



## Input Sessions and Their Value

by

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### Definition

At the Institute of School & Parish Development, we define an input session as a meeting of 10-20 people who are randomly invited to attend a 55 minute session and focus on two or three specific topics for discussion. The input session is facilitated; there is a clear agenda, and the session does not last longer than 50 minutes.

### Rationale

As part of our 7 I process of development, the input session fits into the **Invite Stage**. This is an excellent way to invite people and get them interested in what is going on in your school or parish. In the beginning of your relationship with them -- whether they are a parent, donor, or parishioner -- it is important for you to get to know them and visa-versa. Input sessions provide that introduction and invitation.

When done correctly, we find them to be very successful because of the following reasons:

- People are personally invited.
- The person inviting them is the pastor or principal.
- You are giving people a choice of times and dates.
- People really enjoy giving their opinion.
- A personal phone call is the follow-up.
- They know they are not being asked to serve on a committee that meets forever.
- They know they are being asked to attend a session that only lasts for one hour at the most.
- There is an established agenda.

Through the years, we have found that input sessions allow you to identify many of the future leaders of your school/parish community. It is an excellent way to begin the relationship.

## **The Process**

1. Randomly select the people you wish to invite from a list that is provided.

- Parishioners
- Ministry leaders
- Staff
- Parent leaders
- Alumni
- Business leaders

Please keep in mind that 25-35% of the people invited will attend -- if conducted properly. Obviously, depending on the audience, you will have greater attendance from different groups.

2. Plan to conduct either 2 or 3 nights of input sessions with 3 sessions per night.

- 6:00 PM
- 7:00 PM
- 8:00 PM

3. You want to invite 1.5 times more people than you expect. If you get more, that's great.
4. With a list of 540 names, and you have scheduled 2 nights of input sessions -- or six sessions -- you need to invite 135 people or every 4th name on the list. Please keep in mind that some people will feel left out. That is OK as long as you let them know that you will be conducting another series in the future. Plus, there is a newsletter and various vehicles for their input.
5. Letters are mailed out.
  - Sample included in this article
  - Personally addressed and signed
  - First class stamp
  - No mailing label
6. Within one week, there should be the follow-up phone call from a credible person at the school or parish. Great opportunity for public relations here, so make sure you've got someone who is wonderful on the phone.
  - Sample Conversation:  
*"Hi. Mary, this is Betty and I am calling on behalf of (NAME OF SCHOOL/PARISH). Mary, did you receive the letter from Father (NAME) inviting you to one of the input sessions that we will be having here at the parish next week? You did? Great. Mary, which one of those sessions will be most convenient for you to attend?"*

7. When people arrive, greeters show them where to park and show them where to go for the session.
8. You should have the following:
  - Name tags
  - Refreshments
  - The pastor/principal and/or parish leaders thanking people personally for coming
  - Signs up pointing the way
9. At five minutes to the hour, people are invited into the room -- please see next section.
10. Input session is conducted.
  - The three questions we will be asking are:
    - *What do you see as the present strengths (working well) of the school/parish?*
    - *What are the greatest needs (improvements) that currently exist in the school/parish?*
    - *As we look to the future, what would you like to see here (vision) at (NAME OF SCHOOL/PARISH)? (programs, ministries, buildings, renovations, etc.)*
11. As people leave, school/parish officials are thanking them and inviting them for refreshments.
12. Within 2-4 weeks of the input session, there is an Input Session Report that is mailed to all people who attended listing the highlights. This Report summarizes all of the sessions.
13. A thank you letter is sent with the Report.

### **Input Session Procedure and Guidelines**

1. The room should be arranged in a circle or semi-circle so people can see each other.
2. The facilitator(s) needs to be at the focal point of the room.
3. There should be a scribe that the facilitator(s) appoints.
  - No tape/video recorders
4. Pastor/Principal or some other "official" thanks people for attending and opens with a prayer -- and then leaves the room.
5. Process is handed over to a facilitator(s) -- usually a Core Team member(s).
6. Facilitator follows this process:
  - Introduces him/herself.
  - Has each person introduce him/herself and state relationship with the school/parish

- Goes over the guidelines
  - Introduces the first question and opens up the discussion
    - Engage >>>> Guide >>>> Summarize
  - Keeps track of time every step of the way
  - At 10 minutes to the hour wraps up the session and has people walking out by 5 minutes to the hour.
7. Written guidelines should be distributed at the beginning of the session.
- We would like to hear from everyone.
  - Everyone is on equal ground.
  - This is not a gripe session but please voice any concerns
  - We are not here to discuss personalities
  - There will be no responses or rebuttals to comments made.
  - We will not argue.
  - We will be finished in 50-55 minutes.
  - You will receive a written report within 2-4 weeks.
8. Questions that are helpful when guiding the small group:
- *What do you think?*
  - *Could you be more specific?*
  - *What else?*
  - *What are your concerns?*
  - *How do you feel about that?*
  - *What solutions are available to us?*
  - *Could you clarify your position/point for us?*
  - *Why do you feel that way?*
9. The facilitator and the scribe should pay close attention to those people that raise key issues and seem to want to get more involved in the future. The scribe should write down those names. That is why "big" name tags are essential.

## **The Written Report**

The written report is done after all the sessions and usually follows this outline:

- Purpose of the Input Sessions
- Times and places
- Questions asked
- Key issues raised
- Major "threads" that could be woven throughout all the sessions
- Future focus

This report is usually 3-5 pages in length and should not get into a lot of real controversial "stuff." That should be handled on an individual basis or addressed separately. The written report should affirm the sessions and let people know what the summary is and what the future focus is. No individual names should ever be mentioned in the Report.

## **SAMPLE LETTER OF INVITE TO A PARISH INPUT SESSION**

Date

Dear

I am writing to invite you to a 55-minute input session for (NAME OF PARISH). As school/parish leaders begin working on a long-range advancement planning process, we feel it is important to gather further input and opinion regarding the future mission and vision of the parish. Over the next 12 months, we will be inviting many people throughout our parish who will assume an active role in determining our immediate direction and future focus.

We will be conducting input sessions at 6:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and 8:00 p.m. on three different dates at \_\_\_\_\_ (location). Those dates are: \_\_\_\_\_ . We would greatly appreciate it if you could attend one of these sessions. We will be calling you within the next week to see which time is best for you.

The three questions we will be asking are:

1. *What do you see as the present strengths (working well) of the parish?*
2. *What are the greatest needs (improvements) that currently exist in the parish?*
3. *As we look to the future, what would you like to see here (vision) at (NAME OF PARISH)? (programs, ministries, buildings, renovations, etc.)*

Thank you for your consideration, and we hope to see you at one of these opportunities for input and discussion.

Sincerely,

Name  
Pastor

## INPUT SESSION GUIDELINES

- We would like to hear from everyone.
- Everyone is on equal ground.
- This is not a gripe session but please voice any concerns.
- We are not here to discuss personalities.
- There will be no responses or rebuttals to comments made.
- We will not argue.
- Please use your Individual Input sheet to write down any further comments.
- We will be finished in 50-55 minutes.
- You will receive a written report within 2-4 weeks.

NOTE: Input sessions continue to be a wonderful way to invite and involve people in the life of a school/parish. Unfortunately, the attendance is not what we would like (usually 25-35%); however, we must keep in mind that we are inviting people that we do not know at all. These are 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ripple people. And, it does take time to engage them.