

David Hamburg on Commissions: 1982 - 1997

David Hamburg was the 11th president of Carnegie Corporation, serving from 1982 to 1997. He is a psychiatrist who has been a professor at Stanford and Harvard Universities as well as president of the Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is a DeWitt Wallace Distinguished Scholar at Weill Cornell Medical College and the author of several books, the latest of which is Preventing Genocide: Practical Steps toward Early Detection and Effective Action. Commissions were a hallmark of Hamburg's years with the Corporation, and he recently shared his opinions on their advantages and drawbacks.

In considering whether to form a commission, the first question one must ask is: what is the problem? It must be big enough to merit taking this big a step. From a cynical point of view, one might say that a commission is a good way to delay doing something about a problem, or a way of ducking controversy—something to do if an issue is so controversial you want to get it off your back. But that depends on the controversy. Delay is not such a bad thing with a huge problem.

Then you must ask yourself, will the commission have an impact? Yes, if you can overcome partisanship. And the way to do this is to work with the best people. When faced with an important, difficult, complex problem, you've got to get the best people to take it on. Who the best people are is typically not based on knowledge of a field, but rather the knowledge and skill needed to solve the problem. They should have earned respect. I also look for considerable diversity—in intellectual strengths, body of knowledge and social backgrounds. As far as you can control, it's important to choose people who are likely to interact as well and to have respect for one another's knowledge. They must want to solve the problem, *not* to be bigshots--a bunch of big names who might just be showing off.

You also need a high-quality staff who know the subject well. You want diversity there, too. And good relations. Should there be an advisory board? Is this just for show--optics? Grand people who don't do anything? It all depends on how you do it. If, for example, the people on your advisory board are running a country, this is a way you can involve them without overburdening. In the case of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, the advisory board was made up of great scholars in the field along with world leaders: Jimmy Carter, Desmond Tutu, Mikhail Gorbachev. The advisory board and the Commission made equal contributions, but the board was glad to have the vehicle. They had deep interest, rich experience and were willing to admit mistakes.

How you handle the subject matter is critical. A big problem can get diffuse. Early on you need to work out what are the clear focal points and stick to them. I'm a prevention guy; my background is public health. During the orientation phase, I would say to people working on the problem, "I would like you to turn it on its head and write about how this might have been prevented."

Follow-up is extremely important. A commission isn't worth a damn without it. I learned this the hard way in the 1970s when I chaired a psychiatry panel and the work disappeared without a trace. There was no money and no tradition for follow-up. This has happened time and again--people doing a terrific piece of work that remains a well-kept secret. A press conference is an immediate need; it's not beneath a commission's dignity. Speeches by commission members around the country and world serve to explain the work.

To be president of a foundation and run a commission is demanding and hectic: you've got one foot in each world. It's also thrilling. There are so many facets to be considered; it takes time and money. It takes good people. Dedication. Persistence. Follow-up. Never forget, if you drop it, it disappears without a trace. And that's a shame.