



To Facilitate the Essential National *We the People* Conversation

By Jim Rough

I was excited to read the paper, [The National Purpose Initiative](#), written by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund [RBF]. The vision described in the paper is similar to what we at the [Center for Wise Democracy](#) have been pursuing ... to facilitate a national conversation that “releases the energy, ingenuity and practical idealism of the people,” that “rekindles the sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility,” that “mobilizes the collective wisdom and common sense of the American public,” and which works “on behalf of solving key problems our nation faces.”

Since 1993 we’ve been experimenting with a strategy for convening this kind of large-system conversation and we are excited at how well our approach is working, and the prospect for how it can work at the national and global levels.

Our approach is different than the one described in the Project paper, however. And it’s [different from “Deliberative Democracy” approaches](#) in general because it aims for a creative conversation, rather than one that is deliberative. This requires a different set of facilitation skills and understandings about group process. In this paper—it was supposed to be a short email—I’d like to share a little about our approach, our experiences, the progress we are making, and the prognosis for what’s next.

Then later, I read a follow-up letter from the RBF describing a “[Strategic Pivot and Name Change](#),” where the aim of *The National Purpose Initiative* was seen as being too high and too costly. This was disappointing to read because now the Project has been replaced by something with a “much more modest scale,” [the Pluribus Project](#).

We think the original vision is fully realizable. In fact, we think the way it can be realized is to become more ambitious, not less. So we are hoping that you will look into what we are doing and that you will want to participate with us in this effort ... as well as your effort in the Pluribus Project.

A bigger vision is needed

Our nation had a marvelous founding moment, which leveraged the establishment of representative democracy all over the world. Except for excluding women, Native Americans, slaves, and non-property holders, there was a coming together of citizens as *We the People* to invent a new system of governance. The results were exceptional. We the People established a structure for self-governance, which has carried forward over 200 years. But since then, there has been no more *We the People* conversation, where “We” can check back in on how things are going and make improvements. This is the missing ingredient for our society to become sustainable. It’s up to us to facilitate that conversation into being.

The system that our Founders designed is fundamentally based in competition, not conversation. The natural result is a power struggle in politics, economics, justice, etc. The system assumes that we are all independent and it supports our natural tendency to be self-interested. It doesn’t recognize our increasing interdependence and support our natural tendency to serve society, future generations and life itself. So today this

mismatch between our situation and our system is causing a break down. We naturally pursue corporate profits, mindless economic growth and endless consumption at the expense of the commons. Our system has been left in charge of itself and us, taking us where no one wants to go.

We believe that the really pressing national and global issues like climate change, the rapid depletion of planetary resources, health care, the mal-distribution of wealth, etc. are ultimately caused by our system. Policy changes and individual consciousness are not enough.

To solve the Big, impossible-seeming problems of our society we must step outside of the competitive context that has been set for us, and visit together about what's best for all. On a regular basis we must come together as *We the People*. But how can we do this?

Three social innovations make the We the People conversation possible

Originally we thought it required a U.S. Constitutional Amendment to leverage this larger *We the People* conversation into existence. We thought that *We the People* of the past, who created the Constitution, were needed to legitimize us today as *We the People*. But in the last 12 years our experiments have shown otherwise. The "magic sauce," which allows us to facilitate a legitimate *We the People* conversation isn't the Constitution. It's the quality of conversation that happens in a *We the People* convening and our ability to reliably facilitate it. Below is a brief description of three social innovations: 1) choice-creating, the essential quality of thinking; 2) Dynamic Facilitation, how to reliably evoke "choice creating"; and 3) the Wisdom Council process, how to extend the range of Dynamic Facilitation to large systems.

Social innovation #1: Choice-creating

The core conversation in a democracy ought to be where all the people come together, think respectfully about the problems we face, figure out what we want, and creatively determine how best to achieve it. We call this kind of conversation "choice-creating" as distinguished from "decision-making." It's where people talk in a creative way until the choice becomes clear. They don't fight over options until there is a winner. Nor do they thoughtfully weigh options and select one through a vote. That's decision-making. Choice creating is heartfelt and emergent. In choice creating different views are an asset, not a liability. These differences provide for better solutions and the process of resolving differences builds trust and the spirit of community.

Choice creating can happen in a crisis, or in a "time out." People drop their roles and their blind adherence to old ideas, rules and norms. They become authentic with one another and face the crisis with open minds and hearts. Everyone is included and unity is the only possible result.

When a group thinks in the spirit of choice creating it can overcome challenges that seemed impossible beforehand. This may happen through redefining the problem, transforming the people, gaining clarity about what needs to happen, transforming the system, or by achieving win/win breakthrough solutions. Terms like dialogue, deliberation, debate, negotiation, problem-solving and creative problem solving do *not* describe choice-creating, as important as these tools are and can be in appropriate contexts.

In our system we are structured for decision-making, and choice creating is largely missing. Until now, we haven't even given it a name. But for a true *We the People* to emerge, we all need to be talking in the spirit of choice creating.

Social innovation #2: Dynamic Facilitation

Dynamic Facilitation (DF) is a form of facilitating that can reliably evoke choice creating in groups of people meeting face to face. It is guided by energy, like how much people care about the issue, their fears, or their advocacy for ideas. Guidelines, roles or agendas are not needed so DF can evoke the spirit of choice creating among random people who care deeply about an issue. They can be dynamically facilitated to face a messy, ill-defined, conflicted or impossible-seeming issue, speak naturally, and evolve group unity.

Given our current system it's natural for us to react disbelievingly, saying something like "no way will people always agree." But DF helps us get free of the agree/disagree context that we have grown accustomed to. It helps us shift to a different context where we are building something new together, where differences are valued as a way to generate even better answers.

How DF works: ... The Dynamic Facilitator sets up the room with a half-circle of chairs facing four charts – Solutions, Data, Concerns, and Problem-Statements. These charts are used to hold all comments, to protect people from judgment and to build a story of group progress. For example, if one person is describing an idea, the Dynamic Facilitator will be writing that down on the chart of Solutions. Then if someone else starts to disagree, the Facilitator might ask the person who is interrupting to direct his comment to her, rather than to the person with whom he is disagreeing. She will then record the comment as a Concern. Then she will invite him to offer his Solution as well, "So what might be an even better answer?" This response is added to the list of Solutions. Then the Dynamic Facilitator can go back to the first person and help him finish articulating his solution.

"The Wisdom Council is the most empowering democratic innovation I know."

*Tom Atlee, author
Tao of Democracy and
Empowering Public Wisdom*

Using this approach, no one is judged. The context of agreeing and disagreeing has vanished. Each comment is valued and added to the charts as an interesting piece of the puzzle. People grow in curiosity and creativity seeking to solve the puzzle. Shifts and breakthroughs naturally result and all come to embrace the final result. The process usually takes less time than an ordinary meeting process.

Social innovation #3: The Wisdom Council Process

The Wisdom Council is a way to extend the range of Dynamic Facilitation. A few people in a very large system, like a city or country, can use it to facilitate an ongoing choice creating conversation throughout the system. Every four months or so, twelve citizens are randomly selected and gathered as a microcosm of the whole. Each Wisdom Council meets for a couple of days with a dynamic facilitator. They choose an important issue or are given an issue and reach shared conclusions through shifts and breakthroughs. The Wisdom Council then presents this unity and the story of how it was developed back to all the people. Everyone is invited to visit in small groups, face to face, over the telephone, or via the Internet about what they heard and what they think. Resonance builds. Those in attendance tend to say, "Yes, I think so too!" ... and continue the conversation.

People who were not present are often affected too. For instance, if someone in the larger population expresses a view that differs from your views and from the Wisdom Council conclusions, you are liable to respond with more interest and patience. Where before you might have said, "I disagree," and discussed back and forth. Now you are more likely to respond with curiosity, focusing on how this person's views might be reconciled with the building shared perspective. The media is affected as well because people have less interest in the usual political battle.

Implementing the Wisdom Council process in society can seem risky at first because it promises so much. But all indications are it works and it's safe. One way of looking at it is that every few months we just randomly select a small group of people who are dynamically facilitated, who give a talk and go away. Not much risk in that. Another way to see it is to realize that adding the Wisdom Council process to our national society (or to global society) doesn't directly change anything. It just adds a new voluntary conversation to what already exists.

"The Wisdom Council is the future of democracy."

*Sen. Les Ihara, Senate Majority
Leader, State of Hawaii*

For those interested in convening Wisdom Councils it's vital that they first understand these social innovations. We offer a 3-day seminar on *Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council* where a working group can learn this mode of thinking while developing their plan of action. But while they need to understand the process, those in the Wisdom Council and in the larger society do not. They just need to care about issues and want change. They can speak naturally.

Current strategies and examples

Below are six strategies we are currently using to lay the foundation for a national *We the People* conversation. Examples illustrate why we think each of these paths is working. So far each of the strategies has relied on volunteer labor or has pretty much paid for itself. But with adequate funding we can start structuring the national *We the People* conversation directly. This last option is briefly described below as Strategy #7: The National *We the People* Conversation Project.

1) *We help governments adopt the Wisdom Council process as a way for them to more effectively involve citizens in solving public issues.*

In Vorarlberg, the Westernmost state of Austria, the “Office of Future Related Issues”(OFRI) has been working for many years at stimulating self-organization and empowerment among citizens. They’ve used Citizen Juries, Planning Cells, Appreciative Inquiry, World Cafe’s, Art of Hosting, and more. In 2006, Dr Manfred Hellrigl, the Director of OFRI, and many of his staff attended the seminar on *Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council*.

Now, OFRI regularly supports communities in Vorarlberg and states nearby to use the Wisdom Council for solving difficult public issues and for elevating the quality of public conversation. [See the video presentation of Dr. Hellrigl sharing [the story of progress for OFRI in a presentation](#) in Stockholm. Also see the [Evaluation of Wisdom Council use in Austria by the European Institute of Public Participation](#)]

Community example: In the heart of Bregenz, a city on Lake Constance at the westernmost edge of Austria, is a parking lot. Over the years it’s been difficult to develop key parcels like this because each development proposal generates a political battle. To move the project ahead without the usual battle the mayor convened a “Wisdom Council.” Twelve random citizens met briefly to listen to the latest development proposal. Then the door was closed and they were dynamically facilitated. At the end, the Wisdom Council expressed their unity, which was resonant in the community. They basically said, *The people of this community want to be more closely linked to the lake and this project offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do this. We could take advantage of this opportunity if the center of gravity for the project were moved to the second floor and there was a wide bridge over the highway and railroad, with a sweeping set of steps to the lake.*

The Wisdom Council presented this perspective to investors, architects, city planners, activists, and citizens. Then each Wisdom Council member spoke how enjoyable and rewarding it was to be on the Council. The audience turned their chairs and met in small groups to consider this perspective. The evening presentation was like a celebration because everyone was on board, including the developers who proceeded to modify their project plans.

“If you organize a Wisdom Council you will deliver results that are very close to the common good. I have found no alternative to that yet.”

*Dr. Manfred Hellrigl, Director
Office of Future Related Issues,
Vorarlberg Austria*

State-wide: For a number of years now, all four parties of the Vorarlberg Parliament have supported using the Wisdom Council to address state-wide issues. Twice a year they stop ordinary business and meet in the foyer of their building to hear a Wisdom Council report on an issue they had given them a few weeks earlier. It’s worked so well to help communication among legislators that nearby states in Austria and in Germany are considering using it too.

2) *We help citizen groups use the Wisdom Council as a way to make substantive progress on big issues.*

In 2003 after Jim Rough and Tom Atlee gave radio interviews on the local NPR station in the Rogue Valley of Oregon, three listeners called Jim to ask about setting up a Wisdom Council in their area. They led a one-time experiment, which was successful in empowering local citizens and sparking

transpartisan change. [On this [webpage](#) see the video *Democracy in America* created by Joseph McCormick on the Wisdom Council in the Rogue Valley. Plus see Joseph's comments seven years later describing the resulting impact.]

More recently in 2013 we received a phone call from two women in North Carolina concerned about the same issues described in the RBF paper on the *National Purpose Initiative*—how the power of money has taken over and how elected officials are no longer responsive to the public. Just the previous week [Moyers & Company had dedicated a TV show](#) to this problem in North Carolina, so it was easy to gain a quick understanding of their concerns.

As a first step we suggested they convene a seminar on *Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council* in their area to establish a core group. We felt it was critical for them to first understand how and why this approach works and to start practicing this process in local public meetings. Within eighteen months three seminars had been held, the City of Durham NC had used Dynamic Facilitation in many public meetings, and a citizen group had convened the first Wisdom Council in Asheville NC. Video producer Martin Rausch and director William Gazecki filmed the Wisdom Council to use in creating a set of training films for other communities. [See the [news report from the Asheville Mountain Express](#) describing the Wisdom Council.]

- 3) *We help commercial media establish the new national conversation using the Wisdom Council as a way for them to generate a larger viewing audience.*

Swiss producer Martin Rausch, and Jim Rough created a pitch for national network like CNN to air a “real” reality TV show called *Citizen Wisdom Council Live*. It's a strategy to leverage the national conversation into being quickly with little cost. [See the [2 minute cartoon video](#).]

- 4) *We promote the Wisdom Council process in organizations and conferences so people can begin to gain experience with it.*

Example: One division of the Department of Agriculture of Washington State initiated a series of Wisdom Councils. One lamented how the Department no longer had the spirit of community it once had. With the Internet and emails, people were working more in silos. From that experience the people of that division found a new spirit of community. Later, Wisdom Councils were expanded to include the whole Department, state-wide, where employees exclaimed they had finally “bridged the Cascade Mountain Barrier,” which had always kept the Department in two separate cultures. [See the article on [The Circle Organization](#)]

Example: At a conference on Collective Wisdom, attendees were randomly selected to participate in a shortened version of the Wisdom Council process. The brief Wisdom Council met and chose to organize a ceremony the whole conference meeting in reverence for the planet.

- 5) *We promote and educate people about the exciting potential for change in implementing a Wisdom Council process as an Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.*

This was the original insight of 1993 -- a way society could become sustainable quickly. In 2002 Jim Rough published his book [Society's Breakthrough! Releasing Essential Wisdom and Virtue in All the People](#), describing how the *Citizens Amendment* would transform the key problems we face as a society. We believe [The Amendment](#) will become viable after national Wisdom Councils start happening ... and people begin facing and solving key collective issues. [See the 30 min [interview on the Wise Democracy Amendment](#)]

Example: Partly because of our emphasis on the Amendment, the Parliament of Vorarlberg implemented the Wisdom Council process as an amendment to the state constitution in 2013. The amendment assures that there will be at least two Wisdom Councils every year. Also there is a provision for ordinary citizens to choose the issue. Just one thousand signatures are required to set the topic of conversation for a state wide Wisdom Council and a presentation to the Parliament. [See [the description](#) at the OFRI website.]

6) *We educate people about the potential for change in choice-creating, Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council.*

The three-day seminar on [*Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council*](#) seminar has been held all over the world. Seminar participants learn a new approach to solving problems, to group process, to resolving conflict, to whole systems change, and to personal transformation. As a result, many people now use these skills in their lives and communities as well as to improve meetings.

Some recent books highlighting Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council are:

- [*From Conflict to Creative Collaboration: A Detailed User's Guide to Dynamic Facilitation*](#) by Rosa Zubizarreta
- [*Dynamic Facilitation: Die erfolgreiche Moderationsmethode für schwierige und verfahrenre Situationen*](#) by Matthias zur Bonsen and Rosa Zubizarreta
- [*Spontaneous Evolution: Our Positive Future and a Way to Get There from Here*](#) by Bruce Lipton and Steve Bhaerman
- * [*Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*](#) by Peggy Holman
- [*Empowering Public Wisdom: A Practical Vision for Citizen-Led Politics*](#) by Tom Atlee

Strategy #7: National We the People Conversation Project

In addition to the six strategies discussed so far, with a network of respected philanthropic organizations as partners, we can start setting up the new national conversation using a national Wisdom Council process. Below is a brief draft of how it might work.

1) What needs to happen?

Most all of the BIG problems in our society are caused by our system-on-autopilot. It is taking us where we don't want to go. It structures our thinking process to be far less than what we need. It directs us to ignore the collective problems we face and to focus instead on parochial goals like maximizing corporate profits and earning enough money to survive. It directs us to make collective choices through voting, with winners and losers, and adding up independent judgments. Since we are interdependent, such a process sets the heart and liver competing for blood. The body will die.

To solve today's problems we must shift our underlying system from a basis in judgment and competition to being based in creativity and collaboration. This essential transformation is simple and safe. We just need to add a national *We the People* conversation to what currently exists.

2) Can we achieve this?

Yes. We need a method which allows us to facilitate all citizens to be involved in one conversation where we face impossible-seeming issues and co-determine clear results that most everyone supports. We need these results to clearly be in the "public interest" and to be strong enough to stand up to the power of special interests. We need the process to be creative where people co-discover the real issues and achieve win/win solutions. We need the process to be enjoyable and productive so people choose to be involved. It should be powerful enough to affect policy, build shared vision, spark new stories of purpose, and empower the people.

The process should be safe and fast. It should improve the quality of conversation for elected officials and government staff as well as citizens, and bring the people and government together in trust. It should involve expert views but not allow them to take charge. It should be safe from manipulation. It should be scalable to systems of any size—from a town to a world. And, the process should be accessible, so it's inexpensive and can be convened by just ordinary citizens.

So far through experiments, we believe the Wisdom Council process meets these criteria.

3) Draft of the National We the People Conversation Project

We would proceed in a phased way.

Phase 1: Identify members of the convening team.

Phase 2: Help them learn about choice creating, Dynamic Facilitation and the Wisdom Council. In this phase of mutual learning they facilitate themselves to create a plan of action.

Phase 3: [Tentative] Design a three year project with three national Wisdom Councils per year. In the first year the Wisdom Councils will be held in Washington DC and will have a growing number of co-sponsors, a live audience of invited luminaries to consider the results, plus a live web-based TV broadcast of the Wisdom Council Presentations. These first national Wisdom Councils will address a particularly difficult public issue, hopefully with media co-sponsorship and growing national publicity. Plus they will be filmed to create a video documentary.

Phase 4: In subsequent years Wisdom Councils will move around the country and will add more features aimed at involving very large numbers of citizens using web-based processes. For instance, during the Wisdom Council presentations there will be simultaneous web-based conversations in remote locations. And there will be a way for the people to assess their level of resonance with the Wisdom Council. Plus, there will be follow-up asynchronous, flexible web conversations and “responder meetings” with elected officials. These and other details will be worked out by the conveners in conjunction with funders and other supporters.

How do these activities fit with the Pluribus Project?

In the Pluribus Project the first collaboratory seeks to identify interventions that can influence the next generation of Congressional campaigns so the winning candidates are accountable to a broader cross-section of the electorate.

Each Wisdom Council provides a legitimate voice of the “public interest.” When widely known this voice has immense political power. With it, elected officials and citizens know the public interest rather than having special interests misrepresent it. This process is a way for citizens to provide leadership to elected representatives and to candidates running for office.

“We must do this [the society-wide Wisdom Council]. There is no other way.”

*Dr. Albrecht Mahr,
Organizer of Conferences on
Collective Wisdom*

The second collaboratory will test new strategies for telling real stories of citizen engagement and empowerment. Each local Wisdom Council will have a story to tell, of real people making real impact.

What’s next?

We hope that the big-picture perspective and energy represented in *The National Purpose Initiative* is still alive and that the moment of opportunity has not passed. We also hope that with this brief description of possibility you are interested to learn more. Perhaps we can meet in person, possibly with a few others who have been connected to the Center for Wise Democracy over past years.

We are hopeful that you will be interested in supporting the National *We the People* Conversation Project, as well as in helping to bring forward the other related strategies we are continuing.

For more information see the web site for the Center for Wise Democracy at www.WiseDemocracy.org