

# EDUCATION REPORTER

NUMBER 154

THE NEWSPAPER OF EDUCATION RIGHTS

NOVEMBER 1998

## Using the Delphi Technique to Achieve Consensus

*How it is leading us away from representative government to an illusion of citizen participation*

The Delphi Technique and consensus building are both founded in the same principle - the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, with synthesis becoming the new thesis. The goal is a continual evolution to "oneness of mind" (consensus means solidarity of belief) -the collective mind, the wholistic society, the wholistic earth, etc. In thesis and antithesis, opinions or views are presented on a subject to establish views and opposing views. In synthesis, opposites are brought together to form the new thesis. All participants in the process are then to accept ownership of the new thesis and support it, changing their views to align with the new thesis. Through a continual process of evolution, "oneness of mind" will supposedly occur.

In group settings, the Delphi Technique is an unethical method of achieving consensus on controversial topics. It requires well-trained professionals, known as "facilitators" or "change agents," who deliberately escalate tension among group members, pitting one faction against another to make a preordained viewpoint appear "sensible," while making opposing views appear ridiculous.

In her book [Educating for the New World Order](#), author and educator Beverly Eakman makes numerous references to the need of those in power to preserve the illusion that there is "community participation in decision-making processes, while in fact lay citizens are being squeezed out."

The setting or type of group is immaterial for the success of the technique. The point is that, when people are in groups that tend to share a particular knowledge base, they display certain identifiable characteristics, known as group dynamics, which allows the facilitator to apply the basic strategy.

The facilitators or change agents encourage each person in a group to express concerns about the programs, projects, or policies in question. They listen attentively, elicit input from group members, form "task forces," urge participants to make lists, and in going through these motions, learn about each member of a group. They are trained to identify the "leaders," the "loud mouths," the "weak or non-committal members," and those who are apt to change sides frequently during an argument.

Suddenly, the amiable facilitators become professional agitators and "devil's advocates." Using the "divide and conquer" principle, they manipulate one opinion against another, making those who are out of step appear "ridiculous, unknowledgeable, inarticulate, or dogmatic." They attempt to anger certain participants, thereby accelerating tensions. The facilitators are well trained in psychological manipulation. They are able to predict the reactions of each member in a group. Individuals in opposition to the desired policy or program will be shut out.

The Delphi Technique works. It is very effective with parents, teachers, school children, and community groups. The "targets" rarely, if ever, realize that they are being manipulated. If they do suspect what is happening, they do not know how to end the process. The facilitator seeks to polarize the group in order to become an accepted member of the group and of the process. The desired idea is then placed on the table and individual opinions are sought during discussion. Soon, associates from the divided group begin to adopt the idea as if it were their own, and they pressure the entire group to accept their proposition.

## How the Delphi Technique Works

Consistent use of this technique to control public participation in our political system is causing alarm among people who cherish the form of government established by our Founding Fathers. Efforts in education and other areas have brought the emerging picture into focus.

In the not-too-distant past, the city of Spokane, in Washington state, hired a consultant to the tune of \$47,000 to facilitate the direction of city government. This development brought a hue and cry from the local population. The ensuing course of action holds an eerie similarity to what is happening in education reform. A newspaper editorial described how groups of disenfranchised citizens were brought together to "discuss" what they felt needed to be changed at the local government level. A compilation of the outcomes of those "discussions" influenced the writing of the city/county charter.

That sounds innocuous. But what actually happened in Spokane is happening in communities and school districts all across the country. Let's review the process that occurs in these meetings.

First, a facilitator is hired. While his job is supposedly neutral and non-judgmental, the opposite is actually true. The facilitator is there to direct the meeting to a preset conclusion.

The facilitator begins by working the crowd to establish a good-guy-bad-guy scenario. Anyone disagreeing with the facilitator must be made to appear as the bad guy, with the facilitator appearing as the good guy. To accomplish this, the facilitator seeks out those who disagree and makes them look foolish, inept, or aggressive, which sends a clear message to the rest of the audience that, if they don't want the same treatment, they must keep quiet. When the opposition has been identified and alienated, the facilitator becomes the good guy - a friend - and the agenda and direction of the meeting are established without the audience ever realizing what has happened.

Next, the attendees are broken up into smaller groups of seven or eight people. Each group has its own facilitator. The group facilitators steer participants to discuss preset issues, employing the same tactics as the lead facilitator.

Participants are encouraged to put their ideas and disagreements on paper, with the results to be compiled later. Who does the compiling? If you ask participants, you typically hear: "Those running the meeting compiled the results." Oh-h! The next question is: "How do you know that what you wrote on your sheet of paper was incorporated into the final outcome?" The typical answer is: "Well, I've wondered about that, because what I wrote doesn't seem to be reflected. I guess my views were in the minority."

That is the crux of the situation. If 50 people write down their ideas individually, to be compiled later into a final outcome, no one knows what anyone else has written. That the final outcome of such a meeting reflects anyone's input at all is highly questionable, and the same holds true when the facilitator records the group's comments on paper. But participants in these types of meetings usually don't question the process.

Why hold such meetings at all if the outcomes are already established? The answer is because it is imperative for the acceptance of the School-to-Work agenda, or the environmental agenda, or whatever the agenda, that ordinary people assume ownership of the preset outcomes. If people believe an idea is theirs, they'll support it. If they believe an idea is being forced on them, they'll resist.

The Delphi Technique is being used very effectively to change our government from a representative form in which elected individuals represent the people, to a "participatory democracy" in which citizens selected at large are facilitated into ownership of preset outcomes. These citizens believe that their input is important to the result, whereas the reality is that the outcome was already established by people not apparent to the participants.

## How to Diffuse the Delphi Technique

Three steps can diffuse the Delphi Technique as facilitators attempt to steer a meeting in a specific direction.

1. Always be charming, courteous, and pleasant. Smile. Moderate your voice so as not to come across as belligerent or aggressive.
2. Stay focused. If possible, jot down your thoughts or questions. When facilitators are asked

questions they don't want to answer, they often digress from the issue that was raised and try instead to put the questioner on the defensive. Do not fall for this tactic. Courteously bring the facilitator back to your original question. If he rephrases it so that it becomes an accusatory statement (a popular tactic), simply say, "That is not what I asked. What I asked was . . ." and repeat your question.

3. Be persistent. If putting you on the defensive doesn't work, facilitators often resort to long monologues that drag on for several minutes. During that time, the group usually forgets the question that was asked, which is the intent. Let the facilitator finish. Then with polite persistence state: "But you didn't answer my question. My question was . . ." and repeat your question.

Never become angry under any circumstances. Anger directed at the facilitator will immediately make the facilitator the victim. This defeats the purpose. The goal of facilitators is to make the majority of the group members like them, and to alienate anyone who might pose a threat to the realization of their agenda. People with firm, fixed beliefs, who are not afraid to stand up for what they believe in, are obvious threats. If a participant becomes a victim, the facilitator loses face and favor with the crowd. This is why crowds are broken up into groups of seven or eight, and why objections are written on paper rather than voiced aloud where they can be open to public discussion and debate. It's called crowd control.

At a meeting, have two or three people who know the Delphi Technique dispersed through the crowd so that, when the facilitator digresses from a question, they can stand up and politely say: "But you didn't answer that lady/gentleman's question." Even if the facilitator suspects certain group members are working together, he will not want to alienate the crowd by making accusations. Occasionally, it takes only one incident of this type for the crowd to figure out what's going on.

Establish a plan of action before a meeting. Everyone on your team should know his part. Later, analyze what went right, what went wrong and why, and what needs to happen the next time. Never strategize during a meeting.

A popular tactic of facilitators, if a session is meeting with resistance, is to call a recess. During the recess, the facilitator and his spotters (people who observe the crowd during the course of a meeting) watch the crowd to see who congregates where, especially those who have offered resistance. If the resisters congregate in one place, a spotter will gravitate to that group and join in the conversation, reporting what was said to the facilitator. When the meeting resumes, the facilitator will steer clear of the resisters. Do not congregate. Instead gravitate to where the facilitators or spotters are. Stay away from your team members.

This strategy also works in a face-to-face, one-on-one meeting with anyone trained to use the Delphi Technique.

*Lynn Stuter is an education researcher in Washington state. Her web site address is [www.learn-usa.com/](http://www.learn-usa.com/).*