

Framing the Issue

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Framing an issue is a process that can help community members evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of a potential course of action for a community issue.

If the goal of a facilitated process is to have a better-informed and supported public action, it is important to spend a great deal of time up front deliberately deciding how to frame the issue. Simply stating the issue from one person or a limited group of people’s perspective may not result in the type of public action that is anticipated.

Keep three important points in mind when discussing issue framing as a potential process:

- Never forget that how an issue is framed influences what gets done.
- Framing is a complex process and is not a “one man act.”
- Framing brings clarity to the real issue and cuts out all of the “background noise” that special interest groups bring to the table.

A carefully planned framing process can create a focus for the work to be done.

The framing process has at least four interconnected components. These include *analyzing* the issue, *exploring* the values that individuals and groups have, *creating* a vision for the community, and, finally, developing a *strategy* to move forward and get results.

Through a careful *analysis* process, a community can discover what is actually happening and the current reality. It is important to use a variety of sources in determining this. These include data analysis, projections and the basis for those projections, discovering what residents are actually experiencing, and researching what other communities might be doing in a similar situation. This allows a community to base its analysis on actual figures, people’s real life experiences, and past experiences of other communities, as opposed to opinions about what people think might be happening.

By **exploring values** held by people, the community is able to identify the level of motivation that exists to do something about the issue. In other words, it addresses why

something should be done and what should guide the potential actions. This is what will attract people to the cause.

Creating the vision is a process that helps define what things will look like in the future if the community handles the issue correctly. In other words, it is a destination on the map to success. If this step is not given careful consideration, it will be difficult to paint a picture of the future. It needs to address the question: What are we trying to do and what are we going to become?

Strategy is the action. This is a concrete plan that will allow the community to reach the vision it has imagined. This is the time to set priorities, and develop processes and structures to make the vision a reality.

Through these interconnected steps of framing an issue, a community can create a focus for its work. This will allow community members to articulate what to pay attention to and what not to, what is important and what is not, and what to give energy to and what not to relate to the issue being framed.

Framing the issue is a process that a group of citizens can go through that will compel people to face the benefits and drawbacks of each potential course of action. A community can define opportunities and issues in ways that lead to effective action. Through framing, a group understands and decides what needs to be done, how it is to be done, and why it is important to do. Finally, it is a way to communicate the plan in a clear and compelling way.

Analyzing Community Problems

Sometimes it is hard to get the ball rolling on a community issue because no one agrees on what the problem is. This tool provides a step-by-step process for defining a community problem in such a way that people can do something about it.

Analyzing community problems helps your community group clarify the causes, consequences, and the nature of a problem before trying to solve it. Using this tool can help avoid the wasted time and effort that often results when groups rush into action before making a careful diagnosis of current conditions.

This tool should be used in the earliest stages of a project, before the group develops priorities, sets goals, or mobilizes action.

To get the most from this tool, keep the following points in mind:

- The way a problem is defined determines the types of solutions that will be developed.
- Problems usually have more than one cause.
- The process of analyzing community problems runs against the tendency to think of solutions first.

The following steps in **community problem analysis** are designed for use in a group setting and are intended to:

- tap the diverse experiences, perceptions, and insights within the group,
- broaden and deepen the group’s understanding of the problem,
- identify information that the group needs to adequately define the problem, and
- help the group to frame the problem in a way that promotes constructive action.

Steps:

1. State the problem as it is seen now:
 - Ask the group, “What is the problem as you see it now?”
 - Ask each member to write down his or her definition of the problem.
 - Invite each member to share his or her definition. Record comments on a flip chart.
 - After all definitions are recorded, let the group ask for clarification or additional information — it is not necessary to reach consensus at this point!
2. Describe why this is a problem:
 - Ask the group, “Why is this a problem?”
 - Follow the same process as above in Step 1.
 - Again, there is no need to agree as a group.
3. Describe the causes and consequences of the problem:
 - Ask the group, “What are the causes and consequences of the problem?”
 - Use a flip chart to record the causes and consequences in their respective columns.
 - The group does not need to agree. However, it might be helpful to make an attempt at ranking the importance of the causes or consequences.

4. Describe who is involved:
 - Now ask the group to determine who is involved through a series of questions:
 - a. Who is affected by the problem and how are they affected?
 - b. Who gains from the situation the way it is now?
 - c. Who loses?
 - d. Who actually sees this as a problem?
 - e. Who is doing something about the problem and what are they doing?
 - Create a wall chart using these five questions — each on a separate sheet — and record the answers.

A	B	C	D	E
Who is affected and how?	Who gains from the current situation?	Who loses?	Who sees it as a problem?	Who is doing something about it and what are they doing?

Note: It might be helpful to work on questions A, B, and C, then work on questions D and E.

5. Identify information that you are missing:
 - Ask the group what other information is needed.
 - It might be helpful to go back and review the information from the previous steps.
6. Define the problem in one sentence:
 - Ask the individuals to define the problem in one sentence, share them in small groups, and come up with one sentence for the group. Report this and record it.
 - Ask the groups to state why they defined the problem in the way that they did.
 - Now negotiate with the entire group until you can nail the focus in one simple sentence.

Defining the problem means focusing on some aspect of the situation that you can and will take meaningful action to change. Taking action without a clear definition puts groups at risk for fragmenting their activities and scattering their energy.

7. Define the problem in manageable terms:
 - This is the final step. The most important point is to make sure you have defined the problem in manageable terms and you are able to state why.
 - It is important not to try to include everyone's ideas or it will be too vague. Remember clear, concise, and to the point. It is critical to define something that you can really make an impact on.

Accessing Community Data

An individual's perception of a community challenge or opportunity may be valid. However, others in your community need to have those perceptions backed by hard data. Data also will provide a benchmark for you to measure your success.

Having adequate data about community conditions helps you persuade other people that a problem truly exists. Gathering data also can reveal how well your community group's strategies and actions are working. In addition, having accurate data boosts your credibility with community members and funders.

During meetings, people often ask: What is really going on? Do we have any numbers to back this up? What are other communities doing? This tool will provide answers to these questions.

This tool can be used throughout the process and adapted to the project.

It is important to know that there are two types of data and one needs to be clear about the source and type. Primary information is gathered directly from various stakeholders and community members. It is based on personal experience and perceptions. Secondary information is most often given in numbers and describes current situations and future trends.

Data gathering steps:

1. Decide what you are looking for by answering the following questions. This will bring clarity to your project and assist in deciding who should be involved.
 - What specific topics are we interested in?
 - What data will help us know more about the topic?
 - What specific time period does our data need to cover?
 - Why do we want to know this about this topic?
 - How will we collect the data?
 - How will we know when we have enough data?

2. Start locally. It is important to use local data to make your situation real to community members. Local governmental agencies and social service agencies are often a great source of information. This should include both primary and secondary levels of information.
3. Expand your search. Based on your local research, expand to state and national sites. This most often is done through the Internet. Ask your local sources where they go for data.
4. When gathering data, be sure to document the sources.
 - Publish document — author or organization, date, page.
 - Interviewing — name and date.
 - Internet — title of the Web page and the URL.
5. Determine what the data mean.
 - Note all data as facts, inferences, or opinions. Also, note the context of the data.
 - Determine what is covered and where the gaps are — research is continuous, not a one-time step. You may decide to collect data on a regular basis as a means of benchmarking your progress.
 - Look for connections.
6. Prepare the data to be presented and plan for additional research.

Resource

Krile, James. (2006). *The Community Leadership Handbook*. Blandin Foundation. Published by Fieldstone Alliance (formerly Wilder Publishing Center).

This publication has been peer reviewed.

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Index: Communities & Leadership Community Development

Issued February 2012

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