

# THE ENGAGEMENT PATH

*The Realities of How People Engage Over Time –  
and the Possibilities for Re-engaging Americans*



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# THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE ENGAGEMENT PATH



<b>Personal Realm</b>	<b>Nascent Talk</b>	<b>Discovery</b>	<b>Deliberation</b>	<b>Peeling</b>
				<b>Building</b>
				<b>Sorting Out</b>
				<b>Systems</b>

**DANGER:** Often, we assume Deliberation is the whole of engagement

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## INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement is a big topic in America. We live in a time when many Americans have retreated from politics and public life, and many civic-minded organizations and public leaders seek to re-engage them. Such engagement is taking place through school districts and civic organizations, foundations and leadership programs, as well as elsewhere. But to what extent are these engagement efforts sensitive to the realities of how citizens engage – and the possibilities that exist?

There is one bit of knowledge everyone should know when seeking to engage people in public life: there is a natural path to people's engagement. We call it the *Engagement Path*. If the natural steps along this path are not understood, engagement can fall flat. People's hopes can be dashed, their frustration with public life and politics deepened.

This report is about what happens along the *Engagement Path*. It is not everything The Harwood Institute has learned from our fifteen years of work with people and their engagement; in this instance, we set out with a specific focus on the nature of people's engagement over time.

There are many important touchstones for this work, but none more important than two key reminders found in The Harwood Institute's earlier report, *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns*. When people engage in public life, when they interact with other people, they are in search of meeting two fundamental human needs. First, they are seeking coherence in their lives. They want to make sense of the world around them, figure out where they and others fit, and sort out what they and others think. This search for coherence is echoed throughout this report. Its importance cannot be overemphasized.

Second, people are in search of a sense of possibility – of *hope*. People often engage in public life initially out of frustration, anger or disgust; but, in engagement they find the sense of possibility that moves them to take one step after another – to *engage* with others over time.

These two fundamental human needs sit at the core of all of The Harwood Institute's experience, research findings, and philosophy about citizen engagement. They are critical touchstones for this report.

## KNOWING THE ENGAGEMENT PATH

*The Engagement Path* lays out a framework for thinking about engagement, identifies key hurdles people face as they engage, and reveals significant markers one can see as engagement plays out. Like any framework, it creates a *way of thinking* about the topic at hand; it is not intended to serve as a rigid system or a foolproof model, but as a way to approach the hard work of genuinely engaging people.

This report is a synthesis of key facets of The Harwood Institute's knowledge about how people engage over time. It draws on our engagement initiatives in re-connecting communities and schools, growing community strength, improving political conduct, reforming health care, and many other efforts across the nation. It also taps into our fifteen years of formal research into how citizens view and engage with public life and politics. There is a list of selected Harwood Institute publications at the end of this report.

Based on our experience, the *Engagement Path* is made up of the following elements:

- There are *four engagement steps* for people – each step along the *Engagement Path* calls for different strategies from those who seek to engage people, and holds different possibilities for those who take part.
- There are a series of *inflection points* that people encounter along the *Engagement Path* – places at which engagement can be literally halted or sidetracked. But when properly understood, inflection points can propel engagement forward with a new momentum.
- There is a set of *engagement markers* that people can see *and* feel as they engage along the *Engagement Path*. It is possible to nurture these markers if one is attentive to them.

## THE STEPS OF ENGAGEMENT

The Harwood Institute’s work suggests that there are four significant steps on the *Engagement Path*: Personal Realm; Nascent Talk; Discovery; and Deliberation. Each phase works over time and has unique rhythms. People move in and out of the steps throughout their daily lives, depending upon the topic or public issue of concern. While the steps may appear linear, in everyday life they work in more natural, less predictable ways.

When seeking to engage people, it is important to understand where they start – that is, at which step along the *Engagement Path* they find themselves. The process of moving through these steps certainly can be accelerated, but no step can be skipped or passed over. Indeed, our experience is that when a step is violated, engagement efforts short-circuit people’s willingness, and even ability, to engage.

But there can be problems even when one is aware of these steps. For instance, one key problem is that many engagement efforts assume people are already in the Deliberation step – the most advanced step – when they are not.

Another problem is the rush to engage people with approaches and techniques that suit one step, while people are in another. At other times, we falsely assume that “our single approach” will apply to almost any situation – we take a one size fits all strategy. More nuance and care is necessary in order to authentically engage people.

### **Personal Realm**

In the Personal Realm of engagement, people are, so to speak, in their homes, living in their daily private lives. Their conversations tend to focus on those concerns that have a direct impact on their own lives or the lives of those close to them.

In this stage, people talk with others whom they know and feel comfortable with. This talk occurs daily; it may touch on people’s worries about their health, their child’s education, or what career they should pursue. A conversation about crime in the personal realm, for instance, may involve talk about moving the family to a safer neighborhood.

Conversations at this step along the *Engagement Path* are informal, with the purpose of people getting information, understanding their own concerns, and

testing ideas with others. People are moving at their own pace and focus on those aspects of public concerns that are of most interest to them personally.

In a nation where many Americans have retreated from public life, a key challenge is how to engage people to take the next step – that is, how can people step over that little metal strip beneath their front door into public life?

One mistake that people often make in this step is constantly appealing to people’s self-interests; but, this can push people even further into their personal realm, failing to trigger discussion of “public” dimensions of concerns. Another error is to “raise the volume” hoping to get people’s attention; for many people, this creates too much dissonance and merely turns them off.

### **Nascent Talk**

It is in Nascent Talk where people begin to *connect* more explicitly their personal and public lives. What drives them is their basic need to interact with others. They are in search of a better understanding of what is going on around them. And they want to be understood by others. Importantly, people are not usually motivated at this point to solve problems or to make decisions.

Engagement in this step looks and sounds a lot like people’s everyday discussions. It is a mixture of gossip and conversation about an issue like health care or education. The conversations tend to be random and unstructured. People will start a conversation one day, only to pick it up some days later. People are constantly moving in and out of different conversations.

This kind of talk occurs within the context of everyday activities. You can see it when people talk to their neighbors when walking their dogs; when chit-chatting with others at a kids’ sporting event; when meeting up with others after church services; or, when bumping into someone they know at the grocery store.

People’s discussions in this step are fragile. Attempts to push the conversations along too quickly will force people back into the Personal Realm. People need time and space to engage with others; to mull things over; to express their frustrations; to test ideas. It is in this stage that people “visit” with each other, chat, go in and out from private to public concerns. Conversations that become too “policy” or “issue” oriented squeeze out people’s room to make connections with others, to talk freely, and to figure out what really is of concern to them.

As The Harwood Institute reported in *Will Any Kind of Talk Do?:* “Efforts to bring people in too swiftly or abruptly or passively or in overstructured ways may, in fact, push people away.”

## **Discovery**

Discovery is where people make a *leap* in engagement. Here people fully step into public life. It is in this stage that people gain a sense of possibility that did not exist previously. They attach to engagement more deeply; they become more vested.

What motivates people in this step along the *Engagement Path* is the ability to generate together what The Harwood Institute calls a *re-orienting idea*. This is not just any idea. A re-orienting idea provides people new insight into a public dilemma that they are struggling with. It is rooted in an easy, intuitive language that redefines an issue and helps people see their relationship to it. People emerge from this step with a new sense of coherence and meaning about a public concern.

In Discovery, people often move from being a concerned individual or even a consumer in public life, to being a “citizen” – seeing both their own interests and those of others and connecting them into a common idea. They begin to see themselves as actors in public life.

But this stage often is entirely missed or short-circuited in engagement efforts. Engagement efforts often fail to give people enough time to make their own discoveries and to name them in their own words. Instead, issues are pre-defined or defined in ways that do not relate to people’s lives. Processes hurry people through this step in order to get to the “real action”; and yet, without this step, the context of people’s concerns and hopes – their very lives – is stripped away. Then there is little reason for people to engage.

## **Deliberation**

Deliberation is the next part of the *Engagement Path*. It is in this stage that people’s engagement goes much deeper: people make choices and decisions; wrestle with values and tradeoffs; figure out what to do. This step is a prerequisite to taking purposeful public action.

There are a number of keys to this step. First, it is not monolithic. And yet, it is typically treated as such. People take different routes through Deliberation, depending upon the nature of the issue at hand. The Harwood Institute has found that there are four key routes through Deliberation: Peeling Away; Building; Sorting Out; and Systems (see box on page ten).

Frequently, groups seeking to hold deliberation come along with a one size fits all approach; thus, even if they have determined the appropriate engagement step, in this case Deliberation, they may still be taking the wrong route.

Many groups also seem to approach engagement as if Deliberation were the *only* stage on the *Engagement Path*. When organizations create conversations that are too tightly focused on deliberation, they may engage only small numbers of people – those who already care about a particular issue, those who have confidence to talk publicly with others, or those who have already thought about an issue. Indeed, such efforts may be engaging only those who have moved through the previous engagement steps. This is one explanation for why some deliberation efforts fail to attract more people. Simply put, they have left behind many Americans.

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO DELIBERATION

<p><b>Peeling Away</b></p> <p><i>In Peeling Away deliberations, people repeatedly peel back layer after layer of an issue, each time discovering another issue or dimension that was unknown or hidden to them before. For example, in 1995 when The Harwood Institute engaged people on their views toward the environment and the effects of consumption, as people talked, it became clear that this was not a connection they were willing to make; it held little relevance for them. Instead, as we reported in <i>Yearning for Balance</i>, people were more interested in sharing their concerns about “the values they see driving our society” and that the “American Dream is spinning out of control.” People said the nation had become too materialistic. The issue wasn’t about consumption and the environment, but about greed and values run amok. So, each time people peeled away a piece of the discussion, they found new issues. Not only had they redefined the topic for engagement, but, through a series of personal discoveries, they also found that their own behavior was at issue; when they discovered that, an entire series of conversations began about the American Dream, life choices, and raising children. In 1995, this peeling away of issues prompted deep ambivalence among people – they were not ready to choose between values of material comfort and financial opportunity and those of family, friends and faith.</i></p>	<p><b>Building</b></p> <p><i>In a Building deliberation, there is constant forward progress that purposefully builds over a series of conversations. Here, the same group meets more than once, letting the conversation grow. Each step precedes the next, and is the necessary precursor for what follows. There is a sequence at work. One example of this kind of deliberation is The Harwood Institute’s Re-connecting Communities and Schools Initiative. As volumes of research will attest, the politics of changing the community-school relationship seems to conspire against real progress. In this deliberation, people construct over time a complex understanding about an issue that, paradoxically, produces greater clarity about what is at issue and what people believe should be done. The group talks about what they want for their community; the situation facing their community and their schools; and the purpose for taking public action. Finally, people reach an agreement (a covenant) on what actions to take – some they will do together, others they will take on alone, but always in complementary ways and always aligning their deliberations with their actions. In this kind of deliberation, if people skip a step, the deliberation goes off track.</i></p>
<p><b>Sorting Out</b></p> <p><i>In some deliberations, people wrestle with choices that contain trade-offs and inherent tensions. Each approach involves giving up something attractive in another approach. But sometimes the path forward for a public problem does not have such clear trade-offs. This is what we call a Sorting Out deliberation. Citizens do not need to decide for and against the options, but rather need to sort through what is most important to them about each one. In the process, they pick and choose from among different options. For example, in the early 1990s, The Harwood Institute worked with citizens as they deliberated on the subject of youth at risk using the issue book, <i>Growing Up At Risk</i>. The issue is one that touches everyone’s life. Across the nation, young people face serious challenges that often disrupt their lives and the lives of those around them. The discussion guide sets forth four different directions in which a community might respond: teach values; restore order; provide care; or build futures. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they are all different. In deliberating about this issue, citizens grappled with and sorted out their priorities and what was most important.</i></p>	<p><b>Systems</b></p> <p><i>Some issues require a Systems approach to deliberation. In The Harwood Institute’s health-care work in Georgia, people created multiple webs of issues – all inherently inter-related. Rather than separate out each issue, in order to make them more “manageable,” people worked on one issue and then another, constantly weaving and re-weaving the webs, working to resolve them much like a simultaneous equation in mathematics. In this approach, people create a set of connected values – a <u>system</u> of values that work interdependently – in order to drive health-care reform plans. In Georgia, there were two sets of interdependent values: foundation values that must always be present (including honesty and trust, considerate and human care, dignity and respect, concern for others, high quality care, and prevention); and decision values that must drive trade-offs (including fairness, power to choose, responsible cost and efficiency, and shared responsibility). Georgians said they were willing to make trade-offs on health care, using the decision values, but only if they occurred under the right conditions, that is, if the foundation values were present. These values played out differently on different issues.</i></p>

## INFLECTION POINTS

People confront a set of challenges as they engage over time; these challenges are inevitable. Indeed, these challenges are essential to moving along the *Engagement Path*. The Harwood Institute calls these challenges “inflection points.”

Inflection points are inherently dramatic. At each inflection point, people reach a critical juncture; their engagement will either move forward, be derailed, or simply get stuck. If people can get through their inflection points, they are propelled forward at an accelerated pace. Inflection points come into play each step along the *Engagement Path*.

How people move through inflection points relates to how engagement approaches are structured. Too often, when inflection points are reached, people try to go around them, hope they will fade away, or pretend they do not exist. The key to engagement is to identify and grab hold of inflection points – literally to use them to generate progress.

Through our experience, The Harwood Institute has identified a series of key inflection points that can beset engagement even in the best of times. Here are seven important ones to consider:

### 1. Frustration Overload

When people engage, their conversations often start with their own frustrations or even with demands and claims. While this is a vital part of the Personal Realm and Nascent Talk, things can easily get stuck here; and, when they do, people often disengage, feeling a lack of possibility. People want to know that their conversations are leading somewhere, that they will be productive.

To get past this inflection point, it is essential for people to discover their connection to others – their shared concerns, aspirations, and hopes. This helps to produce a re-orienting idea. But the problem is that many engagement efforts are structured so as to merely seek people’s individual views, especially their demands and complaints. People often do not have to *engage* with one another – to think about each other’s perspectives, to consider common concerns. This leaves people feeling isolated and without hope; the conversation itself is left mired in people’s frustrations.

The key to moving through this inflection point is to pose the right probing questions to people. Such questions open up new space for engaging people, creating a pathway for them to articulate and discover *shared* ideas, beliefs and

emotions; such questions put people on a quest to figure things out, thus generating the sense of possibility so necessary in engagement. The power of finding the right probing questions must not be underestimated.

## **2. The Missing Story**

Sometimes when people engage on an issue they feel as if they are making progress – but then “it” happens. The conversation goes in circles, repeatedly coming back to the same topics and issues. Someone will say, often with a touch of disgust or exasperation, “Didn’t we already talk about *that*?” Or, someone says, “What’s going on here?” People often decide to opt out at this point.

The problem is that people do not take the time to define an issue in their own words. Instead, as the conversation progresses, people simply assume that everyone is in agreement – “We all know what we’re talking about.” People also generate long lists of concerns and ideas on newsprint paper, with the assumption that there is little need to synthesize them. “We can all see what we talked about!”

But what is missing for people, and what is critical for moving along the *Engagement Path*, is the vital sense of coherence. This is what people are in search of. People need room to figure out what it is they are talking about and to describe it collectively using their own language. Deciding on such language is a key step in creating coherence; and this step must occur over and over along the *Engagement Path*. When people can *authentically* capture the essence and complexity of an issue, things begin to make sense to them. People gain ownership. Without this, the meaning of engagement fizzles.

## **3. Too Little Tension**

Discussions on many public concerns can become mired in conflict. Sometimes this is a by-product of how engagement is structured and framed: we encourage people to endlessly vent their frustrations or do battle over competing solutions – whether they are pre-set solutions or solutions that emerge from the conversation itself. This simply produces civic dissonance. However conflict comes about, people often shy away from it, sidestep it, or opt out of the conversation. The conversation is then stymied.

While such conflict can be unproductive, tension *is* absolutely necessary in order for people to move along the *Engagement Path*. Tension is rooted in wrestling with competing values, different assumptions, and underlying worldviews. Tension produces creative juices and ideas. (Such tension also emerges from

points of ambivalence – those instances in which people feel truly torn over what they believe, or how they feel, or what to do.)

At issue is whether people can successfully recognize and turn moments of conflict *into* points of tension. This is important because otherwise engagement may collapse as it gets stuck in conflict.

We find that by giving rise to tension it is possible to accelerate and deepen people’s engagement. When people engage with tension, it produces a sense of possibility – that there is work for them to do, that there is something for them to address, that there is a role for them to play. By engaging tension, people become actors, no longer being by-standers or spectators in public life. In order to move through the steps of engagement *requires* finding the tension.

#### **4. Imagination Trap**

People will sometimes move along the *Engagement Path* and then hit a spot that stops them right in their tracks: they simply cannot imagine a way to act on the dilemma at hand. We at The Harwood Institute see this routinely when, for instance, people are engaged on matters concerning public schools and community. While people will readily articulate their aspirations for their public schools, they often cannot imagine how to move forward – what to do. The public school system seems too big; the forces at work seem too great; people themselves feel “small” – out of scale – in relationship to the problem.

At issue in this inflection point is whether people can trigger their imagination to find an alternative to current conditions and practices – that is, how things can get done, why, and by whom. Moving through this inflection point takes people re-imagining what progress might look like and what steps can be taken along the way, rather than crafting some “comprehensive solution” and figuring out how to implement it (this is the same problem people often encounter when talking about changing health care or the political system). To get out of the imagination trap requires people making different assumptions about the nature of time (that not everything has to be, or can be, done right now!), how change can unfold over time, and what might be intermediate milestones.

#### **5. Personal *Un-accounting***

There is always that interesting moment in engagement when it is time for people to step up and act individually or as a group. It is no secret that it is easier for people to talk about what *others* can do than to talk about themselves. At this inflection point, when it’s time to act, people often become silent; look down at

the table or out a window; or shift uncomfortably in their chairs. Engagement can literally break down here; there can be a stifling feeling in the room – that people’s engagement has been wasted, because individuals will not take up their own role.

This inflection point can be a result of people not engaging deeply enough in deliberation – that is, while discussion has taken place, there has been a *rush* to action. In these instances, people often lack a sense of coherence and possibility; we have jumped the gun.

But at other times, this inflection point can result from a lack of common expectation of personal accounting. No norm of responsibility has been generated in the engagement; there is an unwillingness to ask the tough question about what “we” (as individuals and as a group) will do. Moving forward on this inflection point must be done with care and, at times, delicately. We must understand the rhythms of people’s engagement – their *readiness* for action; norms must be generated about responsibility; and mechanisms that help people see progress over time must be in place to sustain engagement and a sense of possibility.

## **6. Disconnected Action**

A vital inflection point in engagement is when people simply fail to connect their discussions about actions to the substance of their engagement conversations. It is as if all previous conversations and agreements are somehow forgotten. Civic amnesia sets in. The result: when it is time to decide on what actions to take, people reach back for their favorite idea, the one they had long before the engagement ever began; they pine for the quick-fix; and they look for what might sound good to others.

The key to moving through this inflection point is to use the conversation as a *filter* or *lens* for generating actions. This sounds easier to do than it is; it can be quite difficult to pull off. It takes enormous discipline and vigilance to check how one’s proposed (and then literal) actions fit with earlier conversations. Because at the point of “action” in engagement, people typically want to move quickly. The tide is moving against exercising discipline. But the results of people’s conversations need to be placed side-by-side with their proposed actions to check their alignment. This is hard work.

## **7. The Time Is Not Ripe**

There are times when the desire exists to move engagement forward but people demonstrate little interest and resist. At The Harwood Institute, we find that

people in a community may not be ready to move along the *Engagement Path*. And yet, there is an attempt to skip a step along the *Engagement Path* – to move *too* quickly. This happens with individuals, groups of people, and even with entire communities. This inflection point is about ripeness: Are people ready to take the next step along the *Engagement Path*? Our caution is clear: Pushing too hard can result in people retreating from public life.

None of this is to say that we should not actively engage people; indeed, The Harwood Institute’s experience is that it is desirable to *accelerate* progress along the *Engagement Path*. People yearn for such engagement, given the right approach. But such efforts should be done in ways that understand where along the *Engagement Path* people start; how long they need to move through different points; and how fast they will go. Dictating such rhythms to people or a community simply does not work. We must engage on *their* rhythms. We can accelerate, but not violate these rhythms.

## ENGAGEMENT MARKERS

Something special happens when people are able to move through inflection points and along the *Engagement Path*. A transformation occurs in how they see themselves and others; how they define their concerns; and what they see at stake. There are a series of engagement markers that signal these changes. These markers are produced by people's engagement, and we believe give rise to further engagement.

The Harwood Institute has identified thirteen markers; no doubt, there are others. It is important to know that these markers cannot be seen every time people engage. They clearly do not appear in a linear fashion. Evidence of them comes only over the course of engagement – that is, over time. And each participant will not necessarily experience all of them. Indeed, our experience is that many participants will recognize these markers only when they look back upon their engagement.

A complete list of these markers is on page eighteen. And we provide an illustration of how many of these markers play out in engagement in a case study following the list.

The Harwood Institute has found that as people engage, they focus more and more on their hopes and aspirations – moving away from the initial frustrations and demands that people typically express. They are less likely to see others as scapegoats for existing problems or challenges, and they see roles and responsibilities that they and others play in both the problem at hand and its remedy.

While some might expect people's views to become muddled as more and more gets put on the table, people actually gain clarity of the complexity of a situation; they gain a sense of the parts of a problem and how they fit together.

What is more, people look to basic structures in life to deal with common challenges – such as family, neighborhoods and relationships, all things that help to create social fabric. And they seek to strike up covenants – a sense of agreement about what needs to be done and by whom.

It can be tempting to want to force a correspondence between a particular engagement marker and a particular step on the *Engagement Path*. But this would be wrong – the markers that we see in engagement are much more of a *flow* than they are a set of discrete events.

These markers also may sound similar to the factors revealed by The Harwood Institute in *Meaningful Chaos*. Perhaps this should not be a surprise. They both illuminate how people relate to public life.

But there is also an important difference. Think of the *Meaningful Chaos* factors as what people seek in order to forge a relationship with a public concern and public life – for instance, Coherence, Time, and a Sense of Possibility. The engagement markers outlined in this report are a step toward realizing those factors; but alone, they are not sufficient. As we know, there are many elements that make up public life for people, such as news and information, knowledge from civic and political leaders, people’s faith, among other dimensions; these all contribute to people’s relationship with public life.

Still, these engagement markers show why we seek to engage people – and what happens when we do. The possibilities that engagement holds are quite promising. In a nation where people have retreated from public life and politics, these markers illuminate that people can engage; that they can move beyond difficult inflection points; that they can find ways to come together

None of this is easy, of course. And this report is not intended to be a practical “how to” manual; in fact, there are many ways in which to engage people over time. There is no one best approach.

But for those interested in the vital work of engagement, we do believe that these engagement markers are essential to consider. How can we create the conditions under which they can arise? How can we gauge the extent to which they are already present and find ways to further cultivate them? How can people come to name them as they occur so that they can hold them as their own?

## THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE ENGAGEMENT MARKERS

ENGAGEMENT MARKER	WHAT HAPPENS ON ENGAGEMENT PATH	WHAT OFTEN HAPPENS IN PUBLIC LIFE
Aspirations	People focus on their hopes and aspirations – people ask, “what do we <b>seek</b> ?”	Engagement focuses on people’s complaints and demands.
Necessary Involvement	People come to see that they <i>must</i> play a role in solutions to problems.	Discussion is geared to what others can or should do. Fails to provide room for people to discover and express their necessary involvement.
Values	Discussions become <b>rooted in values</b> as people uncover what matters most to them.	Conversations focus on policy issues and programs. These conversations stymie people’s engagement.
Covenants	People <b>search for covenants</b> that will allow them to move forward – who will act and under what conditions.	Engagement ends before people can strike a deal.
Small Talk	People chat and engage in <b>small talk</b> with one another. These essential informal interactions build vital trust.	People often squeeze small talk out of engagement because we don’t value it, or misread small talk for other forms of necessary engagement.
Time	<b>Time</b> is critical for people to work through ideas, uncover core values, and reach agreements.	People cannot be pushed too far too fast. We must know where they start.
Tension	Over time, people can turn conflicts and contradictions into <b>tensions</b> over competing values.	Set up engagement so that it never gets to people’s values and the real underlying discussion.
Curiosity	People’s interest in other perspectives increases as they engage. They become more <b>curious</b> about how other people think.	Engagement often does not allow for real give-and-take; it’s “hurried.” Time is necessary for curiosity to emerge.
Self-Examination	As curiosity in others increases, people gain a greater <b>willingness to look at themselves</b> and their role. But they still may not change.	Engagement fails to go deep enough and give people room to try out different ideas.
Root Causes	As talk progresses, people shift their focus from the problem to its <b>root cause</b> . People begin to dig under symptoms.	Conversations focus on symptoms. The inability to get to root causes short-circuits many engagement effects.
No Scapegoats	As people engage, they <b>scapegoat less</b> . When one person tries needlessly to blame others, the group self regulates.	Time must be allowed for people to develop norms in their engagement.
Basic Structures	People often turn to <b>basic social structures</b> (such as families, neighborhoods) for solutions, rather than new laws.	People fail to understand the role that basic structures play in people’s lives and how they help to create coherence.
Complexity of Clarity	As people talk, they embrace more <b>complexity</b> and make connections that bring <b>clarity</b> to the underlying issue.	Engagement processes are too complex, driving out the room that people need to generate their own complexity – and then gain clarity.

## AN ILLUSTRATION

As health care became a burning national issue in the early 1990s, The Harwood Institute came together with a statewide citizen-based organization to engage people (many of them the same people) for over three years on the issue. At the time, the sound of our conversations paralleled much of what one could hear throughout America. “I felt like a piece of cattle,” one participant said as he described a recent hospital visit. Another person lamented, “Daddy had a stroke ... he was just left in the (hospital) hall.”

The people we met across the state were angry – angry about their lack of health care, angry about the loss of dignity they felt as they were shuffled through a maze of health care providers. They were frustrated with dwindling quality and increasing costs. They were scared they would lose their health care – as so many other Americans had.

One woman said that, in her city, you could drive down one street and go past several high-quality hospitals, but given the way health care was structured, if you were poor, you had to bypass all of them in order to get to the ill-equipped and overcrowded county facility. “We need a change,” another participant said. “I mean, the system is not working now.”

When the conversation began, people pressed for quick results. They demanded an array of solutions, including laws to cap doctors’ fees, regulate insurance companies, and pry open HMOs (health maintenance organizations). “We are talking about a profit-oriented system,” one person said. “We don’t have a medical care system. We have a medical industrial complex.”

Not only did people believe that insurance and managed care companies were making decisions for them (and bad ones, at that), but that the government was doing nothing to help matters. “We have lost control ... in the health care arena,” one citizen said. “We are not in control of anything!”

But as people talked, it was possible to hear a change in the tone and direction of the conversations; the finger pointing and blame placing gave way. In fact, blame eventually turned into notions of responsibility – even shared responsibility. “We all contribute to this inflation,” a participant said. “Those who have insurance or some way to pay, they get far more than they need, and the rest of the people who have no way to make it have far less than they need.”

Where once only black and white existed, now there were shades of gray. One citizen said, “Every person has the responsibility to stay as healthy as he can before running up doctor and hospital bills.” Another person added, “The problem

with saying that we don't have any responsibility for [those less fortunate] is that tomorrow, it could be any one of us."

What's more, people began to say that not all issues were equal in their eyes; they needed to set some priorities and to make some trade-offs. "There are certain things that need to be taken care of first," a participant said. "There are some things you really can do without." Another person said, "We don't ever ask our doctors any questions ... We trust our doctors implicitly to make sure that [we] don't have to pay more than [we] can afford to pay. But that is not the case."

As people talked, certain values seemed to be in conflict with one another. For example, many people believed that everyone in the state should have the same access to health care, no matter where they live. "Rural hospitals should be just as up to par as the largest hospitals," one person said. But, another citizen pointed out that, "For them to have intensive care units and things like that [here], it is really not feasible."

Such tensions were central in all the conversations, running the gamut of health care issues. Another big issue that came up was how to balance the ability of health care providers to make a profit with the desire to provide all people with health care. One person argued, "Doctors have a right ... to make as much money as they can. I wouldn't want anybody to have my profession regulated." But, another person added, "You have the right to make a profit, but I have got the right to stay healthy and get medical care. Does that mean you can charge me four times what it really costs ... just because I don't have the education (to provide it myself)?" Values concerning capitalism, compassion, fairness and equity were at odds.

Here's another example: Many people said they were willing to pay more for universal coverage, but they wanted to make sure they knew their dollars were being well spent. How could this be accomplished? "I'm not willing to do that (pay more taxes) without some form of monitoring," one person said. "I'm not willing to pass an opportunity to make profit on to a whole new generation of profiteers at my expense." Here, values of fairness, reasonable cost and accountability came up.

As people wrestled with these seemingly contradictory values, underlying principles emerged on which ultimately they agreed. Referring back to the rural hospital issue, one person concluded, "Every area should at least have a clinic. You have to provide that necessary care."

People also saw an overarching need for personal responsibility, as well as an effort to prevent illness. "It's not an issue of bleeding heart liberals versus the staunch conservatives. Anybody who is interested in money ought to know it

costs more money to solve a problem once it's gotten out of hand than it does to nip it in the bud.”

Thus, the value of personal responsibility came to thread its way through people's conversations. Indeed, it became a cornerstone of all the conversations. People often wrestled with the extent to which families and neighbors should be responsible for providing care to the people they know – rather than the government or a health care provider supplying such care.

Getting to a system that cared for everyone appeared to be of paramount importance to people across the state – a fundamental value on which they would not compromise. “It is unfair that health care is not available or insurance is not available to all levels of society,” someone said. “There are people who are in dire straights who ought to be taken care of. You can't write off somebody because they are at that point in time they can't pay.”

As participants sorted through the issues, they found common areas of agreement that helped them to create a kind of lens through which to view any possible health care solutions – and which they hoped would drive action on health care.

The system they created included what came to be known as “foundation values” – the guiding principles on which any initiative should be judged.

People wanted *honesty and trust* to be the cornerstone of all relationships in any health care system. They believed that *compassionate and humane care – high quality care* – should be provided to everyone (not just those who could afford it). They also felt strongly that *dignity and respect* should be the touchstone of how each person is treated when they come into contact with the health care system. The participants said that the system needed to shift away from self-interest, allowing *concern for others* to guide it, as well. Finally, people believed that health care providers should stress *prevention* as much as cures.

Their system also involved reconciling a set of decision values: the values that hold tough trade-offs but on which we must make decisions to create a good health care system.

First and foremost, citizens wanted a sense of *fairness*, defined broadly as what's fair to people as a whole – not just to some. They would accept some restrictions on their *power to choose* health care if it would reduce costs, but the desire for *control* ran deep (recall how the national health care debate at the time imploded over this very issue). Like all Americans, they were also deeply concerned about greed and abuse in health care, so creating a system *reasonable in cost, efficient and more accountable* to the people it serves was key. People were also ready and willing to *share responsibility* for their health care by owning up to their lifestyle

choices and by being better health care consumers.

In each of these areas within decision values, people outlined the kinds of specific trade-offs they were willing to live with in order to achieve the expression of the values.

As we engaged people, we could see vividly how our conversation began to differ from that of the unfolding conversation in the rest of America. One was a story of productive engagement; the other, one of isolation, personal frustration and demands. Even though these two conversations began in virtually the same place, their outcomes were strikingly different.

## THE PATH PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

Knowing what can happen as people move along the *Engagement Path* is only a part of the story about how people engage over time. For much can and does go wrong in efforts to engage citizens. The path to engagement is paved with good intentions gone awry. For example:

- Many efforts undermine people’s natural engagement rhythms. For instance, conversations are too narrowly framed or cast in expert terms. Relatively few people find such conversations engaging.
- Some conversations prompt people to express only their frustrations, so that the conversations have no natural rhythm of leading somewhere, and there is little sense for people that they are moving in a productive direction. In short, people’s sense of possibility is undermined.
- Too many efforts to engage people do quite the opposite – overwhelming them with too much information, setting up panels of speakers to talk *at* people, or enticing people to participate by making them feel guilty about their lack of participation. By doing so, these efforts inadvertently push people away.
- There are engagement efforts that are so big and unwieldy that they suffer from their own complexity and weight; the approach itself takes over. People are left feeling overly “processed.”
- When people are ready to step outside their front door to share their concerns and aspirations, we prematurely ask them to make decisions, driving them back into their homes. People simply want to talk and to hear other people talk. Deliberation or decision making is premature.
- People develop a single engagement approach that they come to believe is “the answer” to many engagement challenges. Yet, the approach itself may not be appropriate to different steps along the *Engagement Path*. We can find ourselves out of step with people.
- What is more, people interested in engagement must make a distinction between implementing a project and helping to generate a stronger public life that operates on its own. The former is about undertaking an initiative; the latter is about how to cultivate an organic system called public life. Both can be necessary.

Getting beyond these obstacles is not easy. Their makings often are embedded in our own assumptions and reflexes about why people engage and what it takes for people to engage. They emerge from our desire to move things along, to get “more people involved,” or simply to get the next grant.

Normally, people’s intentions are good; yet, our actions can defy the realities of how people engage over time – and the possibilities for re-engaging Americans in public life. This report seeks to engage each of us in examining those assumptions and reflexes as we work to re-engage Americans in politics and public life.

People want to move along the *Engagement Path*.