

FOSTERING  
WELCOMING COMMUNITIES  
THROUGH DIALOGUE

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*Tips from the Public Conversations Project  
for Welcoming America Practitioners* v. 1.2

WRITTEN FOR WELCOMING AMERICA

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WELCOMING  
AMERICA



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▲ *Building a Nation of Neighbors*

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## WHY DIALOGUE?

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When new immigrants arrive in cities, towns and neighborhoods in the U.S., differences in language, culture and life experience make it difficult for them to be understood and included in community life. This is especially true in areas with little recent history of receiving immigrants. Welcoming America works in such communities to help strangers become neighbors.

For some people in receiving communities, it takes little more than an introduction for them to begin the process of connecting across differences of identity. But for many others, it's not clear where to start or what to do after the introduction to develop a sense of comfort and connection. For still others, becoming comfortable with and welcoming to immigrants requires coming to terms with their concerns or ambivalence about the changing face of the community.

Welcoming America practitioners have used a variety of types of events to help break down barriers and promote understanding. Some involve sharing meals. Some involve panel presentations, film screenings or joint projects. Some use a particular discussion guide or format. This guide focuses on a particular kind of conversation—dialogue—as it can be used with or without other elements like films, panel presentations, or art. Dialogue is more structured than an informal conversation and less familiar than a Q & A session.

### So what is dialogue, and why should it be in the Welcoming America toolbox?

A dialogue, as we use the term at the Public Conversations Project (PCP), is a conversation that is carefully designed and facilitated to help people:

- *understand the experiences of people with different identities, values, and worldviews;*
- *reflect on their own life experiences, values, perceptions and assumptions;*
- *develop genuine curiosity about other participants' lives and perspectives; and*
- *move beyond stereotypes and see the rich complexity and humanity of the "other."*

The planning process for a PCP-style dialogue places a high premium on collaboration with the potential participants, or a diverse planning group, to learn what would constitute a safe enough, satisfying and meaningful encounter for those involved. Participants in a PCP-style dialogue make communication agreements and authorize the facilitator, who does not participate in the substance of the conversation, to remind them about the agreements if necessary. In the early part of their dialogue they usually respond to two or three opening questions in a manner that supports thoughtful speaking, careful listening, and reflection. Later, their conversation usually becomes less structured and they begin to ask each other questions. At the end of the session, they often reflect on their experience and if they are willing, share what they would like to take with them from the dialogue, whether it's a new understanding that will shape their thinking and behavior or a specific idea for action.

Conversations of this sort offer a context—a "container" of sorts—for those who wish to connect across differences more fully than typically happens in informal settings. They also offer a context that feels safe enough for participants to grapple with the strains, tensions and uncertainties that are inevitable when a new home for some means a changed home for others.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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This is the second edition of a guide that we hope to revise and supplement, over time, drawing on feedback we receive from practitioners. Among the resources we would like to include are reports from the field about successes and challenges. We hope you will share your experiences and ideas. (We assume that the reader is someone who plans, convenes and/or facilitates Welcoming America events, though the guide might be helpful to others.)

This guide is intended to be useful in a variety of settings—towns, neighborhoods, schools, campuses, faith communities, etc. Since no one set of practices will be well suited to all situations, it emphasizes the principles that guide PCP's practices and encourages customization of specific practices to the settings in which you work.

Finally, this guide is intentionally short. For those interested in more, PCP offers a 172-page guide, *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*, as a free download at [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

## PLANNING AND PREPARATION

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### GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The work of dialogue begins with the planning phase. The planning process itself can help people feel listened to, understood, included, and willing to trust; in other words, it can exemplify the spirit of dialogue, right from the start. And to the extent that it is a collaborative process, it ensures that what is offered makes sense in the eyes of the potential participants. Some tips on engaging in a thoughtful and collaborative planning process follow.

*Explore the experiences, needs, and hopes in the community* with an open heart and mind, and with appreciation for the strengths of the community. Without such an exploration, it will be difficult to make a plan that is a) responsive to the needs and concerns of potential participants and b) draws upon and affirms the strengths of the community.

*Plan collaboratively with a diverse group.* This not only supports an informed and appreciative approach in accordance with the first principle, it also enables planners to reach out to potential participants more effectively. Ideally, every invitee will find someone in the planning group that they trust to understand their perspectives and experience.

*Be clear about purposes and roles.* This is crucial in order for a) the planners to work together well and b) the participants to understand what the event or initiative is—and isn't.

*Be realistic about time.* It is important to match expectations—planners' and participants'—with a format, group size and time frame that is realistic. A single session might feel like an appetizer—not quite broad or deep enough to be fully satisfying if participants expect more. However, packing too much into a single session is counter-productive if you want to support thoughtful speaking, careful listening and open inquiry.

*Aim for diverse and balanced participation.* The composition of the dialogue group need not be perfect but it's best to avoid “isolates” or “loners”—individuals who won't see any significant commonality of identity in the other participants. In addition to immigrant/U.S.-born diversity, consider diversity with respect to other aspects of identity, though not with a goal of perfection! A motivated and interested group is better than a perfectly balanced one!

*Gather people who understand the potential value of the endeavor.* If potential planners and participants are a bit reticent, seek to understand and address their concerns, but don't twist any arms to get people to participate.

*Be prepared to support next steps but resist getting ahead of the group.* As you plan, think ahead to possible next steps for additional meetings, joint projects, etc. but don't get married to your ideas. Ideas for next steps often emerge from the group and those ideas may capture the participants' interests and energy better than ideas formulated before the group came together.

## EARLY EXPLORATION

In the early stages of exploring ideas for convening dialogues, consider asking potential partners and participants<sup>1</sup> questions like those that follow and be sure to talk with a diverse group of people who have different perspectives, whether or not they are likely to get involved. It is especially important to map the situation carefully if you are working in a context characterized by polarization, fear and distrust.

*What are the issues, who cares about them, and why?*

*Who is harmed or disturbed by the current ways the issues are discussed—or silenced—whether or not they have been vocal about their concerns?*

*What are their concerns?*

*Are some relationships in the community particularly strained, e.g., within a school district, on a campus, in a faith community or organization? If so, how does the friction show up?*

*What do you think are the costs of not talking about the issues and who feels those costs most acutely?*

*How have other conflicts been addressed in the past and how do community members understand what worked and didn't work in those situations?*

*Are there leaders or any other individuals in the community who are especially trusted by those who are most concerned or fearful? Are there “bridge” people who are trusted by a range of participants? Are particular institutions or organizations broadly respected—or not?*

*Are some people and organizations already supporting connection and respect across differences? If so, how can new efforts and existing efforts be mutually supportive or at least not competitive?*

*Who can you or your fellow planners talk with whose responses to these questions might be varied because their experiences have been different? (If at all possible, you or one of your fellow planners should conduct the interview in the interviewees' native language.)*

*What do answers to these questions tell you about who might be motivated to talk with whom about what, in what kind of setting and toward what ends? And about who might be reticent and why? What ideas do they or you have about articulating the purpose of a dialogue? What words would resonate or not? How might concerns be addressed, e.g., about minimizing language barriers?*

*What would be important to know ahead of time about participants, e.g., about their hopes, concerns, preferred schedule or location, and possible barriers to full participation (language barriers, need for childcare or transportation)?*

*How attracted are the potential participants to different sorts of encounters, e.g., casual dinners, a dialogue preceded by an educational offering, small group dialogue or a larger community-wide event with small group break-outs?*

<sup>1</sup> It is common practice at PCP to talk with participants ahead of time unless the group is large, in which case we interview a representative subset. This practice is time-consuming and not always feasible. You can gain many, though not all, of the benefits of pre-meeting calls with participants if you work closely with a diverse planning group and/or have email exchanges with participants (if all participants have easy access to email). For more guidance about pre-meeting contacts with participants, see *Fostering Dialogue across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*, downloadable at [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

*Would it be helpful to begin by having separate dialogues with particular groups?*

*What would success look like? How might relationships shift? Are there possibilities for projects or activities after the meeting that participants might want to learn about or pursue, together or as individuals?*

*What do you and others hope to avoid? For example, are there certain words that, if used, would be seen as insensitive by some participants?*

When speaking to potential participants, elicit their personal hopes and concerns. For example:

*As you think about what a constructive dialogue might look like for you, what could happen during or after the dialogue that would make it worthwhile for you? Do you have particular ideas about questions that you'd like to be asked—questions that will help you to be better known or understood? Any ideas about communication agreements or ground rules that would be helpful to have in place? Any other advice about the format? Any advice for me as a facilitator?*

As you have these conversations, capture the language of the potential participants. And remember that every conversation has the potential to have impact beyond information gathering. Each conversation offers an opportunity to build trust, address concerns, and model the ways of interacting that dialogue supports: careful listening and genuine inquiry about what matters most and why.

## BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE TEAM

Concurrent with and arising from your initial explorations, you will need to build a team. It could be as small as two people who will do the planning, issue invitations, and co-facilitate. Or it could involve different people filling these three roles.

The **planning team** translates broad ideas into a specific plan that includes inviting participants with attention to group size and composition, writing invitations or flyers, handling logistics, designing the format, and so on. Planning teams often include conveners and facilitators and they often include or seek advice from a diverse set of participants.

The **convener** is one or more people or organizations who endorse and sponsor a dialogue. Conveners issue an invitation or they are clearly identified on a flyer, website or other outreach materials. Conveners often contribute to the planning process and they are often, but not always, participants.

The **facilitator** participates in the planning process and later guides the participants during the dialogue sessions but does not contribute to the conversation on substantive issues. In some situations the facilitator is also the convener. (At PCP we almost always have two co-facilitators.)

Filling these roles effectively involves finding people who are trusted. If one convener or facilitator is viewed as more aligned with one perspective or identity, it will be especially important to have a co-facilitator or co-convener who offers some balance. It is especially important to find facilitators who are trusted and willing to play a role that involves focusing on serving the group—helping participants to do what they need to do to honor their agreements and pursue their shared purpose. People who are accustomed to being advocates and experts sometimes find it difficult to shift into the role of facilitator. You and any others who are considering facilitation will serve the group best if you know yourself well enough to know whether that role is a good match for you.



## DECIDING WHAT TO OFFER TO WHOM AND WHY

Your early conversations with community members and planning partners will guide you in deciding what to offer to whom and toward what purposes. In those conversations, invite ideas and share your own as trial balloons. Here are some tips to keep in mind when generating and considering ideas.

*Match what you offer to what the community and potential participants need.* It's easy to get enthralled with an idea and serve the idea more carefully than you serve the people. So it's advisable to begin by carefully thinking through and discussing with your partners what you have learned about potential participants' concerns and wishes. Are there particular sources of tension related to religious or cultural customs, language issues, unemployment, or school budgets? Or is there simply a recognition on the part of some community members that disconnection and unfamiliarity between groups detracts from the sense of community they hope to build and maintain? Is there evidence that disconnection is breeding distrust, stereotyping or fear? Are there serious social problems that can only be solved by developing trust across groups, e.g., related to bullying or gangs, substance abuse, police-community relations, homelessness?

*Remember that every choice you make has the potential to either increase or decrease people's motivation to participate and the impact on them if they do participate.* Your initial conversations with a diverse group of people should help you avoid making unfounded assumptions about what would feel safe, interesting and useful to whom.

*If in doubt, start small with something that is easy to trust.* For example, at PCP we sometimes meet with a small, diverse group of interested people and propose to work with them to design a pilot dialogue with them as participants, suggesting that their experiences in that pilot dialogue will give them an experiential base from which to serve as planners or conveners for a larger endeavor, if they so choose.

*If trauma and deep distrust are concerns, consider starting with separate dialogues.* For example, recent immigrants could meet with each other and long-term residents could meet with each other. In those meetings the participants might feel more safe speaking openly about the issues they face and their hopes and fears about a cross-group dialogue. This could serve as a "warm-up" to dialogue, support trust-building with the facilitators, and provide a context for participants to collaborate on the planning of the mixed group dialogue.

*Draw upon community strengths.* When talking with people ahead of time, balance your inquiry about what's not working with inquiry about what is working and about community resources of various kinds. Then draw upon those strengths and resources. Examples include:

**Religious:** Is there a church in town that is shared by a long established group that worships in English and a newer group that worships in another language? Have those groups already come together to build relationships? If so, how can their learning and new relationships guide or support efforts in the broader community? If not, might their congregants of shared faith but different cultures seek to build understanding?

In a community where many new immigrants are Muslim is there an active interfaith clergy group in town that includes Muslim leaders? If so, can that group partner with you on planning and/or outreach? Do they have ideas about what could be helpful? For example, could they offer a panel discussion followed by dialogue? If so, what topic would likely educate about differences and highlight similarities?<sup>2</sup> Might they all give sermons or lead discussions in their own communities the month or two before offering a community dialogue, e.g. with an emphasis on religious texts and traditions related to welcoming the stranger or approaching differences with respect? Might they do what is called in ecumenical circles "pulpit exchanges" in which clergy or lay leaders from faith communities give talks or sermons at each other's services?

<sup>2</sup> A topic can build bridges of understanding and humanization of the "other" even if it has little direct connection to immigration. For example, an interfaith panel could discuss how each faith group recognizes milestones in the course of life, and if and how culture as well as religion shapes those practices.

**Government/Agency:** Are there elected officials or people working in education and social services who can play a supportive role in planning, serving on a panel, or attending as participants? Are there support services like ESL classes or refugee resettlement agencies through which bonds have been forged between new immigrants and long-term community members? Are there town facilities that can serve as venues, like libraries or schools?

As you consider such possibilities, attend to issues of trust. A town official, principal, city mayor or social studies teacher can be widely respected by residents old and new or can be viewed as biased or polarizing in relation to hot public issues. Also, consider that the official role of a particular individual might make them a good choice as a planner and/or participant because they can act on new ideas utilizing their position. Or it could make them a poor choice if they feel constrained by political considerations or are seen as highly partisan. Similarly, use town spaces only if they are likely to feel welcoming or neutral to participants.

**Civic:** Are there civic groups like Rotary Clubs, Elks, Masons, or Welcome Wagon, cultural centers, museums, parent-teacher organizations, committees that work on important town celebrations, (e.g., on July 4th), or public engagement initiatives like study circles<sup>3</sup> or visioning initiatives? Are there book clubs—associated with the library or informally convened—that could choose a book about immigrants' experiences? Keep in mind that while direct dialogue between immigrants and U.S.-born people is a powerful aspect of this work, a less diverse group, primarily consisting of U.S.-born people, can do some of their work with each other. For example, they might preface a dialogue among themselves with a speaker or have a book discussion. Sometimes well-established groups that seem to be in an especially good position to delve deeply into difficult issues are timid, fearful that their close bonds will be disrupted if they find themselves with different views. They might especially welcome an opportunity to move slowly and start with discussions among themselves, with an outside facilitator who can help them focus and structure their conversation.

**Art:** When groups are different from each other on important aspects of identity, they are prone to see each other through the lenses of stereotypes. Language barriers increase the likelihood that stereotypes will prevail over accurate understanding. Language barriers also limit the avenues by which people can know each other as complex human beings. Art can be tremendously helpful in this regard—performance art, visual arts and crafts, culinary arts, etc. Art can constitute a sharing from one group to another, as when one event presents the dances or quilts of multiple cultures.

Art can also be created together, across cultures and across generations. For example, a bare wall in the high school or town hall can be adorned with fabric art, like a quilt, made by a group of people who are more comfortable working with their hands than having a dialogue. A photo gallery can be created using images that represent the varied cultures and experiences present in the community. An art exhibit can focus specifically on the places from which refugees have fled.<sup>4</sup> Events connected with exhibitions can invite dialogue among those who attend rather than limiting the experience to the sort of mingling that typically occurs as an art show opening.

<sup>3</sup> The work of the Study Circles Resource Center is now carried out under the name Everyday Democracy [www.everydaydemocracy.org](http://www.everydaydemocracy.org).

<sup>4</sup> An experiential exhibit entitled "Torn from Home" was created in Las Vegas and has travelled to museums around the country. See [www.tornfromhome.org](http://www.tornfromhome.org).

*Consider whether or not to pair dialogue with something else.* Combining art and dialogue is just one example. There are many options for a common experience that stimulates a dialogue—sometimes called a “common stimulus.” Examples are podcasts, panels, film clips and full films. Some are inspirational, some are educational, most are both. Many model the sort of sharing that you hope to support in dialogue.

*If you’re using a common stimulus before dialogue, attend to balance, tone and time.*

**Balance:** Welcoming America aims to create environments where those who are unsure what to think about immigration issues can be supported in understanding their immigrant neighbors. In a political culture that is highly polarized about immigration policy, in which advocacy groups on opposing sides sometimes characterize their opponents as destructive, immoral, and ignorant, it will be a welcome relief for the unsure to be in an environment where they can share their concerns and get answers to their questions without feeling like the target of an advocacy effort related to U.S. policy. Toward this end, factual information should be presented in a straightforward manner and come from a widely trusted source.

Care should also be taken to avoid using a common stimulus like a panel or film that is politically one-sided and polarizing. There is a place—an important place!—for advocacy; in fact it is possible to do advocacy in a dialogic spirit. Dialogue and advocacy are not good or bad. They each serve a purpose. The work of a Welcoming America dialogue is not to persuade people to adopt particular political positions. It is to give people experiences that will reduce stereotyping, build understanding, and support collaboration on issues of shared concern. To achieve those goals in the context of a dialogue, particularly with people who are unsure where they stand on U.S. immigration policy, it’s best to welcome discussions about mixed feelings or uncertainties rather than silencing or denigrating them.

**Tone:** Similarly, panelists should follow the same guidelines for respectful speaking that conveners and facilitators will ask the participants to follow. This does not mean that their speaking should be bland! It means that panelists should speak in a respectful way, sharing what they have experienced and come to believe without demonizing those who think differently. They should contribute to an atmosphere of dialogue, not to debate. See Appendix A for a table distinguishing characteristics of dialogue and divisive debate. If you invite someone to be on a panel, you might share this table with them and ask them to speak in the spirit of dialogue.

**Time:** Many events are scheduled in the evening on weekdays. In those cases, the planners will have two hours—or at most two and a half hours—with which to work. Trade-offs are inevitable. For example, if a full-length film is shown there will be little time for the viewers to have a dialogue with each other. If you have only 30 minutes after a common stimulus, you can have people talk in pairs for about 10 minutes answering questions like this: What had special meaning for you, moved you, or surprised you? What is it about you and your life experiences that might help your partner understand why that stood out for you? Then, for about 20 minutes, the full group can be asked if anyone would like to share something they shared with their partner or any other reflections on the film.

***Be realistic and creative about group size and group composition.*** If you want to plan a dialogue oriented to supporting personal connection and you are working with the time frame of a single evening, what you can offer will depend on the group size. You can convene a small group (six to nine people) that will stay together for the evening or a larger group that will break into smaller groups. In either case, aim for some balance in the participant group in terms of identity, native-born or immigrant, cultural background, etc.

If your pool of interested participants is large, e.g., forty native-born people and eight immigrants, it will probably not work well to break into eight small groups with a lone immigrant—an isolate—in each. This might put the one immigrant in a position of trying to represent not just their own experience but their entire group. In addition, having a lone immigrant won't work well for those who have limited fluency in English and want to rely on another participant from their own language group to help them find a word or expression.

If you are faced with such an imbalance, you can limit the number of participants in the more populous group for the first event and plan to offer additional events in the future for others, or you can design an event suitable for an unbalanced group. For example you can have a panel with a group that ranges from second generation native-born, to immigrants who have been in the United States for decades, to more recent immigrants who have come to join an American spouse or other family members, to immigrants who are recent and here not by choice but as refugees from war. Each could be asked to speak about what they most appreciate about being in this country and this town, what they previously have found or currently find difficult, and how they hope to be viewed or understood by those with very different experiences. The audience could ask questions and share additional (brief) stories if they felt so moved. Or as described above, they can first share in pairs then reconvene in the full group.

***Consider offering a series or set of events.*** A single event that lasts only two or three hours can feel satisfying. However, this is most likely if the purpose of the event is modest, e.g. simply to begin to understand each other on a deeper level than is possible in informal settings. Sometimes a single event feels too short, especially if there are complicated issues and concerns on participants' minds—issues that they would like to address in a diverse setting. It may not be possible to do justice to those issues in one session. You can try to address this in several ways.

**You can start with one gathering and build in a way to collect input about next steps.** Events that end with an opportunity to reflect on the experience and share “what you are taking with you” quite naturally stimulate ideas for next steps. If participants suggest meeting again, ask if they have specific topics they would like to explore. If participants share such ideas, write them down and then ask if other participants have ideas. This will reduce the likelihood that an action plan will be shaped only by a couple of the least shy people. You can also welcome additional ideas on a feedback form and/or in follow-up conversations. Ensure that no one feels pressured to continue.

**You can plan a multi-session initiative from the start.** You can ask those who are invited to commit to attend the whole series, which might be four or five sessions. Be particularly firm about full attendance at the first session as this is when the group will make communication agreements and, hopefully, build a foundation of trust. Indicate early on that, at the last scheduled session, if the group wants to schedule another session or another set of sessions, that will be up to them. This guards against the slow and sometimes unexplained attrition that can happen in long-term groups, which leaves the remaining participants concerned about whether the departing participant left because of something that they said.

**You can aim to meet different preferences with different events or projects.** If potential participants' wishes are highly varied, you might want to plan some different events. Not everyone is comfortable building relationships solely through verbal means. Some people like working with their hands. In Boston, people of different faiths created "faith quilts" together, an initiative that included opportunities to speak about faith in a manner that was an integral part of their joint project. This endeavor attracted different segments of the communities than those who had attended previous events like dialogues and book discussions.

**You can plan an event that has several components that might appeal differently to different people.**

For example, an event on a Sunday afternoon from 12:00-5:00 could have four components:

1. a potluck lunch at which people respond to an introductory question (or fill-in-the-blank statement) in a diverse group of 6-8, e.g., If you knew me as a friend you would know that I have these passions, interest and skills \_\_\_\_\_.
2. a panel presentation that includes panelists who connect in somewhat different ways with the audience. For example, the director of a refugee settlement agency could inform the audience about trends and challenges, and some recent or more settled immigrants could personally connect and inform through compelling life stories.
3. sharing at tables about individuals' responses to the panel and the questions they would like to ask each other or the panelists.
4. sharing of reflections and questions in the full group.

Such a plan blends personal contact, education, and exposure of non-immigrants to immigrants' life stories—stories that have the potential of deepening understanding and increasing people's commitment to being welcoming.

**Choose a space and place that is welcoming, comfortable and accessible for all.** What that means in a particular community will be better determined by a diverse planning group than by one individual. Practical considerations will enter into your decision, e.g., accessibility by public transportation and the availability of kitchen facilities if the plan involves a meal. Ensure that participants' seating is comfortable and allows them to see each other. Seating participants in circles with similar chairs and without tables is much better than seating them at long, narrow rectangular tables.

## INVITATIONS AND OTHER PRE-MEETING COMMUNICATION WITH PARTICIPANTS

In much of PCP's work, we send written invitations and we have phone calls with participants before a dialogue. A written invitation has the advantages of orienting all participants to the event in the same way and providing them with details in a form they can look back at later. It can be translated into other relevant languages by the planning group. If it is not translated, participants for whom English is difficult can read it slowly and/or ask for help from a friend or family member.

Any invitation, whether it is in the form of a letter, flyer or announcement, should convey the spirit and purpose of the event, indicate how it will be different from a casual conversation, and promote clarity about what will be expected of participants and what participants can expect from the facilitators. For example:

*This event is designed for those who would like to shift from being strangers to being neighbors. The gathering will be structured to welcome all voices and to promote careful listening. The facilitators will propose that the group adopt some simple communication agreements (like sharing airtime) and ask a few opening questions to launch the conversation. All participation will be voluntary. If asked a question you don't feel ready to answer you can simply pass. No explanation required.*

The invitation should specify the time commitment, whether an RSVP is required or appreciated, and to whom potential participants can address their questions.

Pre-meeting phone calls—in addition to written invitations—are helpful in several ways. Participants (or potential participants) can indicate what they hope for and what they hope to avoid. The ideas they share and the language they use can be integrated into the opening statement about purposes and the wording of the communication agreements, making the event as responsive as possible to the participants' wishes. In phone conversations, participants can ask questions about the nature and structure of the event, who might be there, etc.

Pre-meeting conversations can also help participants prepare for their participation in the dialogue. For example, in pre-meeting conversations with individual participants, you can ask:

*How would you like to participate in the dialogue? Are there any characteristics in yourself that you'll want to hold back or bring forward in order to participate as you would like to participate?*

*Is there anything that you are aware of doing or not doing, in your life in the community, that gets in the way of being understood the way you want to be understood?*

Pre-meeting conversations also allow the facilitator to model respectful interest in the participant and careful listening, thereby setting a tone for the dialogue and building trust. In addition, phone calls allow facilitators to ask questions about the participants' hopes and intentions in a manner that is likely to underscore the participants' commitments or possibly clarify that commitment is lacking. If a participant's commitment and motivation are low, the facilitator can discuss this with the participant in the phone call. If the participant's concerns are heard and their questions are answered and they're still not sure they want to attend, the facilitator can underscore the voluntary nature of the event and thank the participant for being candid. In no circumstance should the facilitator pressure people to attend. In fact, if people attend who don't truly support the goals and spirit of the event, their participation might detract from the experiences of others.

If the event is open to the public and there is no process for collecting RSVPs, it will be difficult to plan a good meeting unless the planners a) do some personal outreach and b) ask for commitments from a core group of people who say they will attend and encourage others to attend. Such efforts are likely to enhance the diversity of the group or reveal that diversity will be limited—information that can be taken into account in the design of the event.

In pre-meeting phone calls, participants sometimes say they will need to arrive late, leave early or miss some sessions in a series. Knowing this ahead of time is helpful. The planning team can determine how to best accommodate those participants and minimize disruption, or ask that participants only accept the invitation if they can fully participate; full participation is especially important in the beginning of a session and in the first meeting of a series.



## EVENT DESIGN

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### COMMON ELEMENTS OF A SESSION DESIGN

Every gathering, whether consciously designed or not, has a beginning, middle, and an end. When designing a dialogue, conscious effort is made to attend to the purposes of each segment and assure that there will be time for closure. You will need to decide how you want to welcome people, remind them of the purpose of the gathering, help them connect with each other, invite them to speak and listen in ways that support their purposes for being together, and bring the gathering to a satisfying close. A description of typical practices follows.<sup>5</sup>

### ARRIVAL, WELCOME, AND ORIENTATION

**Arrival.** Facilitators, conveners or others involved in the planning process should aim to arrive early enough to settle in so they can be ready to welcome participants warmly and give each participant a nametag. When planning the time frame for the event, keep in mind that unforeseen circumstances like traffic jams or a delayed babysitter, or cultural norms about time, can lead to a staggered arrival of the participants. Therefore, it's wise to build in extra time at the beginning, perhaps with a light meal or refreshments.

If staggered arrival is a particular concern, consider planning an activity during that time that doesn't require full attendance. For example, post a large map of the world on the wall and, depending on the map size and the size of the group, a larger scale map of the United States and any other country or continent of likely origin for the participants. Have five colors of push pins or tacks available with a key, e.g. clear = where I was born; blue and green = where my parents were born; red and yellow = places that I associate with my family history and identity on each side, whether it was two generations ago or more. Encourage people, after they have placed their pins or tacks, to find someone they don't know well and share something about the places they have marked.

**Seating.** Without guidance about seating, people tend to sit next to people they know. If you know ahead of time who is coming, place nametags on seats to achieve diversity in each group and alternate seating within each group so subgroups aren't clustered together. If you will be breaking the group into small groups and you don't have a reliable list of participants ahead of time, you will need to devise a check-in procedure that creates groupings as people enter or create some other method to create diverse groups.

**Orientation.** This is a time to welcome participants, perhaps say a few words about the history of the planning of the event, and reiterate the spirit and purpose of the event. If there are conveners who are not also facilitators, they might say some brief words of welcome, thank people for taking time out of their busy lives to come, and introduce the facilitators. If you have had conversations with participants about their wishes and concerns, integrate their language into your opening remarks (if not already covered by conveners' remarks) without attribution to individuals, unless you have permission. For example, "We understand from our conversations with (some/all of) you that you hope for greater connection and, understanding among (groups). A few of you mentioned some x and y issues in town that you thought could be better addressed if groups that are now rather separated or isolated could come to know each other and work together."

<sup>5</sup> Detailed session plans with sample facilitator scripts can be found in *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*, downloadable at [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

In your planning process and other pre-meeting conversations, if you have asked about what works well and what's not working, be sure to include acknowledgment of strengths and successes in your opening comments so the current endeavor can be understood as building upon strengths. In the same spirit, if participants have been asked ahead of time about what attracts them to the spirit of the meeting, their wishes and values can be mentioned, e.g., we have heard from several of you that your wish for greater connection and understanding is rooted in x or y (e.g., values, visions of the future, spiritual commitments, etc.) Avoid comments that are suggestive of the “medical model” in which experts make a diagnosis and intervene.

## COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS

The communication agreements you propose should reflect your understanding of the kind of communication and relationships participants hope to have, and what they hope to avoid. And there may be communication agreements that you, as a facilitator, would be loathe to do without. For example, I would be unwilling to work with a set of agreements that permitted people to interrupt each other whenever they wanted. The ability to speak when it's your turn to speak, knowing that others will listen without interruption, strikes me as a fairly core element in dialogue, especially in the early phase of a dialogue!<sup>6</sup>

*A sample set of proposed communication agreements is as follows.* Note that the material in parentheses would typically be spoken, not written. The written agreements, posted or on a handout, should be easy to scan quickly.

*We will speak from our experience and from our hearts about what we care about and who we are.*

*We will avoid making large generalizations about other people's experiences and characteristics (like “my people all believe”.... “or your people all believe”).*

*We will speak in a respectful manner and listen with resilience and charity. That means giving people the benefit of the doubt when they say something that disturbs you. If this occurs during a structured part of the session, you can make a note of what bothered you and, in the less structured part of the session, ask about what the speaker intended and share how their speaking impacted you. (Some of the richest dialogue comes when people explore the gap between what is intended by one person and how it impacts another person.)*

*We will share airtime and participate within the suggested time frames.*

*We will not interrupt except to indicate that we can't hear or need someone to repeat something.*

*We will “pass” or “pass for now” if we are not ready or willing to respond to a question.*

In some situations, participants also make a confidentiality agreement or simply agree to honor requests for confidentiality if any are made.

After agreements have been made, take one additional step to orient participants to the event. Explain your role. This can be accomplished in three sentences, e.g., “My role is to guide you through the session, attending to time, and reminding you if you forget about the agreements you've made. To play my role, I might have to interrupt to remind you about time or one of the agreements. Do I have your permission to do that?”

<sup>6</sup> Some dialogue groups include participants who are quite comfortable with fast-paced exchanges and interruptions. Over time, such groups might—if all agree—opt for a lenient approach to interruption. However, in the early phase of their dialogue and especially during go-rounds, an agreement to not interrupt will be important to make space for all voices and promote careful listening and reflection.



## STRUCTURES

When a meeting design has structured speaking and listening, it means that participants know exactly when it's their turn to speak and their time to listen. In our practice, we also designate time for quiet reflection.

*Structures are restraints, but paradoxically they have a liberating effect.* The structured formats we use support people in speaking, listening, and reflecting in new ways. They block old patterns and create space for new ways of being together. For example, structures prevent the common pattern of some people dominating because they are very talkative, because they are accustomed to being in powerful roles, or because they feel they have answers and advice for others. Structures also lower anxiety, which increases learning and openness. And they block reactivity, which encourages thoughtful speaking and careful listening.

As you will see in the sample format in Appendix B, in the early segment of PCP-style dialogues we frequently use this sequence, which we call a “go-round!”

The facilitator poses a question and indicates how much time each person has to respond to it.

The facilitator asks the group to pause before anyone responds to allow participants to collect their thoughts.

The facilitator repeats the question.

The facilitator asks someone to start, often someone sitting on his or her left or right.

Each participant is given an allotted time to speak. When he/she is done, the person at his/her right (or left) speaks, and so on, around the circle. Anyone who passes instead of speaking is given a chance to speak when the others have all spoken, if they would like.

When participants have used their time, the facilitator lets them know and asks them to wrap up.

The pause serves many functions. It encourages reflection. It also encourages people to make their own distinctive, thoughtful contributions rather than simply reacting to what others have said. Pauses also promote better listening as listeners can concentrate better on what they are hearing if they have already gathered their thoughts about what they want to say.

In some situations, we ask participants to pause between speakers during a go-round so that everyone can take in and reflect on what the last speaker has said before the next speaker begins. This is especially helpful if we have explicitly asked participants to write down questions, if they have any, to ask each other later.

## QUESTIONS

The adage, “Sometimes the most radical thing you can do is introduce people to one another,” has some truth to it, especially when those who are introduced have been divided against or unknown to each other. Getting introduced is a good start. But we’ve all been in social gatherings where what we learn about another person is quite limited. Even if we’re curious to know what another person’s life experience has been, what gets them out of bed in the morning, or what their deepest concerns, dreams and values are, we might not feel comfortable asking them.

The questions we pose in a dialogue are intended to invite deep sharing about people’s lives, values, hopes and concerns, particularly as they relate to issues that have divided people into embattled groups or discouraged care and connection.

Some questions are introductory or, in some way, set the stage for what follows. These might be answered in one or two minutes—or even in a sentence or two. Other questions are at the heart of the dialogue; participants typically are given two or three minutes each to respond to them.

A first question might underscore the commitment participants have made to bridging divides—small or large—and the values that underlie that commitment. Two examples are:

*What did you have to leave behind to be here and what led you to accept the invitation?*

*Who in your life, living or not, would be proud or happy to see that you made the time to come here to work toward (the stated goal of the dialogue)? What qualities or values would they be seeing in you that made them proud or happy?*

The following example represents a more in-depth sharing about values and commitments, i.e., it moves into the heart of the dialogue. It elicits personal stories about what the community has meant to participants. This is particularly helpful if the community is undergoing changes that have led to divisiveness. It allows participants to give voice to what that change means in their lives—what is at stake for them.

*Please share a story from your life in the community that might help others understand what this community has meant to you and why you chose to take the time to come to a dialogue about.... (for example: healing divisions, supporting cooperation and respect among different groups).*

Good questions for dialogue, especially those that are at the heart of a dialogue, often have these features:

They invite people to reflect on and share something about themselves—usually in the form of a vivid story about a life experience—that is likely to dispel stereotypes and engender genuine curiosity, empathic connection, and greater understanding of how that person came to have their particular perspectives or ways of being in the world.

They focus participants’ attention on each other, not on people outside of the room.

They invite speaking about fundamental concerns and dreams related to dignity, security and identity—concerns and dreams that can be understood by others, even if they don’t share them.

They avoid labels that put people in boxes; if there are particular labels or buzz words that have blocked constructive conversations, a good question will not use those words unless the question invites participants to speak about the personal meanings and impacts of those words.

They invite people to share the complexities of their thinking about issues that are normally discussed in pro and con terms.

They use language that is easily understood by the participants.

They allow all participants to speak about something meaningful in their lives—not simply facts about them.

They are sometimes “bivalent” e.g. asking for hopes and fears, what’s appreciated and what’s troubling. Such questions allow people to see commonality where they once saw difference and difference where they once saw commonality.

In sum, a good question for dialogue will allow people to be known for

- who they are (as opposed to being seen as a stereotype)
- what they truly care about, related to deep hopes or fears (usually poorly represented in slogans and generalizations)
- what in their life has shaped who they are and what they care most about
- what aspects of their views are more complex than one would guess from a typical pro and con way of presenting their views.

The following pair of questions fits these criteria fairly well:

*Please think of a time when you moved from being an outsider, misunderstood and perhaps invisible, then became more understood and included. What made it difficult to be more included? What did you or others do to break through barriers and to feel more welcome?*

and

*Please think of a time when you recognized that someone—or a group—was feeling excluded, invisible, or unwelcome. What did you do to welcome that person or group? What values or commitments did you draw upon? Where or from whom did you learn those values? (If it’s hard to think of an example, feel free to share story about a time that, in looking back, you saw an opportunity to be more welcoming and wish you had.)*

This set of questions

- is bivalent, i.e., it asks those who want to feel more welcome and those who are in a position to be welcoming to think of themselves in both positions, even though being on one side or the other of a barrier to welcome is likely to be more salient for some participants.
- invites stories about life experiences.
- avoids a view of the people in the room as two (or more) homogeneous identity groups with no commonality across groups.

The value of a particular question will, of course, depend on the group's purposes. So in considering different questions you will want to ask yourself and your planning partners what the question will elicit or call forth and how that might—or might not—serve the purposes of the people in the room. For example, if a group of citizens in town—either US-born or fairly settled immigrants—is interested in better understanding their different immigration perspectives, they might want to use a set of three questions similar to a set that PCP developed about twenty years ago for dialogues among people who described themselves as prochoice and prolife. In the context of Welcoming America's work, that question set would look like this:

1. Please share a story from your life experience that might help others understand how you came to have the perspectives, concerns or values you have related to immigration (or, related to shifts in the make up of the population in town).
2. What is at the heart of the matter for you? (In other words, what is it that really matters to you related to these issues?)
3. As you think about your perspectives and experiences with this issue, can you speak about any ways you might be pulled in different directions? Like: On the one hand, I really care about \_\_\_\_ and on the other hand I care about or appreciate \_\_\_\_\_ so it's a little complicated for me—or the issue isn't totally "black and white" or "pro and con" for me because \_\_\_\_\_.

This set of questions could be oriented not to people's perspectives on immigration, but the participants' relationships with the community and their hopes and concerns about it. For example:

1. What has it meant to you to be able to live in this community? Please share a story from your life—before you lived here or while you lived here—that might help others understand what it means to you to live here.
2. As you think about what you'd like to either preserve or change about what it feels like to live here, what's at the heart of the matter for you?
3. What aspects of these issues are complicated for you? Do you have any mixed feelings or are you sometimes torn in different directions? For example, is there something about the needs and perspectives you've heard about tonight—needs and perspectives different from yours—that you really understand?

Questions that focus directly on different views about immigration will be most helpful if the participants have been on different sides of the issue or at different places on a spectrum<sup>7</sup> and they see some value in trying to at least understand each other's views better—not with the aim of agreeing on all aspects of the issue, but with the aim of being able to limit or heal division and work together toward common goals.<sup>8</sup> Questions about participants' views about immigration probably will not be well-suited to a group with new immigrants who are feeling vulnerable, misunderstood and unwelcome, e.g., those who have come as refugees. They will probably benefit from a dialogue that helps them feel better understood and supported by those who are less upset by their presence before engaging with those who are more conflicted or uncomfortable with their presence.

<sup>7</sup> A common misconception in dialogue work is to think that the wider the difference of opinion the better. This thinking can lead to arm-twisting to get people to participate who are not really motivated to do the work of dialogue. Resist thinking that dialogue across smaller differences amounts to "preaching to the choir." Remember that differences among participants will not always be obvious and fruitful reflection and learning can occur when people encounter others who share some elements of their perspectives and differ in other elements.

<sup>8</sup> For very explicit guidance for working with a question set like this, see Appendix A-1 in *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*, available as a free download at [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

If a particular issue has arisen in a community, e.g., an incident or a battle over how to handle a dilemma, the first question in the set of three above could be changed to or preceded by a question about the impact of the division on each participant. For example:

*How has conflict over these issues (or division in the community) affected you, personally?*

The following questions could help people to get to know each other. Such questions could be initial questions in a longer session or single questions in a very time-limited segment of a gathering that is intended to help people get to know each other.

*If you already knew me as a friend, you would know that I have these passions, hobbies, interests and skills: \_\_\_\_\_.*

*Please look back over your life and think about what your parents, grandparents (or other significant people) passed on to you. For example, your name? your values? your faith? your big ears? Make a list. Then consider which of these you most treasure and share something about why. Now think about a way that you have become different from them—you've had different life experiences or made different choices—for better or worse. What are some of those?*

*What does "the American dream" mean to you? What aspects of that dream—no matter how big or small—can you see and appreciate in your own life? What aspects have been hard to reach?*

*As you think about life in the US, how would you fill in these blanks?*

*I feel blessed/fortunate because \_\_\_\_\_*

*I wish I could feel less challenged by \_\_\_\_\_*

*As you think about "your people"—this could be your family or a broader community—those who have shaped who you are—is there a story that has been told over the years about who you are that is dear to you or makes you proud? Is that story reflected in your life now, in the way you are viewed, or the way you feel about yourself? Has it been challenged by any of your experiences? Have your feelings about that story shifted over time?*

Another possibility is to ask people to bring and speak about an object that has special meaning to them related to, for example, "home," or "welcome," or "belonging." Incorporating a visual element can ameliorate the language barrier. Also, it can help people to speak in an engaging manner about their lives, avoiding both bland generalities and speaking only "from the head."

The entire middle section of a dialogue could consist of PCP's exercise on stereotyping.<sup>9</sup> A variation of it would involve asking people a set of questions like:

*When someone does not know you well, are there assumptions about you they might make that would be false? Or hurtful? Or somewhat true but not the whole picture?*

*How would you like to be known and understood?*

<sup>9</sup> This exercise, along with detailed instruction for facilitating a session with it, appears as Appendix A-4 in *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*, available as a free download at [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org).

Decisions about what questions to ask will need to take into account the group size and time constraints. The three-question sets on page 18 would be difficult to use in a large group unless it broke into small facilitated groups of six to eight people and even then the time required would be two to two and a half hours. Those questions are simply not answerable in a quick go-round of one minute each!

*Appendix B offers a two-hour format using the two-question set.* It is designed for a group of 24-25 people broken into 4 or 5 small groups with 5 or 6 people each. That format has one introductory question as well. With additional time, that format could include a common experience like film clips or a panel presentation before the group divides into small groups or an additional question after the introductory question, e.g., “What hope for the future do you have that influenced your decision to accept the invitation to be here tonight?”

When crafting questions for dialogue, keep in mind that any question that is at the heart of the dialogue should allow all participants to speak about something that has meaning for them, especially if one of the central purposes is for the participants to come to know each other as complex human beings, not as stereotypes. For example, asking immigrants and US-born participants to say something about their family history in relation to immigration might serve as a good introductory question, answered briefly. However, if it were at the heart of the dialogue, it would be asking at least some U.S.-born participants—those whose ancestry in other lands is not an important part of their identity—to spend the bulk of their time talking about something that has relatively little meaning in their lives.

Again, attention to purpose is critical. If the main purpose of the session is for U.S.-born participants to hear about the lives of people who are new immigrants, then the design for the session should reflect that purpose. For example, the session could start with a panel of willing immigrants speaking about their experiences, then the audience could break into pairs or threes to reflect on what they learned and what they're curious to hear more about. Then, after 10-15 minutes, the audience could re-convene to hear questions and comments.

The larger the group, the more likely it is that the group will have to break into small facilitated groups or un-facilitated groups of 2 or 3 for both introductory and central questions, then re-convene as a full group. If the number in the group is under 25 or 30, there might be time for the full group to share comments and reflections in a go-round as indicated in Appendix B. If the group is larger, there may not be time to hear reflections from everyone. In that case, the facilitator can invite people to raise their hands if they are willing to share something about their small group experience, and indicate that they should speak about their experience. If someone wants to share what they learned about another person, they should do so only with their permission and should offer them a chance to correct or add something.

## LESS STRUCTURED CONVERSATION

In PCP's practice, we see the questions we pose as inviting people to speak in ways that make it more likely they will be heard and better understood. Then when the conversation becomes less structured, we encourage people to build on that base of understanding by asking each other questions. This segment of a dialogue session not only gives participants a chance to better understand each other; it gives them a chance to show genuine interest in each other.

We often begin this segment by inviting questions only, then offering three other ways they might continue their conversation (see below). In some groups, we offer all four options at the beginning, but even then we suggest that participants start with their questions. As with opening questions, we insert a pause before inviting people to speak, so participants can formulate their questions.

### *Four Pathways to Connected Conversation*

- **Ask a question**  
Is there something someone said that you'd like to understand better?
- **Note a point of learning**  
Have you heard something that stirred fresh thoughts or feelings?
- **Pick up and weave a thread**  
Has an interesting theme or idea emerged that you'd like to add to?
- **Clarify differences**  
Have you heard something you disagreed with? If so, first check to see if you understood it correctly. Then say what was unsettling to you about what you heard and why.

## CLOSING

*Closing questions serve multiple purposes.* They

- foster reflection on the experience
- give people an opportunity to add something that will help them feel a sense of closure
- invite expression of impact and appreciation
- surface ideas about next steps

Examples of such questions are:

*What did you do here—or not do—that contributed to a feeling of connection and understanding?*

*What would you like to take with you from this conversation—an idea, a memory, an insight?*

*Are there next steps you'd like to take?*

*Is there anything else you'd like to say briefly to bring this dialogue to a satisfying close?*

If ideas for next steps emerge, as they often do, you can help the group get clarity about how they want to translate ideas into action. Will someone take responsibility for organizing next steps? Will they want you to help them? Many a good idea dies for lack of clarity about who will do what to make things happen!

Often there isn't time in the meeting to discuss ideas for next steps in detail. It's helpful to have a written feedback form with the usual questions about what was satisfying, what could have been done differently, etc. and a final question like, "Would you be interested in future events or activities related to these issues? (yes, no, maybe) If so, what would most interest you? Would you be willing to get a phone call from one of the facilitators to share more about your experience here and/or discuss ideas for next steps?"

## TIPS FOR FACILITATORS<sup>10</sup>

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### THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

*Be clear about your role.* It is to serve the participants in having the sort of conversation they have indicated they would like to have. You can serve the group by establishing and maintaining the “container” for dialogue, i.e., by protecting and supporting the spirit, atmosphere and purposes of dialogue. To do this you might need to intervene, e.g., to remind people about the communication agreements and keep them on time and on task. If necessary, you will also help participants re-negotiate their agreements, or explicitly and transparently shift their purposes, if interests and needs shift in a new direction that all agree is worthwhile. (This usually is an issue only in lengthy gatherings like retreats or multi-session dialogues.)

The main responsibilities of the facilitator are to

- welcome people and orient them to the event and its purpose;
- get agreement to a set of guidelines (those you have proposed or a version revised by the participants);
- remind people about their agreements if they forget them;
- move the group through the dialogue, supporting the structures (e.g. the go-round structure and the pauses); and
- keep an eye on time, both the time limits in particular sections and the time allocated for the whole session so you will save enough time for the closing.

*Stay focused on supporting the participants in connecting with each other.* This requires that you avoid entering the conversation on the level of substance, no matter how innocuous it may seem to add a comment. Facilitators may choose, however, to respond to an opening question that invites people to introduce themselves in a manner not related to the topic or issue. Helping the participants connect with each other also involves resisting any desires you might have to lead in a manner that makes you the center of attention. This sometimes requires character stretching!

<sup>10</sup> In a short dialogue guide it is impossible to cover all of the scenarios you might encounter. For more written guidance, see Chapter 6 in *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*, available at [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org). For experiential training and coaching, consider taking a PCP workshop.



## MAINTAINING THE “CONTAINER”

*If the group is in a go-round structure, maintain it.* Sometimes a participant will feel compelled to speak out of turn, often with good intentions. If that happens, you’ll need to intervene. It is less likely to happen if, before the go-rounds begin, you say something like, “You may be tempted to respond immediately to something you’ve heard but I’ll ask you to hold onto that thought, until we complete the go-round. You can jot it down and bring it up later.”

*Take seriously your role as manager of time:* There are two purposes of time management:

- to ensure that the conversation has a solid beginning, a long enough middle, and a satisfying end within the time available.
- to ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to be heard, and that the dialogue is free from the domination or disproportionate verbosity of its members.

Your job is to guide people through the dialogue in a manner that accomplishes these purposes and also suits your style and your group’s culture. Your job will be easiest if you are clear about what you are inviting participants to do (e.g., “speak for up to three minutes”) and how you plan to signal when a participant’s time is up. Indicate that a signal is a request to the participant to stop after they complete their thought or sentence.

*Help people to stay focused.* For example, if someone seems to be rambling or tangential and you don’t know how to connect what they are saying to the question, chances are good that others are having that experience too. Give the person a little time to make the connection on their own but if their time is running out and you’re still uncertain, you can say, “I’m having trouble connecting what you’re saying to this question about... Can you make the connection?” Often they can make the connection in just a sentence or two.

## INTERVENTION

Your authority to intervene arises from the agreements participants have made and the purpose they agreed to pursue. How active you will need to be as a facilitator will depend on your group. Some groups or individual participants need a lot of time management; others do not. Some will need a reminder about the spirit of dialogue; others will not. The structure of the dialogue and the care you have taken in the pre-meeting phase of your work are likely to “hold” the dialogue quite well.

*If you're not sure about what your group needs, ask.* Don't feel that you need to read the participants' minds. Ask them! For example, “We have about 45 minutes to go. Would you like to keep going, or take a 5-minute break?”

*If you need to intervene, do it as simply as possible and without judgment.* For example, if someone is speaking past the designated time in a go-round, you can signal that time is up and say something like, “Can you finish up that thought, then we need to move on to (the next person). Or, “We need to keep going around so we'll have time at the end for discussion...” If one or two people are speaking much more than others, you can simply say, “I'd like to check to see if others who haven't spoken would like to speak or ask a question.” One way you can intervene with compassion and avoid shaming is to simply say what you notice. For example, if a few people have done most of the talking, you can say, “I notice that we haven't heard so much from this side of the room.” You can also inquire about what you notice, rather than make a quick judgment that may be based on a misreading of the situation. “I notice that the pace of the conversation has picked up and I'm not sure if it's making it hard for some people to speak. How's it going?”

*Intervene if people are interrupting each other.* It's pretty easy to intervene if this happens. “Excuse me, I'm wondering whether X was finished speaking...” Or, “I want to make sure X can finish what he was saying.” What's hard about it is that you have to interrupt that person in order to intervene!

*Intervene if the spirit and atmosphere of the dialogue is at risk.* For example, if a participant makes a judgment of another person's response, he is probably violating an agreement about respectful speaking. For example if he says, “Bill, I can't believe you are so blind to...” you can ask him to say what he cares about without passing judgment on Bill's contribution.

*Listen for rhetorical questions.* These are questions that have a statement or assumption embedded in them; perhaps it's a statement that challenges. You'll probably be able to sense whether a situation with a challenging question can be well responded to by “resilient” listeners or whether you need to intervene. If people are asking and responding to hard questions, that's great. You are holding for the group a safe enough space so that they CAN ask any hard questions they have. If you're not sure how it's going, ask the group, e.g., “I'd like to check in with you all to see if we're doing alright in terms of maintaining an atmosphere of curiosity and learning...”

*Encourage participants to “unpack” words with loaded meanings.* Some words have different meanings for different people. If you think one of those words is causing tension in the conversation, ask people to say what the word means to them.

*Err on the side of higher structure and strict adherence to agreements in the early phase of the dialogue.* This will signal that you are taking seriously your duty to keep the group on track and to support a constructive atmosphere. A group that has already developed trust and friendships can afford to be a bit more flexible.

*Be prepared to respond appropriately in highly emotional moments.* Immigrants who are refugees often come to this country having experienced trauma unimaginable to most native-born Americans. When feelings of grief or sadness arise, others in the group may offer support, for example, by taking the person's hand or making another gesture of comfort. If a participant has spoken about tragic losses, the group can take a moment of silence to honor those who were lost. In some situations, including at times of anger, you can suggest that the group take a break, allowing everyone to breathe and stretch. During a break, the person who is upset may choose to be alone or accept supportive contact from others.

## FOLLOW-UP AND EVALUATION

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When you seek feedback from participants, it demonstrates that you have an ongoing interest in being responsive to them and learning from them. Guided by what you learn, your practice will improve. Your planning partners and fellow practitioners involved with Welcoming America can also benefit from your learning. Finally, this guide will become much more valuable if you let me and staff at Welcoming America learn from your experiences. Please let us know what worked, what didn't work, what other ideas you have had, and what if anything you would like to discuss. I can be reached at my home office phone number or via email at [mherzig@publicconversations.org](mailto:mherzig@publicconversations.org) and I'd be delighted to hear from you.

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APPENDIX A

**DISTINGUISHING DEBATE FROM DIALOGUE**

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
<p>Pre-meeting communication between sponsors and participants is minimal and largely irrelevant to what follows.</p> <p>Participants tend to be leaders known for propounding a carefully crafted position. The personas displayed in the debate are usually already familiar to the public. The behavior of the participants tends to conform to stereotypes.</p> <p>The atmosphere is threatening; attacks and interruptions are expected by participants and are usually permitted by moderators.</p> <p>Participants speak as representatives of groups.</p> <p>Participants speak to their own constituents and, perhaps, to the undecided middle.</p> <p>Differences within sides are denied or minimized.</p> <p>Participants express unswerving commitment to a point of view, approach, or idea.</p> <p>Participants listen in order to refute the other side's data and to expose faulty logic in their arguments. Questions are asked from a position of certainty. These questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements.</p> <p>Statements are predictable and offer little new information.</p> <p>Success requires simple impassioned statements.</p> <p>Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public discourse. (The discourse defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.)</p>	<p>Pre-meeting contacts and preparation of participants are essential elements of the full process.</p> <p>Those chosen to participate are not necessarily outspoken leaders. Whoever they are, they speak as individuals whose own unique experiences differ in some respect from others on their side. Their behavior is likely to vary in some degree and along some dimensions from stereotypic images others may hold of them.</p> <p>The atmosphere is one of safety; facilitators propose, get agreement on, and enforce clear ground rules to enhance safety and promote respectful exchange.</p> <p>Participants speak as individuals, from their own unique experience.</p> <p>Participants speak to each other.</p> <p>Differences among participants on the same side are revealed, as individual and personal foundations of beliefs and values are explored.</p> <p>Participants express uncertainties, as well as deeply held beliefs.</p> <p>Participants listen to understand and gain insight into the beliefs and concerns of the others. Questions are asked from a position of curiosity.</p> <p>New information surfaces.</p> <p>Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed.</p> <p>Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, that is, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in the public debate.</p>

This table contrasts debate as commonly seen on television with the kind of dialogue we aim to promote in dialogue sessions conducted by the Public Conversations Project. First published in 1992 by the Public Conversations Project.

APPENDIX B

A FORMAT FOR DIALOGUE *with* SMALL GROUP BREAK OUTS

*24 participants 7:00–9:00*



- 7:00 **Gather**  
Get refreshments and get name tags with group assignments
- 7:15 **Welcome and Orientation**
- 7:25 **Communication Agreements**
  1. We will speak for ourselves and from our own experiences.
  2. We will listen with resilience and respect.
  3. We will set aside the need to persuade others to agree with us.
  4. We will speak within the times requested by the facilitator and not interrupt.
  5. We will pass if we do not wish to speak.
- 7:30 **Transition to Small Groups**  
Go into small, diverse groups, each with a facilitator
- 7:35 **Introductory Question**  
Please say your name and something about where you are from and where your parents were born. Just a couple sentences. For example:
  - *I have lived in the U.S. all my life, in the Chicago area, then in Miami, and now here. My mother was born in New York and my father was born in Chicago.*
  - *I came here from Somalia 2 years ago. My mother was born in Somalia and my father in Ethiopia.*
- 7:40 **Central Questions** (answered as a set)  
Read Questions • Pause for 4-5 minutes • Share for about 3 minutes.
 

*Please think of a time, as recent as today or many years ago, when you experienced yourself as an outsider, misunderstood and perhaps invisible. What made it difficult to be more included? What did you or others do (if anything) to help you feel more welcome? Were there small gestures—small things people did—that made a difference?*

*Please think of a time when you recognized that someone—or a group—was excluded, feeling invisible, or somehow less than welcome. What did you do, or wish you had done, to welcome that person or group? What values or commitments did you draw upon? Where or from whom did you learn those values?*
- 8:05 **Less Structured Conversation**
  - Have you heard something you'd like to understand more about?
  - Have you noticed a theme?
  - Is there an additional thought you'd like to share that was stimulated by hearing others speak?
- 8:30 **Full Group Sharing**  
*Format:* With chairs in one large circle, go around, and have each person take a minute to share as they are willing. Remember, it's OK to pass.
  - Is there something you shared in your small group that you would like to share here? Or is there something you are taking with you, some insight, or a commitment or something you have appreciated, that you'd like to share?
- 9:00 **Closing**  
Express thanks, ask for feedback, and adjourn

APPENDIX C

OUR OBSERVATIONS *and* THE SPIRIT BEHIND OUR PRACTICES

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED	SPIRIT	WHAT WE DO
.....	.....	.....
People are more invested in a dialogue when they have been consulted in its design.	<i>Collaborative</i>	We respect participants' knowledge, including them in our planning and consulting them throughout the dialogue process.
People are more likely to have a constructive conversation when they do not attack, are not defensive, and abstain from polarizing ways of speaking.	<i>Preventive</i>	We ask participants to agree in advance to set aside accusation and argument and avoid communication patterns that impeded previous conversations.
Equal respect for everyone enhances trust and collaboration.	<i>Fair</i>	We use structure to provide equal airtime and agreements to promote respectful speaking.
In an affirming, exploratory, future-oriented atmosphere, people are more open to new ways of communicating.	<i>Hopeful</i>	We elicit participants' visions and wishes for the future and highlight the appearance of promising, new interactions among them.
When people share personal stories, their uniqueness and complexity emerge. Personal exchanges diminish stereotyping and promote caring.	<i>Rehumanizing</i>	We discourage depersonalized debate. We invite participants to share life experiences that they associate with their current views.
When people are open with one another, they more easily develop relationships of trust, respect, collaboration, and mutual empowerment.	<i>Candid</i>	Participants are encouraged to speak openly about themselves. We explain why we do what we do, if asked. We express no opinion on the divisive issues at hand.
People learn more and relate better when they listen carefully and attentively to each other.	<i>Receptive</i>	We listen attentively. We use structures and agreements that promote respectful listening.
When people have an inquiring attitude about themselves and others, they interact more constructively than when they speak from certainty.	<i>Inquiring</i>	We encourage participants to ask instead of assuming or advocating. We invite participants to be open-minded toward themselves and others.
When each person in a conversation considers varied perspectives, new ideas emerge and build on one another, dispelling simplistic polarizations.	<i>Expansive</i>	Our questions and tasks are designed to stimulate reflections and conversations that generate clarifying distinctions and fresh ideas.



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WELCOMING  
AMERICA



.....  
▲ *Building a Nation of Neighbors*

*We believe that just as fertile soil is needed for a seed to grow, receptive communities are critical if immigrants are to thrive. Welcoming America focuses on the communities where new immigrants have made their homes, helping neighbors build relationships built on trust and understanding. Instead of focusing on the seed, we concentrate on preparing the soil in which it will flourish.*

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