, we need to demonstrate the Wisdom Council process working in organizations and small communities. Interested people in communities can just start the process and build support among elected officials and community leaders. Since each Wisdom Council generally says, "this is a great process and should continue" each successive Wisdom Council is chartered by a previous voice of "We the People" and hopefully builds increasing interest in the community.

Second, the Wisdom Council process needs to be scaled up to the national level in the many countries.

Third, as Wisdom Councils demonstrate their ability to confront issues and as the process generates a new form of public conversation, legislatures and courts will find it difficult to ignore this voice of "We the People." Legislators will realize that

this voice of the "general interest" is an asset to them, freeing them from the domination of special interests, and enhances their ability to serve the public.

The fourth step is to establish a global Wisdom Council. Despite different languages, levels of education and cultures, the Wisdom Council offers a new prospect for the world's people to transcend their differences and come together.

Call to action

It is unlikely that governments will take the lead in this work. In many different parts of the world it's been ordinary citizens who've seen the potential of this strategy and stepped forward. They've gathered small groups of people to convene Wisdom Councils in organizations, communities, associations, and schools.

Our nonprofit organization, the Center for Wise Democracy, is available to support their interest, your interest, in furthering this work. (See www.WiseDemocracy.org) From this process, we are all discovering that ordinary people *do care, are wise, and can work creatively together to solve the thorny problems that confront us.* We just need to facilitate them into the opportunity.

About the author

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