

EXECUTIVE SESSIONS

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EXECUTIVE SESSIONS

An Executive Session is a formal working group comprising high-level practitioners and academics who come together periodically to redefine and propose solutions for a substantive policy issue, and to reposition the organizations whose missions might include responsibility for progress on that issue. The Executive Session is a tool for researching, analyzing, and communicating with practitioner communities and for challenging the conventional wisdom on long-standing policy and managerial problems.

The first Executive Session held by the Kennedy School of Government's Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management addressed the response of the criminal justice system to dangerous offenders. Over the last five years, the Program has convened Executive Sessions in four other substantive areas of criminal justice: (1)the juvenile justice system, (2)delinquency and the family, (3)community policing, and (4)state and local prosecution. Also, in early 1988, the Kennedy School's Center for Health and Human Resources Policy initiated an Executive Session on improving service delivery to poor children. The Executive Sessions on community policing, prosecution, and service delivery to poor children are continuing.

I. Definition and Description

A. THE PARTICIPANTS

One conception of the Executive Session is that it functions as a "national board of directors" for a critical policy problem or issue. The goal is to constitute a group composed of individuals of independent standing who are prepared to take joint responsibility for rethinking and improving society's response to a social problem.

The size of an Executive Session is usually 25-28 participants. Each person must have ample time to express his or her views and to be heard by the others. The participants typically include:

- o fifteen to twenty high-level practitioners whose daily work brings them face to face with the policy problems at hand;
- o several public officials (both elected and appointed) and representatives of professional organizations and of the community;
- o a team from the Kennedy School (faculty members, research professionals, and doctoral students) and a few academics and researchers from other institutions.

Selecting the members of an Executive Session is probably the greatest challenge facing the convening organization. The success of the enterprise depends on the contribution of its participants and on their ability to interact fruitfully with one another. The Kennedy School has experimented with various approaches, some more formal than others, to selecting participants. Peer referral tends to be an essential component of the process.

The selection process for the membership of an Executive Session is guided by several principles. First, candidates should be selected as individuals, and not only as representatives of key institutions. Clearly, it is critical that a variety of institutions be represented and that participants be prominent and important contributors in their fields (as academics, practitioners, advocates, and so forth). However, it is even more important that participants be thoughtful, creative, open-minded individuals who will be seriously interested in exploring substantial institutional change.

Second, the membership should be drawn from a limited number of constituencies. This is important largely because it is preferable to have two or three persons representing each constituency, so that no one individual shoulders the burden of representing his or her "camp." Having fewer constituencies, with multiple representatives from each, not only

alleviates the pressure on individual members, but also helps to prevent the stereotyping of any one constituent perspective.

Third, membership must be viewed as permanent (i.e., for the duration of the Executive Session). Substitutes do not attend. Since an Executive Session attempts to further the development of both intragroup communication and new ideas -- processes that require a considerable passage of time -- turnover within the membership is disruptive. If members are unable to attend individual meetings, they may send an observer, but the observer may not participate in the discussion.

Finally, the Executive Session offers no access to the press. Because each participant's sense of ease is crucial to the success of the project, the Executive Session must be structured in such a way as to encourage all members to speak freely; thus, barring the press is critical. Proceedings are transcribed, but only for the purpose of reconstructing lines of argument.

B. THE TIME FRAME

The convener must consider carefully (1)the duration of the Executive Session as a whole, (2)the frequency of meetings, and (3)the length of meetings.

An Executive Session is expected to last for two or three years. A fundamental assumption of the Executive Session concept is that the policies, procedures, and philosophy that constitute conventional wisdom on any issue have developed over many years and will yield only to a concerted effort over a considerable period of time.

Meetings of an Executive Session are usually held twice a year. This balance of interval and frequency seems suited to both the need for continuity of discussion and the time commitment that busy practitioners can make. It also allows time between meetings for research and the development of discussion documents.

Individual meetings last approximately two days, typically from a Thursday evening dinner and working meeting through early afternoon on Saturday. Therefore, participants generally are required to be away from their own positions for only one full working day. The two-day meeting is carefully programmed and nearly all of the members' time is structured. All meals, both social and working, are usually in a group setting, and the meeting agenda covers most of the rest of each day.

C. THE LOCATION OF MEETINGS

Experience has demonstrated that meetings of Executive Sessions convened by Harvard should take place within the Harvard setting. Clearly there are logistical advantages to holding meetings at Harvard, as Executive Session staff are located at the university. However, the primary reason for holding meetings at Harvard is not logistical but substantive. The Harvard name appears to play a crucial role in motivating Executive Session members to become and to remain committed to the project. Holding meetings in Cambridge seems to be critical to offering the "Harvard experience" to Executive Session members. Moving members away from their home bases also seems to encourage freer and longer-range thinking.

D. PRODUCTS

Papers. The intellectual work of the Executive Session is carried out in a series of papers that develops over the life of the Session. In general, several papers on a variety of critical issues are presented and discussed at each meeting of the Session. They provide a major portion of the agenda and guide the content of the meeting. Also, since the papers evolve over the life of the Executive Session, they reflect the intellectual development that is, ideally, at the core of it.

Papers are typically written by members of the Kennedy School team and/or the academics and researchers from other institutions. In one Executive Session, the staff

attempted, with some modest success, to create "co-ownership" of papers by teaming a primary writer (usually from Harvard) with two or three other members of the Session. That was designed both to broaden the content of the papers and to increase the commitment of the practitioners to the ideas being developed. Papers from the police meetings are being published jointly with a federal agency, the National Institute of Justice, and distributed to a mailing list of 30,000; this series is entitled Perspectives on Policing. (See Attachment A for examples.)

Books. Books have resulted from the Sessions on juvenile justice and on delinquency and the family.¹ It is also likely that the Perspectives on Policing series of papers will be published in book form. The prosecutors' Session is likely to produce a book of writings by the participants themselves. A specific goal of the Session on service delivery to poor children is to add to the conversation of a faculty seminar on poverty and to the resulting book.

In general, Harvard staff takes primary responsibility for both the production and the substantive content of the books. They are not the product of consensus among members of the Executive Session. On the other hand, the content and direction of the work have always been heavily influenced by the conversations within the meetings of the various Sessions.

Transcripts. All meetings of the Executive Session are taped and transcribed. Speakers are assured complete control over the recorded text of their contributions to the discussion and guaranteed that no material will be quoted without their permission. The transcripts are mined for ideas not fully developed within a particular meeting, for themes

1 Mark H. Moore et al., From Children To Citizens, Vol. I: The Mandate for Juvenile Justice; Francis X. Hartmann, ed., From Children to Citizens, Vol. II: The Role of the Juvenile Court; James Q. Wilson and Glenn C. Loury, eds., From Children to Citizens, Vol. III: Families, Schools, and Delinquency Prevention (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987).

of the discussion, and for pertinent quotations that may be used with the permission of the speaker. The very fact of transcription and of the resulting document lends an air of seriousness of intent to the Executive Session process and aids in developing in the members a sense of their joint enterprise.

Expanded Executive Session. The Executive Session on Community Policing, after seven meetings, decided to expand its discussion by increasing the membership for one meeting, held in December 1988. The purpose of this National Executive Session on Policing was both to share the ideas generated by the original Executive Session and to learn from the new participants. More than 90 people participated in the three-day meeting. Because of the large number of people, a new format was used: a combination of small working groups and plenary sessions. The ideas discussed in this meeting reached a wide audience, both through the participants themselves and through newspaper and journal articles that appeared afterwards. (See Attachment B.)

E. FUNDING

To date, the Executive Sessions have been funded by a combination of public and private sources. Federal sources have been the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Institute of Justice. Private sources include the Carnegie Corporation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

II. Critical Issues

A. THE ROLE OF THE CONVENING ORGANIZATION

The research center of the Kennedy School that undertakes to convene an Executive Session assumes responsibility for the direction and content of the meetings.

One role of the convening center is to act as a "mirror" for the conversation among the members, for the policy makers can better hear the conversation about policy when they are removed from the responsibility of daily decision making. In this role, the conveners repeat and play back the themes of the conversation. Another role is that of an impartial interrogator and challenger of the conventional wisdom.

The convening center also facilitates the conversation within the Executive Session, generally from the position of the Chair. The facilitator's main focus is on the meeting process. However, he or she should be able to participate knowledgeably in the conversation. The facilitator draws the members into fruitful and challenging discussion and ensures that both unarticulated issues and unvoiced opinions are brought into the conversation. Other Session members from the Kennedy School assist with the facilitating function, but not at the expense of attention to substance.

B. THE ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIP

Academics and practitioners are not natural allies, even if they are dealing with the same issues. Their methods, goals, and constituencies differ. Yet most attempts to bring academics and practitioners together are hampered more by deficiencies of structure than by deficiencies of will. A conference, for example, gathers and disperses too quickly to allow listening and learning relationships. Real progress requires the commitment of time, a convener able to bring the right people to the table and willing to do the staff work, and patient effort on a common agenda.

The Executive Session utilizes the convening power of Harvard to bring and keep the right people at the table. It uses that same influence to promote an atmosphere of respect for the intellectual work of both practitioners and academics and to point to what each brings to the other. The Session is, by definition, committed to a long period of time during which patience is demanded. The time commitment of an Executive Session

demands several years of coming together again and again. And finally, Harvard staff carries the workload of listening, writing, and attempting to lead the conversation to fruition. These are valuable assets in the work of making real progress toward examining conventional wisdom.

C. THE GOALS OF AN EXECUTIVE SESSION

Any of three outcomes makes an Executive Session a success. First, the members might agree that a particular set of policies should be changed and then recommend alternative policies, suggest ways to implement them, accomplish the change in their own agencies, and recommend such actions to their colleagues.

Second, members might disagree about the directions of policy, but agree about the definition of the issues and the parameters of the discussion. They would then articulate for themselves and the larger professional and academic world the arguments and alternatives so that informed policy choices could be made. In such a situation, one would expect that members also could articulate the arguments of those with whom they disagreed.

The third outcome, less positive but equally important if the issues permitted no further progress, would be a discussion that informed the members of the Executive Session, and through them a wider audience, of the nature and depth of disagreement around the policy area. While there would be disagreement on both the definition of the issues to be debated and recommended policies, the very fact of organized intelligent discussion ending in mutual respect would encourage further examination of the policies and the taking of specific actions by those for whom policy choices have been delineated.

Any of these outcomes would affect the national debate and subsequent actions based on a clearer delineation of the policy choices.

D. EVALUATION

An Executive Session can also be judged by less abstract, more operational criteria.

Did it hold its members and the conversation together?

Did it lead to changes in actions by the members of the Session? For practitioners, this would mean changes in the operations of their agencies. For academics, it would mean new directions for their research, writing, and teaching.

Were the ideas generated by the Session accepted in the larger world? That would be evidenced in the topics of conferences and other meetings, in journal articles, in articles in the popular and semipopular press, and in publications aimed at professional associations. (See Attachment C.) One would also hope to see the ideas generated by the Session reflected in statements of organizational purpose and in value statements.

Finally, we would hope that, as a result of the Executive Session, citizens would receive better delivery of services and would be more aware of their rights and responsibilities.