

Promoting Dialogue
IN CHANGING TIMES

A GUIDE TO Nurturing Community Dialogue

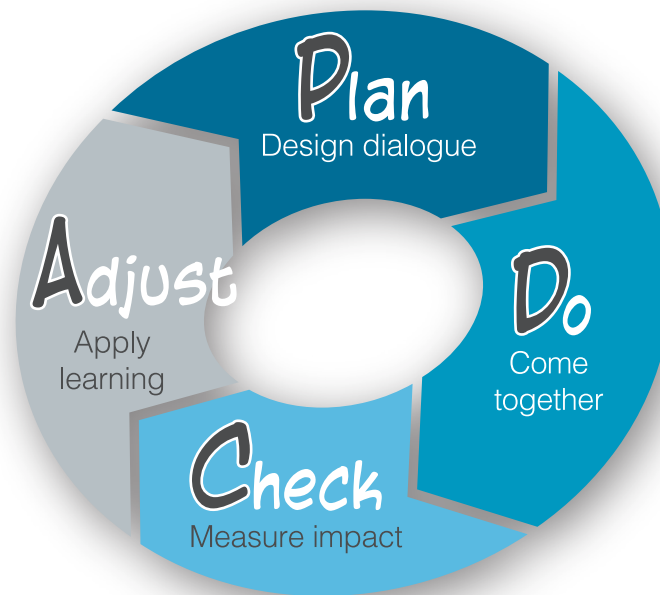


Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change—personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what's important to us, we begin to come alive.

~ Margaret Wheatley

Dialogue is a way to harness and build on the wisdom and capacity that exists within groups. By expanding civic life through meaningful conversations, communities form connections as a whole. A collective capacity develops and a growing sense of control emerges in the face of social challenges.

Planning dialogue is more than a process or methodology, it is an art. It requires reflective practice. Creating an environment where dialogue may occur means that we continually assess and adjust our plans. Although we cannot force it into being, using a PDCA framework can help us ensure that the necessary ingredients are present.



Plan

DESIGNING DIALOGUE MEANS TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE WHOLE PROCESS.

Much of the work is done before participants come together. The principles of dialogue need to be infused into every aspect – the preparations before the participants come together, the activity of working together, and how to check in and adjust the conversation when needed. By asking ourselves key questions throughout the process, we can better explore and understand each step. Through careful planning, purposeful adjustments, and transparent evaluation, connection is co-created and we move into dialogue.

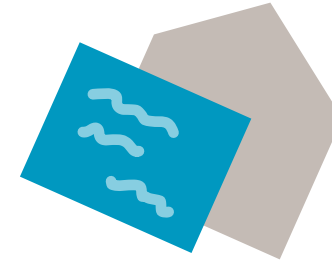
Plan

1. IDENTIFY THE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Misunderstandings lie at the root of almost all divisions and polarizations within our community. Identifying those divisions, created by misunderstanding, will help clarify what exactly you might want to accomplish with dialogue. It gives us a focus and a purpose. Doing initial background research to understand the nature, context and history of the divide may help you to better address the issue. This could be in the form of one-on-one conversations, surveys or more. It might be helpful at this stage not to identify publicly with a set position. Being open to the possibility that we may be influenced by other perspectives throughout the initiative and change our mind is not only important for those who participate but also for those who plan.

▶ **Reflecting on the following questions may help you identify where to start when planning dialogue:**

- **What are the main issues** on which people in my community disagree?
- **What are the challenges and opportunities** we face related to those issues?
- **What are my experiences and assumptions** and how have they influenced my views?
- **What experiences** might have shaped other people's views?
- **Is it essential that we all agree** on a particular perspective?
Can I imagine ways in which we might work together even if we disagree on some points?



2. DEVELOP THE INVITATION

Take the time to invite people well. Invitations begin very early in the planning and unfold over time. It is a process, rather than an isolated thing. A great invitation process responds to the unique need of the community. To engage people in dialogue, it may be worth taking the time to have a series of small conversations before bringing people together in a large group. This can help create trust and build your understanding of the individuals, groups and ideas that make up your particular community. A sense of connection, cohesion and commitment is cultivated as relationships are established. Dialogue is already happening through the invitation process. In building this network of invitees, be sure to include a diverse cross-section of voices relevant to the misunderstanding you have decided to focus on.

▶ **Reflecting on the following questions may help you identify who to involve:**

- **Who does this issue affect?** Who do we need to involve?
- **How might I better understand** the various perspectives?
- **What factors might be** currently influencing these views?
How do those differ among various stakeholders?
- **Who, in the community,** already understands multiple perspectives or has trust-equity with multiple groups?
- **How can we encourage** and support them to get involved?
How do we invite people so they know they are needed?

Plan

Try to think outside of the box and go beyond the usual players. Potential partners to consider include: those most affected by the issue, educators, health and social service professionals, members of the business community, members of the media, public policy and enforcement professionals, and thought leaders and other citizens in the community.

3. DETERMINE HOW PEOPLE MIGHT COME TOGETHER

Once we have established an initial understanding of the divide and have connected with individuals and groups who may be affected, we can start thinking about how people might come together. Community dialogue can exist in many shapes and sizes. Dialogue might start small with two people listening to one another. It may be achieved in a large open forum when audience members “give ear” to each other. It is not limited to a public meeting or sitting around a table.

Think about how to structure the space based on the needs of the community. Creativity is needed in order to elicit diverse opinions and promote mutual understanding. It is not enough to have a group of experts present to the public. That is passive. Dialogue is participatory. This means participants are actively engaged throughout the time they are together. Choose a structure that will support inclusivity. Include activities that help nurture the principles of dialogue.

Thinking about the potential partners you have identified, you might ask yourself questions like:

- **What common interests** do some of these potential partners have? What activities might appeal to people from different perspectives?
- **What activities or structure** will best serve our need based on the divide(s) we have identified?
- **Where do people in my community** normally meet and engage with strangers? (These will often be seen as safe spaces.) How might we develop dialogue in those places?
- **What are some of the best ways** for my community to come together?

The ways to get to dialogue may be different in each setting. Walking tours facilitated by different members of the community, World Cafes, art shows, a series of “ask me anything” sessions or participatory theatre all have the power to create an inviting atmosphere (safe space) that could promote reflection, openness and understanding. The sky’s the limit. The only critical requirement is that it helps us listen to, and understand each other.

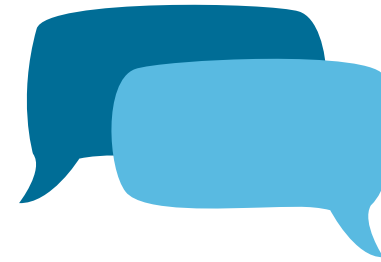
Do

AT THIS POINT, MUCH OF THE WORK HAS BEEN DONE IN THE PLANNING PROCESS. We have identified the divides, invited individuals and groups, and have ideas around how to engage people in dialogue. Now it is time to come together. The following points may help ensure the coming together is more than special – that real dialogue happens and understanding increases.

1. EMBODY THE PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

The way we meet is a model for the future we want to create. The principles of dialogue give us guidance on how we can work together. Although there are no “rules” for dialogue (since it is not a game), there are certain orientations we must learn as we go along. The principles of dialogue help us learn different ways to give space to each other – something most of us are not very good at. Dialogue is a new way of being together and it takes time to learn. In uncertain moments of confusion or disorder, come back to the principles of dialogue.

These principles continually remind us that the way forward, as a community, is not to choose from among currently available alternatives but to build new possibilities by combining insights from different perspectives in the community. Ideally each member of the community comes ready to share and to learn. The principles of dialogue can be utilized to push us toward this ideal. Of course, there is no formula, no one-size-fits all. Yet the more we can embody these principles in our interactions, the more likely we are to build understanding and achieve strong functional community.



Practice empathy

- Create a space that encourages all to “feel what it’s like in someone else’s shoes”
- Encourage stories or testimony where applicable

Celebrate diversity

- Include a diverse range of perspectives through design and activities
- Ensure all voices are heard and embolden everyone to participate

Promote curiosity and learning

- Pose thoughtful questions that encourage exploration and self-reflection
- Practice reflective listening to build understand and learning by all

Expose assumptions and suspend judgement

- Explore how personal views are influenced by assumptions based in our past
- Engage in activities that involve “trying on” different perspectives

Put power in its place

- Focus on creating a safe space and not on controlling the discourse
- Encourage people to come to dialogue as fellow citizens and not representatives of a position
- Discuss openly the ways unequal power operates in your community and invite people of power into that conversation

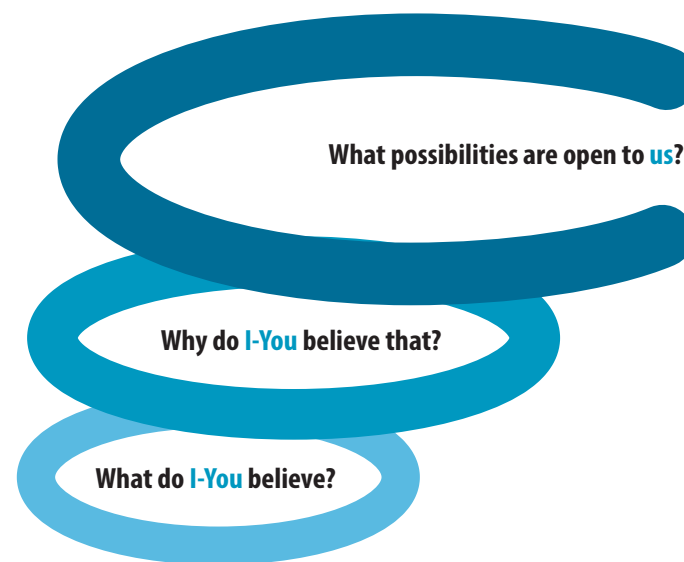
2. START SMALL

At times you may feel overwhelmed. Often the contentious issues we encounter in community are large, multi-layered, and complex. Thinking that we can solve such problems ignores their complexity. Rome was not built in a day, but it did become the centre of a great empire. The same is true with dialogue. We have to be realistic about what we can achieve with the time and resources we have. It is okay to start small and chip away. Many small dialogues can achieve great results over time.

The critical part is not the size of the effort at the beginning but the clarity of the vision. Reaching out to a few key stakeholders with the intention to create relationships and build trust can be an important catalyst to a new way of being together in the community. It could start as small as a coffee shop dialogue between two people. But if those two people leave with a greater understanding of each other, that understanding will impact other conversations and relationships going forward.

3. REMAIN FLEXIBLE BUT INTENTIONAL

When we confront the complexity that is human life, it is important to try and stay flexible but intentional. Too much order (rigid agenda, authoritarian facilitation, strict rules) may kill the spirit and not enough (no guidance, unfocused questions, no strategy to measure change) could create confusion and frustration. In dialogue we try to harness the creativity and possibilities that come out of disorder while nurturing enough order that we can be productive. Dialogue occurs when we explore and build off the spontaneous comments and gestures of those around us. When we listen to each other, reflect on our own assumptions, and ask open questions it allows us to reach new layers of awareness by constant self-revision. Similar to a spiraling effect, we move to new possibilities as we stay attuned to what people are saying and shift gears when necessary.



Check

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING THAT BRIDGES THE DIVIDES WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES IS DIFFERENT THAN SOLVING PROBLEMS. In problem solving, we project a goal and develop a means to achieve it. In emergent work such as dialogue, you cannot know the outcome ahead of time. When we harness the creativity of community through supportive design, possibilities emerge that exist beyond our imagination. This is the beauty of dialogue.

This does not mean that we should be less concerned about outcomes. Develop a plan on how you will capture change within the community. You might set a regular cycle to assess the quality of dialogue within your community and check in with those who plan or are engaged in the dialogue in any way. This could be through formal evaluation forms, collecting change stories, capturing photos, reflective questions, monitoring community spaces (e.g., letters to the editor, online forums) or other means.

Evaluation can be creative. Doing small activities at the end of the dialogue can be a good way to capture participants' thoughts and feelings. A 5-minute writing exercise in the form of a story or poem can be another way to measure change. A concluding drawing session based on participants' ideas or remaining questions could be a good reflective summary for the group.



Thinking through the following questions can help you decide the best way to measure change within your community:

- **How will we ensure** that our work reflects the principles of dialogue?
- **How will we measure** or understand the impacts of our work?
- **How can we mobilize** the creativity and change that comes from dialogue?
- **What barriers continue to exist** within the community? How might we navigate these barriers?

Adjust

NURTURING DIALOGUE IS AN ART RATHER THAN A SCIENCE. You try things with the intention of achieving greater understanding. You consider the results and you make adjustments. Achieving results with dialogue involves practice and making incremental adjustments along the way while being attentive to unexpected windows of opportunity that appear. Dialogue is a balancing act, a dance, an art form that creates the beauty of community.



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**University
of Victoria**

Canadian Institute
for Substance
Use Research

Institut canadien
de recherche sur
l'usage de substances

909-510 Burrard Street | Vancouver, BC V6C 3A8

<https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/ltc-nurturing-dialogue.pdf>

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This resource is adapted from one developed with funding provided by the Government of Canada as part of the Let's Talk Cannabis dialogue project. This project is led by the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. Any views expressed, however, are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada or the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research.