



From Pluribus to Unum How Task Forces Come Together

Reach in your pocket or coin purse and take out some coins. Turn them over and look for the Latin phrase, “E Pluribus Unum.” It means “out of many, one,” and it’s a symbol of the American belief that, wherever we come from and however different we may be as individuals, we can work together.

But is it true? Can we really work together, particularly in cities and states, to tackle tough problems? This isn’t an idle question because dealing with our toughest problems often involves pulling together people who’ve never worked together – people who’ve perhaps never met.

Can we reasonably expect strangers to come together in task forces or committees, agree on a need to act, consider reasonable alternatives and make good decisions? The pluribus part is easy. But how do we get to unum?

At Civic Strategies, we’ve been working for years with what we call “new groups” – people who barely know one another (and sometimes start out as adversaries) but are charged with the task of dealing with a major civic or state problem or opportunity. How do you bring these new groups together and get them working productively?

Well, first things first: Is this really the right group? Two tests: Does the group represent a cross-section of the city or region (or at least the parties most interested in or affected by the problem)? And does it include elected and appointed officials who might be asked to implement what this group recommends?

Once we’re confident that the right people are involved, we concentrate on three key tasks in bringing new groups together: research, process and connection.

Research: What Would We Want to Know?

Here’s what we ask: If we were members of this group, what would we want to know in order to make good decisions? This usually leads to six to 12 good questions that need answers before this group starts its work. Example: What have other places done in successfully dealing with this problem? If we decide to do nothing, what are the likely consequences? What do people in our community or state think about this problem? Who “owns” the problem and its ultimate solution?



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We're very careful in our research not to take sides or prescribe outcomes. We stick to objective facts. We do bring some useful perspective to the research because of the work we do in other cities and states, but we never attempt to tell groups "the answer."

But this research is critical in two ways. First, if we can get agreement on a set of objective facts and reasonable assumptions, our chances of helping the group come up with a broadly supported outcome is greatly enhanced. Second, the research helps us design a process that will efficiently move the group along.

Process: Logic, Pace – and a Good, Simple Theory

The group processes we design are all different, but they follow a pattern. Our first objective is to get agreement on the nature of the problem or opportunity and the need to act. Our second objective is to have the group describe how the city or state will look when the problem is resolved or the opportunity fully achieved. Finally, we work with the group on a step-by-step process for getting from where we are now to where we will be when the problem is resolved. We call this the "DMP" model of group decision making and change. (For an explanation of the DMP model, please see our article, [A Good Simple Theory for Change](#), on the Civic Strategies web site.)

Beyond this simple outline, we depend on logic and pace. We structure processes so that the group discusses and decides issues in a logical order (generally, the big, philosophical issues earlier, the more detailed ones later), and we pay particular attention to group dynamics. Some groups (and some people) need more time to absorb information and reflect on it than others, and we watch for signs that people are growing weary of the pace – or are impatient to move on.

Connection: Involving Others in Your Work

In the end, no group is successful if citizens and affected parties reject its work, so we are mindful that others must be involved in the task force's work. This involves communication, of course, but it's usually more than that. Sometimes groups aren't sure how others will react to their decisions, so we convene focus groups, advisory panels or town hall meetings to "field-test" the group's tentative decisions.

At other times, the group may want to hear the public's voice first, so we will convene town hall meetings earlier in the process.

It's not only the public that must be connected to the task force's work, though. In nearly every case, there are people in authority who must become part of the group's work even though they don't serve on the task force. Sometimes it's obvious who these people are – if it's an education issue, it would include members of the school board, top administrators and PTA officials. Sometimes, it's not so obvious – we might find a state official, for instance, who has influence in but not responsibility for an issue. We'll work to get her connected.

Point is, we're careful not to overlook those whose voices are important or whose resources or approval might be needed later on, and we try to find as many ways as possible to connect them with the task force's deliberations.

Increasing the Odds of Success

Will all this attention to research, process and connection guarantee a successful outcome? Alas, there are no guarantees in public. Our cities and states are like a bus with a gas pedal for the driver and a brake for every rider. If an interest group wants to stop a good decision from going forward, it often can.

But we can greatly increase the odds of success by involving citizens and leaders in the deliberations, communicating effectively and creating better decisions through objective information and a logical, sensitive process.

And that's the best way of turning pluribus into unum.

About Civic Strategies

Civic Strategies is a consulting company that helps communities make important decisions. In the past decade and a half, we've managed numerous task force processes. To learn how Civic Strategies can help an important task force be successful, call us at (404) 873-5343 or e-mail us by [clicking here](#).