UF/IFAS Leadership Development: Defining Public Issues

Elizabeth B. Bolton and Muthusami Kumaran

Recommendations for Leader Training

- Prepare to teach this lesson by reading and familiarizing yourself with the objectives, materials, handouts, and activities/exercises.
- Begin preparation several days in advance in order to secure whatever additional resources you need to make the lesson a “local” learning experience.
- Plan a learning environment with care so that the surroundings contribute to the achievement of the objectives.
- Begin on time, and end on time. Schedule a break at about halfway through the lesson.
- With each lesson after the first one, ask participants what they did as a result of the previous lesson. Record these!
- Introduce each lesson with an overview of how it fits into the overall major leadership development program.
- End each lesson with a summary and restatement of objectives. Explain what the participants are expected to do with the lesson after they leave.
- Heighten anticipation for the next lesson by sharing a brief description of it, but be cautious not to give too much away.

The IFAS Leadership Development Packet of eleven modules was developed for use by Florida Cooperative Extension agents. They were designed for training agents and officers and not for general distribution to the public. Handouts for audience use are labeled and printed on white paper. These may be duplicated for use during class.

Each lesson is designed for a workshop approximately two hours long. Use your judgement on shortening or expanding various parts according to the needs of your participants and availability of time.

Objectives

1. To define what a public issue is.
2. To learn the steps in identifying community issues.
3. To gain skills in defining and studying an issue.

Lesson Outline

Introduction and Overview of Objectives (15 minutes)

- What is an Issue? (film strip)
- Defining Public Issues

Exercise and Group Lecture (40 minutes)

- The Case of the Vaporlight Vandals (exercise and handout)
- Labeling the Case
- Issue Identification Worksheet
Lesson Plan—Defining Public Issues

Step 1—15 minutes
Use slide presentation What is an Issue and accompanying script to introduce lesson.

Use Defining Public Issues as a background for introducing what will be done in this lesson.

Write objectives on chalkboard or state them.

Step 2—40 minutes
Hand out a copy of The Case of the Vaporlight Vandals to each participant and give them five minutes to read it. Respond to the case study by using background comments.

Use Labeling the Case to tell how to define an issue.

Hand out Issue Identification Worksheet and ask each person to label the issues in the Vaporlight Vandal Case. Allow about 10 minutes for this.

Use the worksheet responses to discuss the process of defining an issue.

Step 3—40 minutes
Find some copies of local or regional newspapers. Clip articles, stories, or editorials and have one for each participant or group. An alternative is to ask participants to bring newspapers and find issue-oriented articles.

Put steps of Issue Identification on chalkboard and present short lecture on steps.

Form groups and discuss news articles using the nine steps shown on chalkboard.

Step 4—20 minutes
Use Public Problem Analysis Techniques as a background for lecture. Emphasize How to Study an Issue.

Ask each participant to use this lesson to identify and study an issue before the last lesson. Hand out Examining Issues (Table 1) and Issues: Where Do I Stand (Table 2). Letter Lobby can serve as a guide for writing letters to public officials.

Distribute evaluations and ask for suggestions. Take up evaluations and adjourn.

What is in an Issue? Filmstrip Commentary

Frame 1
The quality of our lives may depend upon our involvement in issues.

Frame 2
Make the most of your time and energy as you determine your position by following a logical step-by-step process when exploring an issue that concerns you.

Frame 3
Start with a simple, clear statement of the issue. Do not include the causes of the problem that led to the issue. Do not hypothesize about solutions, and do not try to analyze the issue. Simply define it in a concise, straightforward manner.

Frame 4
Then determine who the interested parties are, remembering that there may be more than one or two. It may help to list the parties on paper. Be sure that you have identified all of those who are involved with the issue.

Frame 5
Next, find out what the viewpoints and feelings are of each party involved with the particular consumer issue. Be sure you can state each group’s opinions and viewpoints as the group itself would.
Frame 6

After you have stated each viewpoint, analyze it. What are the possible short-term outcomes of a particular viewpoint? What are the long-term outcomes? What are the implications of each viewpoint?

Frame 7

By this time, you should be ready to make a decision about the issue. What is your position? Why? Can you justify your position to yourself and others? You might try it out on some friends to see if you can state it clearly. How would people in the various groups react to your position?

Frame 8

How are you going to get involved? To what degree? Outline your plan of action. How much time will the plan require? What resources will you need? What action will you take?

Frame 9

In summary, the major steps for analyzing and becoming involved in an issue can be approached systematically when these questions are answered:

Step 1: What is the issue?
Step 2: Who are the interested parties?
Step 3: What are the viewpoints on the issue?
Step 4: What are the implications and possible outcomes of each viewpoint?
Step 5: What is your position on the issue and why?
Step 6: What is your action/involvement plan?


Defining Public Issues

In George Orwell’s book 1984, , the term Newspeak stood for the language invented by Big Brother, or the government, to gradually restructure the way people thought. The plan was an efficient one, since human thought paths are given directions by word meanings. In 1984, the Newspeak idea had a tremendous impact on society. A warning was sounded against the dehumanizing control that a technologically advanced, soulless government can have, if allowed.

With the educational techniques of Newspeak in mind, the following system for defining issues semantically has been developed. It is called “Issuespeak.” It is intended to provide a mental framework for understanding the basic parts of public difficulties.

ISSUESPEAK: A New Language for Defining Issues

Public policy education theorists claim that the first step in the policy process is to identify the issue. After having said it, they quickly launched into the many ways an issue should be analyzed. None seem willing to spell out the vital—and slippery—task involved in actually defining the issue. Maybe that is because the secret lies in using the right words.

The major problem in identifying the defining issues is the language used when looking for them. We call issues problems and problems concerns, and we get solving all muddled with resolving. It is confusing. It gets difficult.

Our minds need clean categories to separate complex data. Using a real life situation, let’s apply this language system and see how it works.


The Case of the Vaporlight Vandals

Alice Dunning was furious. It was the fourth time in a month she had stepped out after dark to find the street lights had been shot out. The street was pitch black. It had taken two years of petitioning the city to get new vaporlights installed on the street in front of her house, and now vandals were shooting them out! Just last night she had reported to the police that a gang of six youths between the ages of 14 and 17 were sauntering down the street just before the last lamp went out. Two of them were carrying small rifles. No one had been arrested.

The street light incident, along with a rash of burglaries, an attempted rape, and the mugging of an elderly man in this neighborhood had residents frightened and angry. Several of them got together and decided to do something about it. They called a meeting of the people in their precinct. Alice acted as convener of the group.
During the meeting, it was discovered that delegations from other neighborhoods also had the same complaints. Gangs of youth were terrorizing and vandalizing local businesses and residents.

Soon the mayor appointed a task force to analyze the situation and make recommendations to the city council. The council has jurisdiction over the city’s budget, the police force, and the local social service agencies. The task force met at Alice’s that weekend. As discussions began, what had seemed like a very focused concern soon gave way to many different viewpoints and concerns.

**Task Force Members**

JAKE—A corner grocery store owner, who feels that the city needs to subsidize the purchase of iron gates to protect store fronts at night. He also thinks a cadre of police dogs could be trained to patrol the area.

VIVIAN—A mother of four, member of her church council, and PTA chairperson who believes that lack of parental supervision is the issue. It is not right that both parents work outside the home. She wants the city to sponsor a parent education program and punish parents just like delinquents.

BOB—A high school teacher and single parent who feels that civic groups should be organized to plan, promote, and run teen drop-in centers throughout the town. He thinks the problem is lack of recreational opportunities.

JENNIFER—A young accountant and city councilwoman who knows the treasury cannot support more protection measures. She is single and opposes a raise in taxes because somebody else’s kids are misbehaving. She feels volunteer programs will have to make up for the financial shortfall.

ALICE—She shares her home with her elderly mother. She worries that vandals will break in when she is at work. She and her mother live in fear. They feel the issue is one of protection. Locking up the gangs seems to be the only answer.

**Background**

With such different views, how can this group of citizens identify and deal with the real issue? They could begin by stepping back to view the whole situation as it was even before the problems began. By taking it apart and examining the pieces, common insights would begin to appear.

If sophomore biology taught anything, it was that by dissecting a creature and labeling its parts with universally understood names one could recognize and name any one of those parts, even when they showed up in crazy places. As with the frog, so with this issue.

**Labeling the Case**

**Topic or area of concern** is a word or phrase that names the situation. It is the broad umbrella category into which certain problems, issues and sub-topics fit. In the Vaporlight Case, the topic is crime. Names are not controversial.

**Sub-topics** are also descriptors. They specifically name parts of topics or areas of concern. Vandalism, rape, murder, theft, and delinquency are all subtopics of crime. Like topics, they simply name and are not controversial.

**Problems** are most frequently mistaken for issues. They are the symptoms or results of social/economic imbalances that create the issues. Problems can be solved. In this case, problems include coping with a dark street, dealing with fear, and recovering from a loss of life or property. Problems themselves are seldom controversial, although the ways chosen to deal with them may be — and that is their connection to the issues.

**Solutions** are the answers to problems. They can be accomplished by individuals answering to an immediate need. They often fix things just enough so that issues are not seen as a whole. The emphasis on punishment as the total answer in this case is a typical short-term solution.

**Issues** are controversies. They are created by social and economic imbalances, they demand attention through problems, and they center around selecting remedies and using resources to prevent or solve problems. They always come in pairs: remedy issues and resource issues. Issues cannot be solved. They must be resolved through education, negotiation, or compromise. The issues here are:

1. What kind of comprehensive plan will help the city’s young people and protect citizens from vandalism?

2. How can we make resources that are now being used for something else available to carry out the plan we design?

**Remedy Issue** is one of the “issue twins.” It is a controversy about the philosophic alternatives for correcting the imbalance. It asks “What is the best plan for benefiting the most people? For preventing and curing the most problems?”
Resource Issue is the other issue twin. It is a controversy over the power and resources needed to carry out the best remedy. They are the most political in nature and basic to managing change. In public affairs, they ask the questions:

- Who has the final say?
- Who pays?
- Who benefits?
- Who will be denied?

Resource issues need to be resolved in the arena where money and resources are controlled and where the decisions for the money’s use are made. There is almost always competition for resources. To compete successfully, supporters of a certain remedy must understand how those decisions are made, who the power brokers are, and how their idea can best be sold. In the case of crime, some resource issues are “Who will be protected? How will prevention programs be funded?”

As with Remedy Issues, Resource Issues do not have clear-cut solutions. They require education, negotiation, and sometimes compromise to be resolved.

Resolutions are the mechanics for working out issues. They are accomplished only through collective permission and power. They occur after education, negotiation, and/or compromise occur in the group or society. They seek to restore balance to basic social and economic structures by encompassing the interaction between these basic structures.

Education on the Issue is a matter of giving decision-makers and power brokers facts and information about the issue, the favored remedy, and the kinds of resources needed.

Negotiation is the use of strategy to trade some non-essentials for the assurance that really important features of the remedy will be carried out, provided adequate resources are available.

Compromise must occur when there is so much competition for power and resources that education and negotiation cannot resolve the issue. When agreeing to use just part of a favored remedy to accomplish getting a job into the system, and letting others use parts of their favorite, that is a compromise. This keeps the system democratic.

Issuespeak Broadens Viewpoints. After you have used Issuespeak a few times (the worksheet in Table 3 will help you get started), you will find it impossible to view public difficulties in a narrow way. Because issues are, in reality, complex and multifaceted, they require creative approaches and open minds to resolve them. Good luck!

Issue Identification

A community issue grows out of an accumulation of daily events that occur in the environment of any community. The purpose of identifying issues is to determine specific areas of concern that a community may have. Groups expressing concern are saying to you that the quality of their life is not satisfactory to them.

Identifying and addressing public issues is the key to effective public involvement and to responsive community resource management. But first, you must learn to detect what an issue is and how to go about identifying an issue.

An issue is a topic of public concern that can be acted on and is a subject of fairly widespread public interest.

The issue identification worksheet (Table 3) is one method for identifying issues in your community.

Step 1—Gather Data

Talk with community leaders and groups about what they believe are the major concerns of your community at this time. Since many different points of view exist on these questions, be sure to pick a variety of groups that will reflect a cross-section of the people and ideas in your community. For example, in the business sector (banks, large and small companies, Chamber of Commerce, etc.), in the public sector (elected officials, school personnel, police and fire chiefs, etc.), and in the civic sector (service organizations, religious and cultural groups, etc.).

Step 2—Do Research

Review local newspapers (for past 6 to 12 months) and see what issues are emphasized.

Step 3—Gather Data

Talk with neighbors and friends and ask them what they believe are the major concerns of the community.

Step 4—Summarize Findings

Gather the information from Steps 1 to 3 and select the one or two concerns that were most frequently and/or most strongly expressed.
Step 5—State Issue
State very specifically, in one or two sentences, what the issue is, so that it can be clearly communicated to a variety of publics.

Step 6—Analyze Issue
In relation to the issue(s) identified, list what you think are:

1. root causes or sources of the issue
2. people or groups affected by the issue
3. people or groups with an interest in the issue (list their stance pro or con if possible).

Step 7—Compile Data
Combine Steps 5 and 6 into a more complete definition of the issue. Write a brief (one-half page) statement that reflects these components.

Step 8—Get Feedback
Share this statement with various people to get their responses. Record comments.

Step 9—Final Statement
Use input from Step 8 to modify your definition as needed.

Final Note
In using this process to identify community issues, you can begin at any step. If you are unsure about what the most important concerns are in your community, begin with Step 1 on the Issue Identification background sheet, and follow each succeeding step. However, if one or two concerns are clearly most important and prevalent in your community, begin at Step 5 by stating the issue.

Prepared by David Foster and Kathleen Wilson, Human Resources Department, University of Hawaii, and Jean Young, State Coordinator, FCL, Hawaii, 1982.

Public Problem Analysis Techniques
A potential public problem exists if the consequences of an action go beyond the individual or group directly engaged in that action. Whether society regards a potential public problem as an actual public problem depends on many factors such as nature and extent of consequences, recipients, and initiators of consequences, values, attitudes, timing, geographic areas, etc.

Value Influence
Defining a public problem requires a comparison between the present state of affairs and a more desirable state of affairs. Standards of desirability are measured by values. Value conflicts are the source of most friction in dealing with public problems. The conflicts rarely mean the existence of completely different philosophies of what is good or bad. Usually conflicts are an indication of clashing priorities on values that are commonly appreciated.

Value conflicts can be minimized by filtering accepted values through the following principles:

- Values are subject to change; reassess them frequently.
- Be open to constructive criticism and the viewpoints of those who place a different emphasis on certain values.
- Values can be interpreted differently; they have a limited desirability.

While values guide our thinking in terms of defining what is a more desirable state of affairs, beliefs are ideas of the way things really are. There are two types of beliefs: factual and perceived. Both may or may not be true.

To make effective use of factual information the following eight errors should be avoided:

1. Confusing the symptoms of a problem with its causes.
2. Jumping to conclusions.
3. Developing general conclusions from limited and/or unrepresentative observations.
4. Oversimplifying the analysis; failure to look at the total situation.
5. Distorting conclusions beyond the factual base.
6. Assuming what is true of the pieces is also true of the whole.
7. Judging the person instead of the ideas presented.
8. Judging the response instead of the ideas presented.

How to Study an Issue
1. Define the issue.

Write down your definition of the issue to be studied. Determine the origin. Issues may originate from many sources such as citizens groups, educators, consumer
activists, government bodies, business groups or any combination of these.

2. **Determine the current status of the issue.**

Find out if the issue is in the discussion stage or what action may have been taken. It is best to become involved in an issue as early as possible. Has a resolution been passed or a regulation proposed? Has legislation been introduced? The further an issue progresses from discussion to action, the more difficult it is to make a substantive contribution.

3. **Decide who will be affected by the issue.**

Is the issue local or does it affect a large segment of society? How does the issue affect the economy? Who has the most to gain or lose with respect to the issue? How does it affect you as a consumer? taxpayer? citizen?

4. **Find out where the issue will be decided.**

Will it be decided at a local, state, or national level? Will it be decided in Congress? Will it be decided by the commissioners of a regulatory agency? Are citizens or consumer activist groups working on this problem?

5. **Ascertain when the decision will be made.**

Is this an issue that will be decided now or over a period of time? This will determine your schedule of action.

6. **Research all viewpoints.**

Controversial issues are always accompanied by strong opinions. It is important to reduce all arguments to hard facts in order to make an unbiased evaluation. Be sure to study existing alternate plans. Make a complete list of resources so that the data you gather will provide the balance you need for objectivity.

7. **Evaluate the issue based on your research.**

Determine where you stand with respect to the issue using the following checklist. Make two lists based on the effect a yes decision would have opposed to a no decision. Be sure to list both positive and negative effects for each of the following:

- economy
- society
- employment
- business
- taxpayer
- environment
- quality of life
- freedom of choice
- health or safety
- short- or long-range benefits

**Note:** Be sure to consider the long-range implications of your decision to avoid costly mistakes and the need for future reversal.

8. **State your position.**

When you have reached your conclusion, write it down using your own words and rationale. This will be the basis for action you take.

9. **Recheck status of issue.**

Before taking action, recheck the status of the issue. During your study process, the issue might have advanced further along the route to a decision. It is important to know the current status so your position is directed to the proper source.

10. **Plan your follow-up action.**

- Make an “action list.”
- Determine whether your group should act as individuals or as a unit.
- Communicate your position to the individuals and groups who will be the decision makers. This may be a legislator, a regulatory agency, or a city council. The level and origin of the issue will help you determine this.
- If your issue is national or regional in scope, consider additional or supplemental action on a local level that will reinforce your position.
- Encourage other groups to support your position.
- Communicate your position to all branches of the media.
- Keep your members regularly informed of the current status of the issue.

Adapted by Inge C. McNeese, FCL Editor, Oregon State University.
**Letter Lobby**

Communicating a position by presenting pertinent and persuasive facts in a letter may influence decisions on issues.

When you write:

- Use an appropriate business form.
- Sign your full name and address.
- Be brief and to the point.
- Give factual information.
- Be realistic and practical.
- Write an original letter.
- Use the proper address form.

**News Notes**

To be in the news, you do not always have to “make” news. The **press release** is one way of delivering a message through the media, especially concerning the position taken on an issue.

The written statements should always include answers for the six journalistic questions:

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- Why
- How

The beginning sentences of a press release should grab the readers’ attention and tell the story. In this case, the climax comes first rather than last.

- Be brief (short words and short sentences).
- Be accurate (check details).
- Be complete (exact details).
- Use active verbs.
- Type and double space (use one side of the paper).
- Include name and telephone number of contact person or organization (upper left-hand corner of first page).

Table 1.

**EXAMINING ISSUES**

**Step 1:** What is the issue?

**Step 2:** Who are the interested parties?

**Step 3:** What are the viewpoints on the issue?

**Step 4:** What are the implications and possible outcomes of each viewpoint?

**Step 5:** What is your position on the issue? Why?

**Step 6:** What is your action or involvement plan?


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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>I can state the issue clearly.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>The issue is important to me.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>The outcome of the issue will affect me directly.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I am emotionally involved in this issue.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I am rationally involved in this issue.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I have determined my position on this issue freely.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I have weighed alternative and possible outcomes.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I feel strongly about the position I have taken.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I have taken action on my position.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>I am willing to state my position publicly.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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### ISSUE IDENTIFICATION WORKSHEET

1. The **topic** or **area of concern** is:

   **Proof:** The topic or area of concern is a word or phrase that means the situation.

2. The **problems** in this case include:

   **Proof:** Problems have solutions that individuals have power to carry out over time. Agreement or support from the general community is not essential to these solutions.

3. **Remedy Issues** in this case may include:

   **Proof:** Remedy issues are controversial alternatives for *righting* the situation. Since all suggested remedies cannot be used, selecting those that will be most effective becomes the issue for the group. This issue must be resolved before an action plan can be made.

   *Which remedies did your group select as best for a:
   
   Short-range plan?
   Long-range plan?

   *Which of the following did your group use to resolve the remedy? the issue?
   
   Education (presenting the facts)
   Negotiation (trading non-essentials to make everyone happy)
   Compromise (foregoing what some think is essential to allow room for other’s essentials)

4. **Resource Issues** in this case are:

   **Proof:** Resource issues are controversies over power or resources needed to carry out the remedy. They are questions that must be resolved in the larger community, the one that has major power to control resources.

   * How far will your group go to resolve these **bottom line** issues so your remedy plan can be carried out?
   Education
   Negotiation
   Compromise