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Social Action in Rural Communities

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Introduction:

“None of us knows as much as all of us.” Public deliberation processes are designed with this in mind – to be inclusive, to capture the best experience and knowledge among a group and to create shared meaning and understanding.

Mary Pipher in her book, The Shelter of Each Other (Pipher, 1997), says our society is capable of great decency ... we've outlawed child labor, passed civil rights legislation and more. Americans have long believed that the way to make a nation stronger is to make it better. *But* when we stopped working together in groups, things began to fall apart. We need to learn to work together again.

Discourse-based or capacity building approaches to problem-solving are gaining popularity as communities experience the erosion of their civic fabric when issues have ended up as community battlegrounds.



Excerpts from “Cultivating Productive Public Conversations” (Bramson, 2002) suggests that creating safe space for deliberative dialogue involves creating a container for public conversations. Most of our public spaces in the U.S. are made for debate and argument. Safe public space evolves and strengthens over time. There must be contact before content.

Successfully addressing community issues and projects often follows a process or plan, similar to a roadmap. The value of the systematic approach outlined in this article is not measured so much in the success/failure of a project, but in the preservation of relationships, connections made from being inclusive, and the greater good that will result as an outcome. The ultimate consequence is greater trust. If a project is successful, so much the better.

One of the first attempts to lay out a step-by-step community process for community action was the “Social Action Process” (Beal and Bohlen, 1958). They suggested that all social action takes place in some sort of social system, never in a vacuum. Examples of social systems are neighborhoods, clubs and organizations, churches and communities.

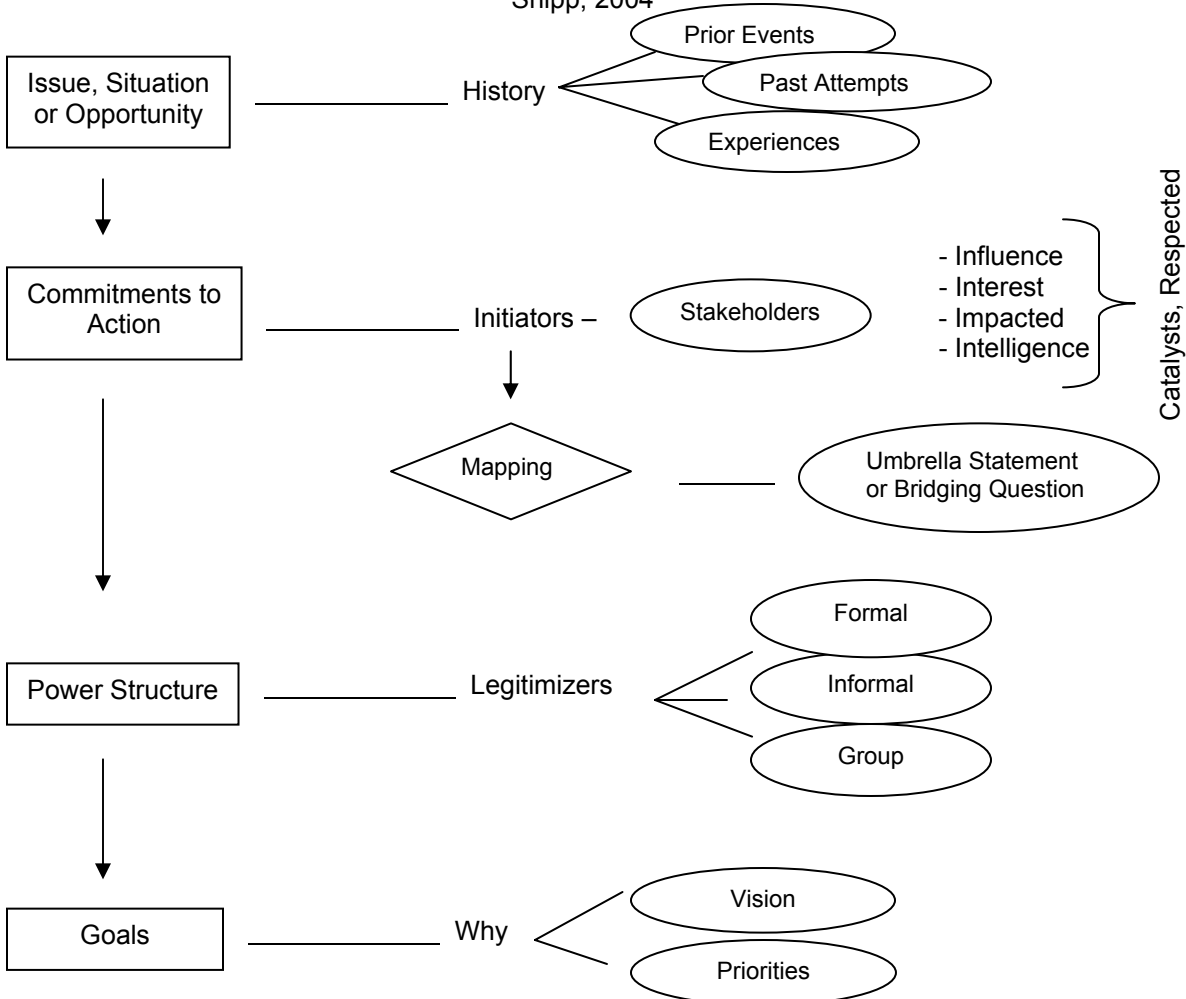
Another model called “A Community Action Process” (Sharpe, 1987) borrows heavily from Beal and Bohlen and provides a logical guide of nine steps to successful completion of a community project for group leaders.

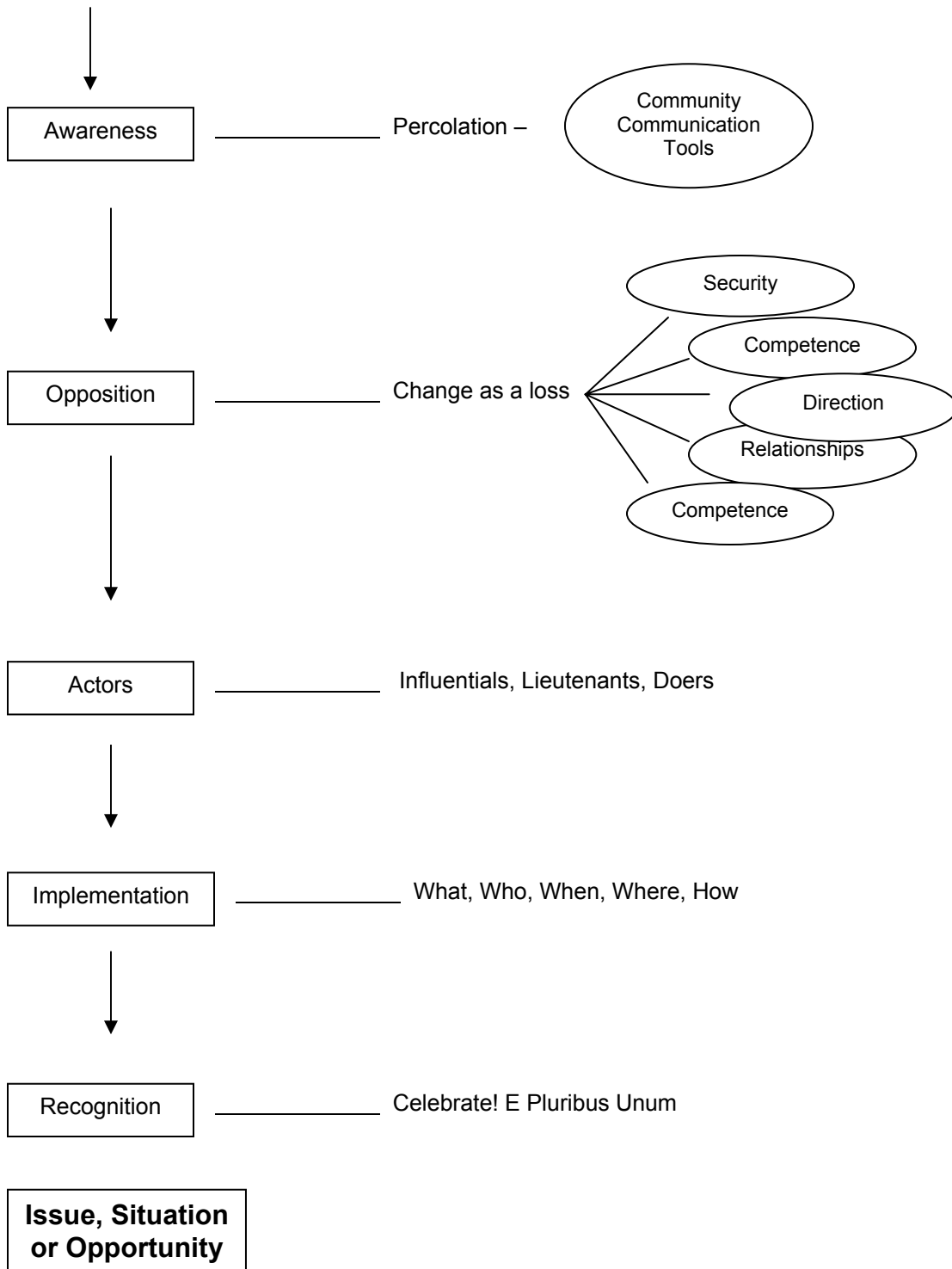
Both models are included at the end of this article.

This article combines these two approaches in a modified version (Figure 1) found useful by the author. The sequence may vary depending on the issue.

It begins when two or more people agree that a situation or issue exists and something should be done.

Figure 1: **Social Action Model**
Shipp, 2004





As human beings, our tendency is to identify problems and fix them. We see solutions immediately to almost everything because we are a society of problem solvers. We run into problems when our solutions affect other people who have different ideas, solutions, goals, needs, values or interests. Long before solutions, steps should be taken that are designed to open up communication and include those most affected by outcomes early on in the process.

The first step is to understand the nature of the issue inside and out. This is a critical step. We may skip this, believing it isn't important or is inconsequential. We would be remiss not to give it serious consideration.

- What is the history of the issue?
- How did it arise?
- Were internal or external forces involved?
- Who is affected, a lot or a few?
- What prior events or attempts have been made?
- What was successful, what wasn't and why?
- What experiences did people have?

Understanding the prior history and the inside/outside nature of the situation shows a willingness among the core group of individuals to ask questions of others and to listen. This lays the groundwork for establishing community trust. It also aids in defining how the issue is presented to the public so it is neutral, unbiased, non-judgmental and non-positional without alienating certain groups or individuals.

Therefore, critical to continuing beyond this point is good "framing." Framing is defined as one's perspective or world view of a situation. People operating from different frames often talk right past one another and community controversies originate from differences of frames. Take care to frame the issue inclusively to open rather than close lines of communication.

Commitment to Action

A group begins gathering as a result of considering the prior situation. This group is called the "Initiators" and includes those with influence, interest, intelligence or who are impacted or affected in some way by the issue. They often represent a group or faction of other people. Initiators have enough respect amongst the group they represent that they are trusted and can act as catalysts for commitments to action. Also important is considering the community power structure so they are aware of what is happening. (See next section)

Often, those opposed are invited to be part of the initiating group for three reasons. If they agree to participate, they can help build the umbrella statement or bridging question. If they don't wish to participate but be kept informed, it opens communications to build trust. If they refuse participation, they will be less intent on blocking decisions or forward movement because the courtesy was extended to them to be involved early on in the process.

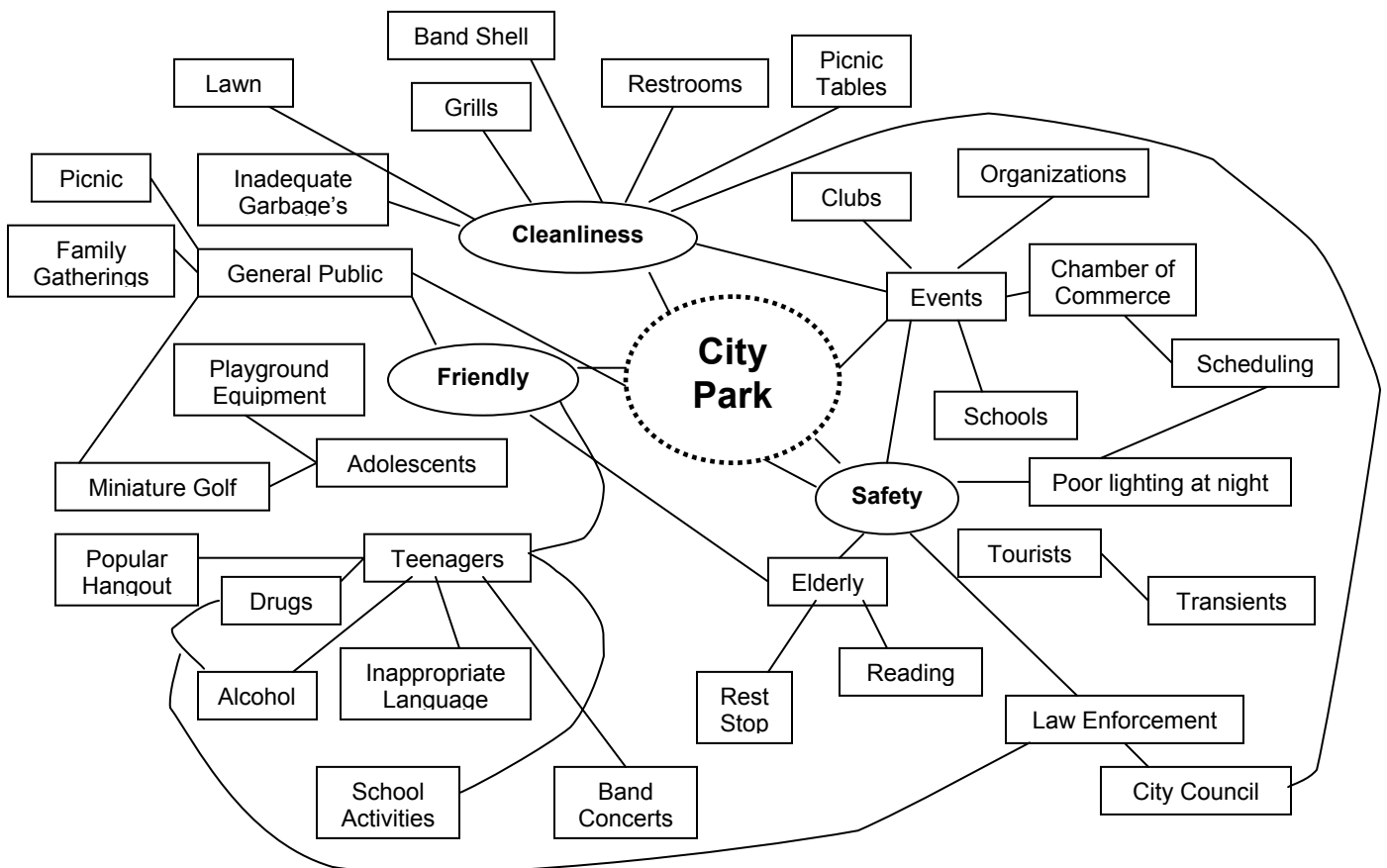
At this stage, a technique called *Situation Mapping* can be used to define the scope of the issue. A situation map integrates perspectives, organizes thoughts, gets broad base participation and captures the complexity involved.

How to: Divide into small groups of 5-7. Give each group a flip sheet with a circle in the middle naming the issue. Ask them to work individually identifying those things related to the middle on sticky notes (one idea per note). Then begin placing sticky notes onto the sheet to build a map that highlights key aspects of the situation, illustrates the complexity and interconnections, aids in creating shared meaning and common understanding, and fosters learning.

Example:

The City received citizen complaints about the condition of the city park throughout the summer and during winter weekends. Evening complaints then began all year round about “wild” youths using the city park -- abusive language, harassment and hostility toward other park users causing fear, insult, disgust and a generally bad experience. When the initiating group came together and had met several times, their first *situation map* (Figure 2) looked like this:

Figure 2:



The map is used throughout the process and may be modified, added to or changed as new information arises. As a communication and planning tool, it shows the public that all concerns and interests are important and considered in the process.

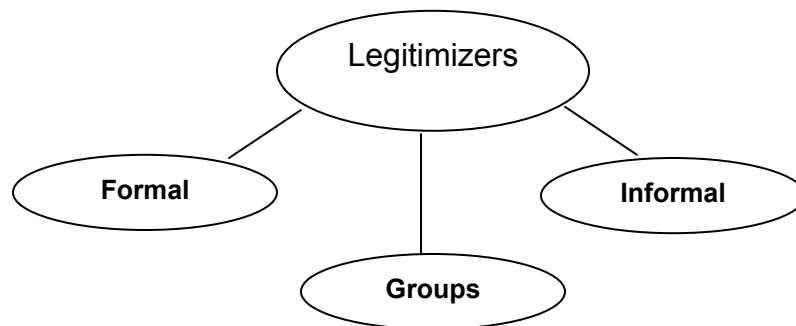
After creating the map, the next step is for the group to reframe the issue by creating an Umbrella Statement or Bridging Question. Steven Covey says “begin with the end in mind” and this step achieves that. It answers the big “WHY?” question.

Umbrella Statement – these are overarching statements that are broad, encompassing and do not alienate an interest. An example for the city park situation might be: “A friendly, clean and safe city park for all users”.

Bridging Question – a bridging question connects the different perspectives. A bridging question for the city park issue might be: “How can we have a friendly, clean and safe city park while also meeting the needs of users of any age?”

Power Structure

We would be remiss if a community’s power structure were not considered throughout the process. This group is called the “Legitimizers”. In almost every community, there are certain people or groups whose approval or acceptance of proposed ideas is necessary for them to move forward. They give their stamp of approval.



Formal legitimizers are those people having positional, assigned, acknowledged or personal power recognized in the community. In the case of the city park example, the initiating group must have support from the City Council on any actions because they are the decision-making body for city government. They are formal legitimizers in this issue.

Informal legitimizers vary from place to place, time to time and are influenced by population and economic shifts. Informal legitimizers are those who are

connected to others and because of trust, loyalty or respect, others rally behind them or support them. Examples would be the leader of the group of young people causing the city park problems, a neighborhood spokesman or a long time city resident.

Groups have factional power and may influence decision makers, such as the Rotary Club or special events committees.

The initiating group should align their efforts with decision making individuals or systems early on in the process.

Goals

Once the initiating group has a vision identified after looking at all the interests, needs, concerns, priorities and has developed the umbrella statement or bridging question, the next step is to establish broad goals. This often takes time depending on the size of the group. It requires listening, dialoguing and questioning skills in order to create goals acceptable to the entire group.

At this stage, goals are very general, shared by the members of the initiating group, written clearly and in understandable language.

Awareness

The message is carried to the public to make them aware of the issue. This is called diffusion or percolation and requires a plan just as much as implementation. There are numerous community communication modes and the initiating set are not always the best people to carry the message to the public. Share the situation map to help others understand the various aspects, complexity and interconnections. Use the umbrella statement and bridging question often to invite open communication.

Opposition

Throughout the process, the group continues to ask “Who did we miss in this conversation?” By now, it is clear who might benefit more or less from certain solutions or strategies. Expect some opposition even though you have done your best to include them early on in the process.

You can keep the doors of communication open by focusing on the vision and the opposition’s interests rather than their positions. Determine what their concerns are that created their position. Continue using bridging questions to include various points of view and request their help in generating options to consider.

Why do people oppose something? Perhaps the solution is viewed as self serving or serving a few rather than many, the impact is unclear, resources are limited, it's viewed as a criticism of a way of life or choice, it interferes with accomplishments and loyalties, or norms or values are ignored.

Often people are opposed to something because it will be different than before. It's change. To say that we are afraid of change is insulting to many. A healthier way to look at change is losing something – relationships, security, competence, direction or territory. If the initiating group can discover the impact of the change on others and what this means in terms of loss to them, the conversations with the opposition may be more positive and productive.

Even after keeping the doors open to the opposition, you may not be able to bring them around to your perspectives. The hope is that much of the animosity, alienation and hostility is lessened because of your genuine desire to find a satisfactory solution that is mutually agreeable.

Note: When the lines in the sand have been drawn and deepened, it becomes ever more difficult to move forward while preserving future relationships.

Example:

A city park should be respected!

Let's keep things the way they are!

SAVE THE CITY PARK FROM REGULATIONS

Vote: AGAINST

Please vote on Tuesday, January 21st

Paid for by the Committee to Save the City Park

When you see for/against or yes/no such as the above postcard that was mailed to the general public, the issue has become so heated that the lines have been drawn in the sand and they are deep. Gaining public trust and credibility at this point is extremely difficult!

Strategies

When possible, involve the general public outside the initiating group in offering solutions. Therefore, strategies might be a laundry list of general ideas that could be put before the public as potential solutions to consider with encouragement to piggyback upon the ideas or propose other alternatives that the group could consider. Remember to keep the door open for public participation at this point as you share the group's ideas with others.

Strategies for the City Park Issue might include:

- *Add more lighting to the park interior.*
- *Increase police patrols during certain times of the day.*
- *Put more garbage containers throughout the park to make them more convenient.*
- *Enlist support of surrounding businesses/residents to keep an eye out for anything amiss and report it.*
- *Request assistance from teen groups or school groups.*

Actors

Actors are the ones who actually implement the solutions that have finally been determined by the initiating group and endorsed formally or informally by the power structure. Actors may be involved in the initiating group or not but the actors have the endorsement or stamp of approval of the initiating group.

There are three kinds of actors that might be involved:

1. Influentials – these people initiate policy, direct, advise, supervise or have power to veto, i.e., City Council.
2. Lieutenants – plan and implement, are visible, usually beholden to the influentials, i.e., Parks and Recreation Department supervisor.
3. Doers – carry out the decisions.

Implementation

Implementation is the means by which something gets done. Considerations include: 1) time schedule, 2) committees needed, 3) kinds of personnel needed, 4) buildings and facilities required, 5) content materials, 6) visual aids or other methods needed, 7) the need for meetings, 8) communication channels, 9) publicity requirements, and 10) all other planning details. A plan or other systematic approach is usually employed to accomplish the tasks with benchmarks along the way to monitor and evaluate progress.

Recognition

Celebrating successes, small and large, are extremely important in any public process. Small celebrations can be built in along the way to recognize the contributions and sacrifices made. A large celebration at the end honors the overall effort.

Conclusion:

Written in Latin on the tails side of U.S. coins is E. Pluribus Unum . . . “Out of many, one.”

Social action models are designed to provide greater opportunity to be inclusive and capture the best experience and knowledge of a collective group, to create shared meaning and understanding. The lofty goal is that out of many perspectives, one answer is found that is mutually agreeable.

Public deliberation involves both citizens and public officials in defining an issue, in conversations to build mutual understanding and in weighing options, making choices and taking action (Bramson, 2002). Public deliberation involves postponing solution generation to engage community members at the beginning of the process by defining an issue in terms that are meaningful to them (reframing).

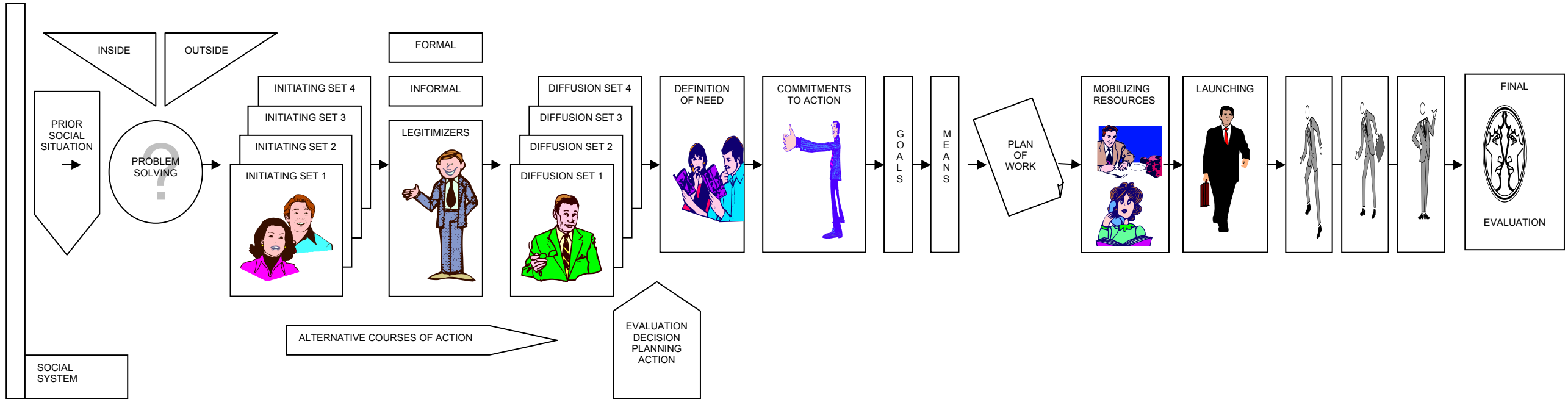
The value of the systematic approach outlined here is not measured so much in the success/failure of the project, but in the preservation of relationships, the connections made as a result of being inclusive, and more good will as an outcome. The ultimate consequence is greater community trust.

References:

1. Pipher, Mary. The Shelter of Each Other, Ballantine Books, NY, ISBN 0-345-40603-6, 1997.
2. Bramson, Ruth Ann. “Cultivating Productive Public Conversations”, International Economic Development Council, http://www.iedconline.org/edj_sample_page1.html, June, 2002.
3. Beal, George M. “How Does Social Change Occur? Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Service, Ames, Iowa, RS-284, 1958.
4. “A Community Action Process”, Montana State University Extension Service, EB 15, August, 1987.

APPENDIX I

“ . . . How Social Action Takes Place ”



Credit: Beal, George M., How Does Social Change Occur? Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, RS-284. 1958.

APPENDIX II

“A Community Action Process”

