

THE NEUTRALITY CHALLENGE

Which of these four approaches most aligns with your values and commitments to facilitating social change?

#1: SOCIAL JUSTICE IS THE WORK

"You can't be neutral on a moving train," explains historian Howard Zinn in describing the importance of taking a stand for social justice. Civic professionals need to take this insight into their work by acknowledging that structural inequalities exist in society and that these inequalities are detrimental to our social fabric. As a result, social, political, and economic justice are goals that need to be front and center when facilitating dialogue.

This work requires taking a stand on the side of justice by leaning into questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants need to recognize that our economic, political, and social systems have significantly and disproportionately oppressed historically marginalized groups especially based on race, ethnicity, sex, wealth, sexual orientation, ability status, immigrant status. Current levels of exclusion, inequality, and injustice undercut core civic values and threaten the fragile foundation of our democracy.

Less powerful voices are often silenced in the name of "neutrality" or "civility," and neutral and objective processes may actually reinforce the status quo, with its existing disparities in power, access, and opportunity. With this approach, inclusion, equity, and justice are the explicitly stated goals in facilitating social change.

#2: WE NEED INTENTIONALITY

What's missing is a genuine and comprehensive commitment to a purposeful examination of the patterns of power, privilege, and structural inequality underlying any public problem. Civic professionals must always examine "the problems underneath the problems" by using constructive dialogue to unearth patterns of power, privilege, racism, discrimination, and disparity.

It's easy to assume that participants will inevitably examine the underlying systems, structures, and behaviors that contributed to, or even cause, the problem being discussed. Some even think that getting "the right people" (often simply a diverse group) in the room will suffice. This perspective suggests that that approach is not enough: what is required is an intentional and thorough examination of power and privilege.

This entails asking critical questions that raise, examine, and work to resolve power dynamics and equity considerations at every step of the process. Intentionality is the value that undergirds all aspects of problem solving, including naming and framing, process design, facilitation, action planning, reporting, and action.

#3: PASSIONATE & PRINCIPLED IMPARTIALITY

It's possible to be passionate about a topic yet avoid seeking a predetermined end. Civic professionals should strive for this form of "passionate and principled impartiality." Facilitators can make a commitment to learning, growth, and leadership development, which means placing a commitment to the democratic process above the desire for any specific outcome or goal.

Civic professionals need to take advantage of the positive impact of neutrality and objectivity, while working with groups to solve public problems in an inclusive way. This approach serves to highlight the inherent tensions in the work of deliberative democracy. Ideally it will give facilitators the authority to bring people together across differences, emphasizing a commitment to participatory processes that builds the civic capacity of a community to solve problems.

Ultimately, this approach strives for impartiality. This involves facilitating a process with no predetermined or partisan end in which facilitators still bring to bear a passion for the democratic processes involved in exploring their solutions.

#4: TRUST THE PROCESS

Neutral deliberation will ultimately plant the seeds for social justice. In contrast, an explicit focus on equity and social justice will brand the work as partisan and contribute to the polarizing politics of our public life. Civic professionals need to be objective and neutral as facilitators of change and trust people in this process to come up with sound decisions.

This neutral approach enables a broad and diverse coalition of people to come together to work through a problem, which is ultimately the only way it will be solved. In our hyper-partisan political culture, neutral conveners and strong facilitators that emphasize a well-designed process can be critical to moving conversations forward and undoing some of the negative consequences of polarization.

If we define our work as favoring one side of an issue or another, facilitators will rightly lose their legitimacy as neutral and fair conveners. We will also likely be less successful because some people who should be present won't be at the table. This approach seeks to change the nature of the conversation by moving away from partisanship and polarization by providing neutral space for dialogue that (ideally) leads to informed action. This is the best way to restore faith in democracy and make a long-term impact.

