

Building Dynamic Groups



Town Meeting

Basic Principles

In recent years we have seen on occasion, a so-called town-meeting on the evening network news. Public officials and administrators have utilized town-meetings for various subject matters. Former President Carter initiated some of the most widely seen Town Meetings during his term in office, and more recently, President Clinton has used this technique. These public officials use Town Meetings as a tool to stay in touch with the grass roots. Family and Children First Councils can use this concept to gather information to use in program planning and direction.

Key Principles

In order to attract large gatherings of people, Town Meetings, must be well advertised through the major communications channels.

The Town Meeting should not be used for speech making. It is a more useful method for public officials to listen to what the people have to say on current issues, what their sentiments, feelings, their aspirations, their hopes and their dreams are, and to engage in some two-way dialogue.

The setting is generally semi-formal; to some extent, the presence of the media adds formality. One of the prime reasons of a Town Meeting is to give people a chance to see their public officials and to actually get to ask him or her a question or two. It is important that the public is made to feel the input it makes is received with sincere interest. At times, public officials are tempted to answer all the questions on the spot. Public officials should resist this temptation. To answer a question to which one doesn't know the answer is a fast way for a public official to have his credibility undermined. Another danger is to give speeches and defend a position. This too fails to make the best use of the technique. The stress in the Town Meeting should be on active listening, on learning from the public.

The use of a facilitator with a predeveloped list of questions can focus on discussion and interaction of the audience with the group that is wanting to obtain additional information from the community.

Reference: Bleiker, H. (1981). Citizen Participation. Institute for Participatory Planning. Fenston Education.