

VOICES

Ohio State Residence Life Senior Staff Training 2018

**Dialoguing Where We Live: Learning from Many Voices
Dialogue Workshop Prep Work Packet**

SECTION III:

Tips for Facilitators

Facilitation Challenges

Managing Conflict

Special Situations



Tips for Facilitators

A dialogue facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed. But the facilitator should be well prepared for the discussion. This means the facilitator...

- > understands the goals of the community change effort.
- > is familiar with the discussion materials.
- > thinks ahead of time about how the discussion might go.
- > has questions in mind to help the group consider the subject.

Helping the Group Do Its Work

- > Keep track of who has spoken, and who hasn't.
- > Consider splitting up into smaller groups occasionally. This will help people feel more at ease.
- > Enter the discussion only when necessary. When the conversation is going well, the facilitator isn't saying much.
- > Don't allow the group to turn to you for the answers.
- > Resist the urge to speak after each comment or answer every question. Let participants respond directly to each other.
- > Once in a while, ask participants to sum up important points.
- > People sometimes need time to think before they respond. Don't be afraid of silence! Try counting silently to ten before you rephrase the question. This will give people time to collect their thoughts.
- > Try to involve everyone; don't let anyone take over the conversation.
- > Remember that this is not a debate, with winners and losers. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the discussion ground rules.
- > Don't allow the group to get stuck on a personal experience or anecdote.
- > Keep careful track of time.

Helping the Group Look at Different Points of View

- > Good discussion materials present a wide range of views. Look at the pros and cons of each viewpoint. Or, ask participants to consider a point of view that hasn't come up in the discussion.
- > Ask participants to think about how their own values affect their opinions.
- > Help participants see the things they have in common.



Tips for Facilitators

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Asking Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions can't be answered with a quick "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions can help people look for connections between different ideas.

General Questions

- > What seems to be the key point here?
- > Do you agree with that? Why?
- > What do other people think of this idea?
- > What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- > What experiences have you had with this?
- > Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- > What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- > How might others see this issue?
- > Do you think others in the group see this the way you do? Why?
- > How does this make you feel?

Questions to Use When There is Disagreement

- > What do you think he is saying?
- > What bothers you most about this?
- > What is at the heart of the disagreement?
- > How does this make you feel?
- > What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?
- > What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?
- > What is blocking the discussion?
- > What don't you agree with?
- > What do you find most convincing about that point of view?
- > What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- > Could you say more about what you think?
- > What makes this topic hard?
- > What have we missed that we need to talk about?

Questions to Use When People are Feeling Discouraged

- > How does that make you feel?
- > What gives you hope?
- > How can we make progress on these problems? What haven't we considered yet?

Closing Questions

- > What are the key points of agreement and disagreement in today's session?
- > What have you heard today that has made you think, or has touched you in some way?



Responses to Typical Facilitation Challenges

Most dialogue circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and care about the conversation. But there are challenges in any group process. Here are some common challenging situations, along with some possible ways to deal with them.

Situation: Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible Responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact—it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Consider using more icebreakers and warm-up exercises, in pairs or small groups, to help people feel more at ease.

Sometimes people feel more comfortable after a few meetings and will begin to participate. When someone speaks up after staying in the background for a while, encourage them by showing interest and asking for more information. Make a point of talking informally with group members before and after sessions, to help everyone feel more at ease.

Situation: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.

Possible Responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you must intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate. Use the ground rules to reinforce the message. You might say, "Let's hear from some people who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Ed, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say."

Pay attention to your comments and tone of voice—you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker. If necessary, speak to the person privately and ask them to make room for others to join the conversation.

You might also say, "I notice that some people are doing most of the talking. Do we need to modify our ground rules, to make sure everyone has a chance to speak?" Ultimately, your responsibility as facilitator is to the *whole* group, and if one or two people are taking over the group, you need to intervene and try to rebalance the conversation.



Responses to Typical Facilitation Challenges

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Situation: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible Responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to invite others to speak."

Refer to the suggested times in the discussion materials to keep the conversation moving along. Or, when a topic comes up that seems off the subject, write it down on a piece of newsprint marked "Parking Lot." You can explain to the group that you will "park" this idea, and revisit the topic at a later time. Be sure to come back to it later.

Situation: Someone puts forth information that you know is false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts, but no one knows the answer.

Possible Responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard other information about this?" If no one offers a correction, you might raise one. Be careful not to present the information in a way that makes it sound like your opinion.

If the point is not essential put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information and bring it to the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Situation: There is tension or open conflict in the group. Two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible Responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that airing different ideas is what a dialogue is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue. It is OK to challenge someone's ideas, but attacking the person is *not* acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that discourage such behaviors and encourage tolerance for all views.

Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members have bought into the ground rules, they will support you. You might ask the group, "What seems to be at the root of this dispute?" This question shifts the focus from the people to their ideas. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question. (See *Managing Conflict*, page 50.)



Responses to Typical Facilitation Challenges

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Situation: Participant is upset by the conversation. The person withdraws or begins to cry.

Possible Responses: The best approach is to talk about this possibility at the beginning when you are developing the ground rules. Remind the group that some issues are difficult to talk about and people may become upset. Ask the group how it wants to handle such a situation, should it arise. Many groups use the ground rule, “If you are offended or upset, say so and say why.”

If someone becomes emotional, it is important to acknowledge the situation. Showing appreciation for someone’s story, especially when it is difficult, can be affirming for the speaker and important for the other participants. In most cases, the group will offer support to anyone who is having difficulty.

Ask members if they would like to take a short break to allow everyone to regroup. Check in with the person privately. Ask them if they are ready to proceed. When the group reconvenes, it is usually a good idea to talk a little about what has happened, and then the group will be better able to move on.

Situation: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible Responses: This rarely happens, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle asking everyone to respond. Or, pair people up for a few minutes, and ask them to talk about a particular point. Then bring everyone together again.

Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and doesn’t appreciate the complexity of the issue. In this case, your job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. Try something like, “Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?”



Managing Conflict

Not all disagreement or conflict is bad. In fact, it can provide an opening to understanding. However, for dialogue to be productive, disagreements must be handled respectfully. Stick to the issue at hand. Don't make the conversation personal.

Using Conflict Constructively

- > Create shared ground rules to cover conflict. Ask the group, "How shall we handle disagreements between group members?"
- > Encourage speakers to use "I" messages, such as, "I feel strongly that people who send their children to our school have a responsibility to be involved." Remind people to speak for themselves, not for others or a group.
- > Ask the people in conflict, and the larger group, to help focus the conversation, saying, "What do you think is the root of the disagreement between James and Jessie? What are the key issues here?" This takes the focus off the people, and puts it on the issue at hand.
- > Invite people to share the experiences that led to the formation of their opinions, saying, "Could you tell us more about any experiences in your life that have affected your feelings and thoughts about this issue?"
- > Invite others into the conversation if conflict is escalating between two people. For example, say "We've heard quite a bit from John and Jane. Would someone else like to offer an opinion?" By bringing the larger group into the discussion, the focus shifts to a more general conversation.

Handling Unproductive Conflict

- > Interrupt and remind group members of ground rules, if the conversation becomes heated.
- > Intervene immediately and stop the conversation if it becomes personal or confrontational.
- > Take a short break.
- > Speak to individuals privately and ask them to comply with the ground rules.
- > As a last resort, remove anyone who is disruptive.



Facilitation Tips for Special Situations

Working with Cultural Differences

Awareness of cultural dynamics is important. This is especially true when issues of race and ethnicity are a part of the conversation. We may not agree on everything, but we have enough in common as human beings to allow us to talk together in a constructive way.

Sensitivity, empathy, and familiarity with people of different backgrounds are important qualities for the facilitator. If you have not spent much time with all kinds of people, get involved in a community program where you can see cross-cultural dynamics in action.

Remind the group that no one can represent his or her entire culture. Each person's experiences, as an individual and as a member of a group, are unique and OK.

Encourage group members to think about their own experiences as they try to identify with people who have been victims of discrimination. Many people have had experiences that make this discussion a very personal issue. Others—particularly those who are usually in the majority—may not have thought as much about their own culture and how it affects their lives.

Encourage people to think about times when they have been treated unfairly, but be careful not to equate the experiences. To support participants who tell how they have been mistreated, be sure to explain that you respect their feelings and are trying to help all the members of the group understand. Remind people that no one can know exactly what it feels like to be in another person's shoes.

Invite group members to talk about their own experiences and cultures. This way, they will be less likely to make false generalizations about other cultures. Also, listening to others tell about their own experiences breaks down stereotypes and helps people understand one another.



Facilitation Tips for Special Situations

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Working with Interpreters

- > Remind interpreters that their job is to translate accurately, not to add their own opinions.
- > At the start, explain that this will be a bilingual discussion. Encourage everyone to help make the conversation productive and meaningful.
- > Tell the group that it may be awkward at first, but it will get easier as the sessions progress.
- > Give interpreters written materials ahead of time, and go over the process with them.
- > Ask interpreters to let you know if they need more time.
- > Speak in short sentences and keep ideas simple. (This gives the interpreter time to catch up.)
- > After every session, ask interpreters to translate discussion guidelines and notes that were posted on newsprint.
- > Sometimes participants who speak a different language are reluctant to talk because they are afraid of making a mistake. Give them time to collect their thoughts before speaking.
- > Consider putting people in small groups, but don't separate people by language. (You may need more than one interpreter per circle.)
- > Try to practice together beforehand.
- > Look at the participant—not the interpreter—when speaking.

Working with Groups Where Literacy is a Concern

At the start, give a simple explanation of how the dialogue will work, and tell participants the goal of each session. Each time you meet, state the goal of the session.

- > If the people in your group can't read, or have trouble reading, limit your use of the flip chart.
- > If participants are required to fill out forms, assign someone to ask the questions and fill out the forms with/for them.
- > Be prepared to read aloud to the group, or ask for volunteers to read.
- > Ask people to rephrase or summarize to make sure everyone understands.
- > Avoid using jargon or acronyms. When these terms come up and people look puzzled, ask: "What does that mean?"
- > In between sessions, check in with participants. Make sure they know that what they have shared is very important to the group.



Facilitation Tips for Special Situations

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Working with Multigenerational Groups

Facilitating multigenerational groups can be extremely rewarding. Young people add energy, enthusiasm, and innovative ideas while their elders add the benefit of extensive experience. And including people of all ages helps everyone look at a situation with fresh eyes.

Here are a few things to help multigenerational circles work well:

- > If young people are not speaking up, divide participants into pairs or threesomes for part of each session.
- > Use icebreaker exercises at the beginning of each session.
- > Step in and redirect the conversation if the discussion turns into a question-and-answer session between adult participants and young “experts” about youth issues.
- > Try to have several people in each age group in every circle. Avoid having a “token” young person or senior citizen.

Working with Public Officials in the Circles

Dialogue is most effective when people from all walks of life and all parts of the community take part. This includes public officials, whether they are elected or appointed.

Public officials—such as a police chief, school superintendent, city manager, mayor, city workers, school board members, planning board members—play particular roles in solving community problems. They often have the authority to “make things happen,” and can provide a different perspective or expertise. Also, working with a range of people offers a promising alternative to typical public processes that often pit citizens against officials.

Here are a few things you can do to help your dialogue work well when public officials are present:

- > Take some extra time to set the context and establish the ground rules.
- > Make sure that everyone (including public officials) knows exactly what to expect from the process.
- > Provide ample time for the group to talk about the ground rules including confidentiality.
- > Remind people that this is a democratic conversation—acknowledge that there may be people in the room with different levels of authority or expertise in the community. However, during the dialogue, every person’s experience and perspective is equally important to the conversation.



Facilitation Tips for Special Situations

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- > Step in if the conversation turns into a question-and-answer session between the public officials and the other participants.
- > If the public official begins to dominate, work to bring in other voices and points of view.

Working with Programs that Address Racism

Racism is a very challenging issue for many people in our country to talk about. It can be hard to get to a deep discussion that helps people speak truthfully and work effectively toward community change.

Here are a few things to remember when addressing this issue:

- > Take some time for self-reflection. Assess how much experience you've had talking about racism. If your experience is limited, you may want to read some books or articles, or view some videos to help you become more comfortable with the topic. (See the bibliography in Everyday Democracy's discussion guide, *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation*.)
- > Talk about the issue with your co-facilitator before you begin.
- > At the beginning of the discussion, acknowledge that this can be a difficult subject to address and commend the group for being willing to participate.
- > Each circle should have more than one participant from the same racial group.
- > Ideally, a group talking about racism should be racially diverse and co-facilitated by a biracial team. Avoid having the facilitator(s) from a different racial group than the participants.
- > When you are setting ground rules, make sure to talk about how to handle offensive remarks, even if they are unintentional.
- > Briefly describe your own ethnic background before asking other participants to share theirs.
- > If you are facilitating a discussion using Everyday Democracy's *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation*, be sure you are familiar with the activities in Session 3—"Move Forward, Move Back" and "Opportunities and Challenges"—and the *Community Report Card* in Session 5. Take extra time to practice so that you feel completely prepared.