



Cool Cleveland Commentary

Deliberation Day: The Power of Civic Engagement

by Eric Lutzo

As a Moderator for the PBS special, Deliberation Day, Eric Lutzo was asked by Ed Morrision from The Center for Regional Economic Issues [REI] at Weatherhead to write on his experience in Case's Deliberation Day 2004 conversation. This article below was broadcast on 10/16 on WCLV FM. Take part in REI at Case for their next Making Change series on Mon 11/15 held at the Ritz Carlton at 7:30AM.

Northeast Ohioans can be proud. Not only will they be highlighted on a national level for their participation in an extraordinary event, but also because they have proven themselves to be collaborative, diverse individuals who value choice and the democratic process.

Citizens from all over the region came together on 10/16 at Case Western Reserve University, randomly selected to participate in a structured conversation titled Deliberation Day. The sponsors of this national event were the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and By the People: America and the World, a new initiative of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. The same event took place in 16 other cities and regions around the country. The event was to be considered a public opinion poll with a human face. Participants covered the same two critical issues: homeland security and workforce development in a global economy. Deliberation Day was coordinated and produced locally by the Center for Regional Economic Issues (REI) at Case and WCPN ideastream.

As a region we are lucky to have such exciting institutions like Case's [Regional Economic Initiatives] REI and ideastream working on initiatives that are both economic and civic in nature. One has to ask, "What was the selection process that took place which made Cleveland one of 17 finalists across the country?" Regardless of the answer, they had the vision to be there and champion our communities as suitable candidates for participation.

The Deliberation Day concept allowed citizens to engage in a new form of conversation. It was the type of conversation that everyone present had thought about but few have acted upon. For

some it was an uneasy feeling, but for others it was the opportunity of a life time. In the end, it was an experience the participants wanted to do again, and an opportunity to learn a new set of civic engagement skills that allow us as a region to dialogue together and collectively reshape our region. Civic engagement of this nature is not new. In fact, regions across the county have used civic engagement models to revitalize their economies and communities. Here in Northeast Ohio we can really benefit from such an experience. As people across the region begin to learn the methods of communicating, again through civic engagement, they can begin to make change happen not just in their own communities but with in the region as well. I participated in the event as a moderator, and can honestly say, having done events of this capacity before, that it truly was a pleasure to work with some of the thought leaders here in Northeast Ohio as well as a dynamic group of citizens from across the region. It helped me understand that Northeast Ohioans care, have passion for their beliefs, and hope for the future. It was a gleaming example that working together we really can make a difference and reclaim our right to free speech.

Somewhere along the way while working longer hours, buying bigger houses, putting our kids through school and worrying about our region loosing economic viability, we forgot that if we just gather to converse or deliberate we just might awaken to new possibilities and ideas for our communities on local, regional, national and even global levels. This one-day event made all participants realize that as a collective listening to the different opinions, we can actually shape policy and opinion for the future and make change happen.

In preparation for Deliberation Day, facilitators from around the region came to Case to discuss the process that would be the basis for this event. Deliberative Polling, developed by Professor James S. Fishkin, is a technique that combines deliberation in small-group discussions with scientific random sampling to provide public consultation for public policy and electoral issues. Leaders from across the region shared their personal experiences with the deliberative process.

Beginning sessions like this are always interesting and fun. No one knows each other, ground rules have to be set, and the level of expectation is high for everyone. As a moderator, it is my job to see to it that everyone feels a part of the group. It is a skill, as my fellow moderators can attest to, to be able to bring out the silent voice and quiet the overpowering one while making everyone feel valued. Fortunately, we had a good mix and participants who were willing to contribute. The group I moderated jumped right into the topics at hand. First we covered national security. It was interesting to hear the differences in the room about



preemptive action, working with allies vs. going it alone, civil liberties and spreading democracy. The conversation directed itself to our understanding of the other cultures and asking if these countries really wanted us to be present at all. At that point, I asked the group if they had the opportunity to communicate via video conferencing with another part of the world – specifically Iraq – what they would say. The room went silent and then comments began to flow. They wanted to know how life was there and if the Iraqis support a U.S. presence in their country. They wanted also to let the Iraqi people know that U.S. citizens care about their well-being. It was very moving and very insightful. The majority of the group questioned the U.S. motives around being in Iraq and taking preemptive action with them. Although the group was very concerned about the war and our position as a world leader, there was also a clear message to the leadership of our country – what is the plan for transitioning through and out of Iraq. It was great hearing from the senior members in the room when they shared their experiences with other wars and the climate in the United States during those times. It gave me a fresh perspective on war. The civil liberties topic spurred a lot of controversy. Many in the group needed more information on things like the Patriot Act. Others were eager to share. The majority of people said that their lives have not been impacted (as far as they know) by the Patriot Act, but the compassion that ensued for citizens right here in Northeast Ohio who have been taken out of their homes for questioning really made the group think. They questioned if the Patriot Act should be revised, and what needs to be done about it? One participant, whose husband works for a government agency, said the effects of the act have stopped hundreds of possible attacks through the sharing of resources and allocating additional funding to support government agencies.

After lunch, the group gathered again to talk about domestic issues, specifically jobs. How did trade, outsourcing and current tax policies impact our jobs? This time around, the group seemed more united. They felt open trade was a good thing because it brought new products to our market. The group agreed that outsourcing was nothing more than traded human talent, and that tax policies were out of control. What went unsaid around the two issues was equally as interesting as what was said. No one said anything about the people of Iraq and the insurgents that continue to battle for what they see as their right to govern their own country. No comments were made about our allies being weak and incapable. The fear of

terrorism was not mentioned nor was Al Qaeda. There were no negative comments made about Islam, or about differing beliefs or opinions. No comments were made about President Bush or Democratic challenger John Kerry, and no comments about their integrity, character and ability were mentioned.

As I reflect on the day, I wonder what it would be like if events like this took place in every city, town and village across the county. Would those currently running for office listen to the voice of the people? Would they attempt to enact the hopes and dreams of the people? An event on this level has never been attempted; would it impact our current policies?

Deliberation Day left me with a sense of hope and pride for our region. I realized that we have tremendous talents right here in Northeast Ohio and the ability, if we choose, to make change happen over night. Deliberation Day taught me that we are a dynamic community that is tolerant and open to the possibilities that are with each of us.

If the idea of engaging your community and the region excites you, you'll want to participate in this extraordinary type of public forum. Check out Building Opportunity Networks in Northeast Ohio and register for the next Making Change event on Mon 11/15th, held at the Ritz Carlton in Cleveland at 7:30AM. To register, contact Betsey Merkel at The Center for Regional Economic Issues at bmerkel@weatherhead.cwru.edu or call 368-5540. You will participate in defining the opportunities for northeast Ohio in two key areas: creative industries and sustainable business development, while connecting with the new Universities Collaborative. Find out what's really happening in Northeast Ohio and get behind the headlines to meet the people transforming our economy. from Cool Cleveland reader Eric Lutzo Eric@ForwardThought.net Eric Lutzo is the founder of Forward Thought, a coaching and leadership development practice, with a Masters of Business Administration from Case Weatherhead School of Management. <http://www.forwardthought.net>

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