A Community Problem-Solving Toolbox: Seven Principles and Some Examples

Frances Cooper

Communities of all sizes are engaged in successful problem-solving efforts. Seattle businesses, residents, and civic groups pooled resources with their police department to attack drug and gang problems; in Page, Arizona, citizens transformed disputes over trash accumulation into a community-wide, anti-litter campaign that spread to adjoining Navajo lands and the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area; a program called Families With a Future is lowering the infant mortality rate in Chicago.

The Center for Public Problem Solving, an organization devoted to the discovery and dissemination of effective problem-solving techniques, has found that successful projects seem to follow, either intuitively or formally, most of the following principles.

1. Successful projects include a broad community of interest; those who have a stake in the problem are involved in solving it. This principle has broken a policy logjam in the city and county of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Numerous interest groups in Santa Fe have been in conflict about regional water policy for years. The problem has been finding the right balance and priority in use of the three major water sources open to the area. Issues about growth, equity in paying for new service, conservation of ground water, public versus private management of the water system, and water quality are just a few of the complex concerns fueling the debates.

In February 1990, a committee was convened to take a fresh look at these issues and to make recommendations to the city council for a new comprehensive water policy. Participants included city and county planning staff, the League of Women Voters, management of the private water company, citizen groups, environmental/conservation interests, the state water agency, and others. For the first time, those with a stake in the problem sat down face-to-face to craft a solution. The

result was a set of recommendations to the city and county governments concerning the future management of water in the area.

Unsuccessful projects, we have found, try to impose solutions that ignore the concerns of other interested parties.

2. Participants in successful projects respect the opposition; they seek solutions that honor diverse values. This was the case in the Santa Fe example. A colleague in problem-solving efforts, Dr. David Stiebel, a University of California, Berkeley, lecturer in dispute resolution, says this principle also characterizes problem-solving efforts he has negotiated. He notes that "NIMBY [Not In My Back Yard] disputes are a good example of how important it is to respect the opposition. It is tempting for planning officials to believe that they are right because they have studied planning and the neighbors have not. I worked on a project where the neighbors were afraid that an expansion of a recreation center would increase traffic. The planning staff had data showing that it would not. Staff and neighbors were on a collision course until staff recognized the validity of the neighbors concerns. The planners thought the neighbors' fears were irrational, but they came to recognize that the fears still had to be addressed. When the planners stopped trying to convince the neighbors to abandon their concerns, and worked with them on measures both sides could accept, the conflict turned around. The planners changed their attitude and began to respect the opposition. That was the turning point."

Many problem-solving efforts fail because technical experts do not realize it often takes more than data and analysis to overcome neighborhood fears. Respect, listening, and jointly generated responses are also often required. In a successful bottom-up, long-range planning process in Hayward, California, the Center's staff asked technical staff and citizens to analyze data together.

3. Successful projects include education components. They encourage citizens to clarify the kinds of communities they want, and

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they provide a forum for citizens to learn from others with different points of view. The city of Piedmont, California, used a citizen survey to find out what library services were needed by residents. The city used the data from the survey in discussions with the Library Commission, the city council, and a citizen's group that had been vocal in their opposition to city library policy. The city of Sunnydale, California, used a similar technique to rank citizen service preferences and to make budget decisions.

Effective public participation is not only the opportunity to state our views, but the necessity for confronting the views of others. Policies generated with little or no opportunity for citizens to hear and learn from their fellow citizens, especially those who are less active in community affairs, often have major problems with policy implementation.

4. Successful efforts develop media partnerships; they provide background briefings and explain the project's purposes to the media in advance. Current projects at the Center involve helping communities confront the AIDS epidemic more effectively; others involve similar efforts concerning alcohol abuse. In both areas, local broadcasters have been eager to learn more about the problems, hear about efforts in their own communities, and join the problem-solving efforts by assuring continued coverage of these issues.

Dr. Stiebel explains the important role the media can play. "I am working on a dispute among the city of San Pablo, California, Contra Costa County, two unions, a neighborhood association, and a merchant's association over the county's desire to locate a probation facility near some condominiums. One of the most reliable methods of communicating with all those people is through the newspaper. Some people read the paper more than their mail, and the newspaper reaches people interested in the issue who are not on my mailing list. The newspaper is a tool to involve as many people as possible."

Public officials often consider the media to be an adversary. They can, however, be partners. Efforts to bring the media into problem-solving efforts pay big dividends.

5. Successful efforts often must cross boundaries. The issue extends beyond one jurisdiction and is inter-related with other community problems. Lucy Hilgendorf from the Western Network, an organization that specializes in resolving environmental disputes, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, recalls this example: "We worked with the city of Sheridan, Wyoming, and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to resolve problems over enforcement of the Safe

Drinking Water Act. Ostensibly, the problem was about enforcing drinking water quality standards, and involved only two parties, the city of Sheridan and the EPA. In reality, we discovered that the problem really involved a broad region and complex conflicts over water supplies to the whole area. A mediator brought together more than a dozen parties to participate in the problem-solving process including state agencies and community organizations, as well as the original disputants— the city of Sheridan and the EPA. The issues included project financing, safe water, jurisdiction, and distribution design. Working in a cross-jurisdictional problem-solving mode allowed us to generate a major agreement to form a joint water supply program to meet local needs. The parties, who had been locked in conflict for 10 years, created a smoothly functioning joint organization to solve their problems. This, by the way, was the first EPA enforcement case ever submitted to mediation. I hope this success encourages them to take this broad approach in the future."

It takes time, patience, money, and organizational skill to trace the multiple roots of problems. Focusing on only one aspect of the problem, artificially isolating it from other related issues, or involving only one jurisdiction in a multijurisdictional issue only exacerbates the problem in the long run.

6. Successful problem-solving projects do not rush to solution. When this occurs, problem-solving efforts become nothing more than attempts to sell preferred solutions. In the case of drugs, for example, communities fall into dispute over their favorite solutions. Some call for legalization; others favor education or stricter law enforcement. Successful projects, on the other hand, carefully explore the parameters of the problem and its specific impact on the community. Solutions grow from these observations. Communities that are successfully confronting the drug problem are looking at where drugs are bought and sold, who buys and sells them, and how these activities can be curtailed. Activities like neighborhood watches, alternative activities for kids, and police-community cooperation in high-risk areas, are all solutions that grow from a careful observation of the specific community situation. The South San Jose Neighborhood Association in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for example, formed a partnership with the local police department to confront the threat of gangs and drugs; the police opened a neighborhood substation, and the neighbors worked with them to make the neighborhood safe.

Advocating a preferred solution requires nothing more than demanding that someone

else do something. It takes energy, courage, and dedication to take a hard look at the problem and to take action to address it.

7. Successful problem-solving experiments succeed in part because participants learn from their failures an refuse to give up. Lucy Hilgendorf refers to a project in Winona, Minnesota, where the involved parties were unable to reach agreement. The problem was a long-standing dispute between the city and the county of Winona over solid waste disposal. After a series of lawsuits, Governor Rudy Perpich urged mediation on the parties. Each side was unable to budge from its original position during the mediation effort, and each now hopes to win total victory, either in the courts or the voting booth. Commenting on the process, Hilgendorf says, "Many of the problem-solving principles seem relevant in this case. Several of the major stakeholders were not included—the presence of the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, the utility company, and citizens groups might have reduced the polarization. Clearly, each side was com-mitted to its own "solution," which hindered efforts to explore the problem together. The press was ever present, and although it served an educational function, its presence also encouraged parties to polarize. The process was made more difficult because the parties were told to participate, rather than voluntarily working together. We all learned something in the process about negotiations. I hope no one gives up."

At the Center for Public Problem Solving, we have found that the seven principles outlined in this article facilitate problem-solving efforts. We are gathering case studies of successful problem-solving experiments around the country. We look forward to hearing from the readers of *Public Management* about whether the principles we have identified contribute to their problem-solving efforts, and whether we ought to add other principles to the list. Contact the Center at 140 Second Street, Suite 600, San Francisco, California 94105, 415/541-7974. **PM**