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**ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: AN EFFECTIVE PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2010
November, 2010
Raleigh-Durham, NC**

Round Table Discussion: An Effective Public Engagement Strategy

Narrative of a Poster Presentation for the NACSW 2010 Convention

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Abstract

A round table discussion is a forum where everyone present is on equal footing. No one is “the” expert regarding an issue. It is an excellent strategy for public engagement because it brings together voices from every stratum of concerned citizens. It is an exceptional form of small group communication when the group is going to be a long term engagement such as citizens’ involvement in the decision-making process of local, state, or federal government through activism and/or public policy advocacy beginning at the neighborhood level. The round table discussion is a dialogue. It is not training or a next-step oriented process. Rather it is an on-going conversation that involves disenfranchised stakeholders, consumers, and professionals.

Key concepts: round table, dialogue, faith leader, everyday citizen, public engagement

Introduction

King Arthur Pendragon set an intriguing precedent by convening his council of government (the king), security (the knights), and religion (the wizard) at a round table. At this table everyone's opinion and insight carried equal weight. Camelot rose and fell not at the behest of Arthur alone. Rather, everyone in the kingdom had a seat at the table, for here Arthur heard the voices of everyday citizens as well.

King Arthur is myth; but, the effectiveness of the round table, especially with regard to public engagement is very real. It is an excellent form of small group communication when the group is going to be a long term engagement such as citizens' involvement in the decision-making process of local, state, or federal government through activism and/or public policy advocacy beginning at the neighborhood level.

The round table discussion is a dialogue. It is not training or a next-step oriented process. Rather it is an on-going conversation that involves disenfranchised stakeholders, consumers, and professionals.

This paper will:

- Define round table discussions
- Articulate the effectiveness of Round Table Discussions as a public engagement strategy
- Describe the role of the social worker as a faith leader engaged in round table discussions.
- Describe how to plan and conduct a round table discussion
- Posit the implications for social work practice

Definition

What is a round table discussion? A Round Table is an open discussion where everybody is on an equal footing. Nobody is at the head of the table; you're all peers. The intent is for everyone to have equal influence and to speak uncensored. It is an excellent strategy for public engagement because it brings together voices from every stratum of concerned citizens, “both community members and professions and nurtures their active participation in all aspects of decision-making processes...Community members are valued as equal partners. Information is gathered to inform action, and new understandings emerge as participants reflect on potential actions (Healthy Minnesotans, 2008).

As Susko (1991) learned, it is important to listen to the voices of the forgotten. It's vital to examine consequences, both intended and unintended of services, programs, projects and policies from the perspective of each faction affected. The public engagement strategy of round table discussion facilitates this effort of social justice and individual empowerment. Importantly, round table discussions facilitate the elimination of obstacles to organizations' working with the governments in funding and operating servicets for individual consumers as well as neighborhoods and communities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

This section defined the concept of round table discussion. It opined that this dialogue facilitates the involvement of everyday citizens in decision-making processes that impact them. The next section will look at how to plan and conduct a round table discussion.

The role of the faith leader

In this context, the term faith leader refers to the Social Worker actively practicing her/his vocation from a faith-based perspective. It could be the social worker in the marketplace of social services, mental health care, or politics. Or it could be a pastor or church-affiliated professional advocating social justice. Whether professional social worker or lay minister, faith leaders in the United States have for decades sounded the clarion call for everyday citizens to arise and influence the people and systems that affect their lives

The social worker is a critical stakeholder for public engagement. Social workers as faith leaders are the gatekeepers who ensure collaboration between the secular and the sacred in the arena of social justice and social welfare. Conducting a round table discussion fosters that collaboration. In this role, the Christian in social work exercises her/his accountability for the social work code of ethics 6.04, social and political action (National Association of Social Workers, 1997).

This section identified the role of the social worker. That role was identified as a faith leader who abides by the social worker code of ethics mandate of social and political actions. Further, it is the role of the social worker to plan and conduct the round table. The next section will look at planning and conducting a round table discussion.

Planning and conducting the round table discussion.

The round table discussion is a dialogue. It is not training or a next-step oriented process. Rather it is an on-going conversation that involves disenfranchised stakeholders and/or consumers. Still, Newstrom & Scannell (1989) offer helpful tips for facilitating dialogue in their classic book, The Games Trainers Play.

To plan and conduct a round table, the social worker as faith leader must:

- Establish a working group
- Choose an issue
- Develop a budget
- Select a location
- Invited selected participants
- Keep it low tech. Use chart paper or marker board rather than a PowerPoint presentation.
- Time limit it to no more than an hour and a half which includes set up time
- Distribute a summary of the discussion

This section outlined planning and conducting a round table. Keys to successfully planning and conducting a round table are to make sure the right people are at the table, keep it simple, and make sure the word gets out about what was discussed. The next section proposes that round table discussions facilitate public engagement.

Round table discussions facilitate public engagement

A round table discussion presents an opportunity for everyday citizens to unveil their hopes and dreams, needs and desires relative to the common good. An effective round table discussion reflects the diversity of the public sector in which it is held. Seated at the table is a representative from a wide range of cultural, racial, ethnic, and geographical, gender, and age backgrounds. The engagement is cemented by the exploration of both interpersonal and systems-level issues that either encourage or hinder the everyday citizens' participation in decision-making (U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, 2004). Having this range and array of persons in conversation is a without question a catalyst for public engagement.

This section highlighted how the round table discussion facilitates public engagement. In particular, it was noted that a diversity of individuals with a vested interest in an issue conversing with one another will launch public engagement. The final section will suggest implications for social work practice.

Implications for Social Work Practice

One of the basic tenants of the social work profession is the responsibility to empower broken and disenfranchised individuals and peoples. For the Christian in social work it is the call to ensure that mercy triumphs over justice, to respond to caregivers and those dependent upon them in times of distress. Round table discussions are apt venues for discerning what it will take to ensure that these who are part of the huddled masses become fully engaged citizens.

Summary

The round table discussion is an on-going conversation among stakeholders, consumers, and professionals who have a vested interest in an issue related to social justice or social welfare. It facilitates the elimination of obstacles to including the everyday citizen in the decision making process of governments. An effective round table discussion empowers and identifies the nameless faces who rely on the all too often alienating projects, programs, and policies of the power elite.

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ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: An Effective Public Engagement Strategy

What is a round table discussion?

The advanced, intermediate, and beginner social worker will experience round table discussion as a dialogue. It is not training or a next-step oriented process. Rather it is an on-going conversation that involves disenfranchised stakeholders and/or consumers.

Effectiveness

- Gives voice to the everyday citizen



- Facilitates the elimination of obstacles to including everyday citizens in the decision making process of governments.

The Social Worker in a Faith Leader Role

- Critical stakeholder for public engagement
- Accountable for the Social Work Code of Ethics 6.04, Social and Political Action
- Planning and conducting

Planning and Conducting

- Establish a working group
- Choose an issue
- Develop a budget
- Select a location
- Invite selected participants
- Keep it low tech
- Time limit it
- Distribute summary of discussions