CITIZENS BUILDING COMMUNITIES:

THE ABCs OF PUBLIC DIALOGUE

LWV

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FOREWORD

Throughout its history, the League of Women Voters has played a significant role in encouraging the informed and active participation of citizens in government. Our role as a "trusted convener" has been instrumental in creating balanced forums where citizens can learn about issues, share their perspectives and have an impact on decisions made in their communities. Since various models of public engagement through dialogue have emerged over the last decade, the League believes it is important to share some of these models and the resources many groups offer to help move dialogue into citizen action.

This publication is the product of the efforts of many people who merit our thanks, beginning with the author, Matt Leighninger, senior associate at the Study Circles Resource Center, whose background in community dialogue and democracy work brings great insight into the practice of public involvement. We also thank David Mathews, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, and Maxine Thomas, general counsel for the Kettering Foundation, for creating the gathering that led us to the development of this publication. We appreciate the contributions of many people who shared their insights: Terry Amsler, program director for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Conflict Resolution program; Joe Goldman, senior associate, AmericaSpeaks; Rosemary Gunn, national projects manager, Information Renaissance; Sandy Heierbacher, convenor, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation; Amy Malick, communications director, Study Circles Resource Center; Martha McCoy, executive director, Study Circles Resource Center; Patrick Scully, deputy director, Study Circles Resource Center; and Lars Torres, researcher, AmericaSpeaks. We would also like to thank League leaders whose vision and practice contributed to this publication, including Carol Woodward Scott, Rosie Stephens, Nancy Polk and Ellen Taylor, along with LWVUS Executive Director Nancy Tate, and LWVUS staff, Shirley Ponomareff and Cheryl Graeve.

Finally, we extend special thanks to Libby Sharpe for her contribution to the League of Women Voters and the impact she made through the League for more than 50 years. She was a leader in training Leagues on techniques to help them hold discussion/dialogue groups. We thank her family, especially her husband, Irwin Sharpe, for their contribution in helping to bring this publication to print. It is our hope that dialogue leaders of today will use this material to bring more citizens into an active relationship with their communities on issues that matter to them.

KAY J. MAXWELL, PRESIDENT
League of Women Voters of the United States

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USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to give the reader an introduction to the best practices in public dialogue. For the purposes of this publication, we are using the term "public dialogue" to encompass the variations and models covered here; others may use different designations, "community forums" for one. The general sense is the same.

This guide includes a description of some successful principles, followed by five sections: a set of key planning questions to consider; lists of major large-group, small-group and online formats now being used for productive discussions of important issues; and resources.

To keep this guide as compact as possible, we have tried to "boil down" the most common public dialogue formats to their bare essentials. We have limited our focus to formats and processes that share the following features:

- Those used to engage large numbers of people;
- Those open to anyone who wants to participate; and
- Those that derive much of their power and effectiveness from involving a diverse, critical mass of citizens.

Therefore, we have excluded citizens' juries, deliberative polls, conflict resolution and dispute mediation processes, and many other types of meetings.

If you are in the process of deciding how to organize a public dialogue effort, you will probably want more information than is included in this guide. The resource section at the back provides links and resources to help you find what you need.

Understanding Public Dialogue

Public dialogue is sometimes portrayed as an old-fashioned notion, a throwback to the days when town decisions could be made "under the village oak." But citizen involvement is being reinterpreted for the 21st century. Modern citizens may have less free time to spend, but they probably have more skills to contribute.

With their higher levels of education, and with the aid of new tools like the Internet, citizens are increasingly proficient in studying issues and giving recommendations, even on technical policy decisions. When they feel that their efforts will make an impact, they are also willing and able to take action themselves, not only as volunteers but by gaining the support of the various groups to which they belong. This has helped create a much higher level of collaboration among governments, businesses, churches and nonprofits.

To tap this new citizen potential, local leaders are organizing public dialogue projects. These efforts are often motivated by some common challenges:

- Though plenty of information is available, citizens don't always seem highly informed about politics and policy;
- The level of anger and controversy over policy decisions – from school bond issues to land use decisions to state and national legislation – seem to be rising;
- Issues of race, and other kinds of differences among citizens, continue to affect student achievement, police-community relations, and many other aspects of life; and
- Governments don't always have the resources to solve our most pressing public problems.

Most of these dialogue events share some key characteristics: they involve large, diverse groups of people; they use both small-group dialogues and large forums; organizers provide background information and lay out different options; impartial facilitators or moderators help the discussions run smoothly and fairly; participants provide specific policy input; and organizers often ask citizens to plan for action rather than simply making recommendations.

Many kinds of organizations have taken the lead in these dialogue events, including civic groups, mayors' offices, nonprofits, school districts, faith-based groups, human relations commissions, police departments, community activists and neighborhood associations.

WHAT IS A CITIZEN?

The term "citizen" has a rich history in American democracy. However, it can also be a confusing word to use. Sometimes it is defined in a narrow, legal way, meaning only those people who hold U.S. passports or are eligible to vote. In this guide, we will use a broader definition: citizens are residents who care about the places where they live. Many local leaders are tapping into that commitment, helping people work together to improve their communities.
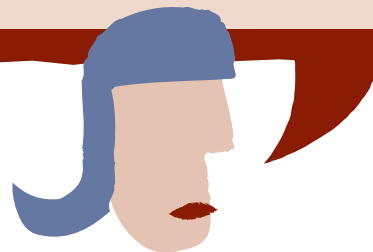
Getting Started: Important Questions and Best Practices

IMPORTANT PLANNING QUESTIONS

When you begin planning the use of dialogue to address an issue, there are some key questions to consider:

What is the issue you want citizens to address, and how should you describe it?

In many communities, a compelling issue has served as the catalyst for public dialogue. Some of the most common issues being addressed are race, education, immigration, crime, criminal justice and corrections, growth and sprawl, youth development, economic development and police-community relations. Some projects have taken on multiple issues, helping citizens address a range of challenges facing the community. Still others have involved citizens in developing city budgets or land use plans.

The words you use to describe the issue are important. In order to involve a wide range of people, you need to frame the issue in an impartial way, so that it covers many different views and possible solutions. For example, "improving the quality of our schools" appeals to a wider array of people than "increasing school funding." Remember that public dialogue is different from advocacy: you are inviting people to grapple with an issue, not trying to convince them to support a particular solution.

The issue should also be described in non-technical language, so that ordinary people feel like they have something to say. For example, "planning and growth" has more appeal than "housing density and minimum setbacks." Citizens are certainly capable of dealing with technical questions, but if you avoid jargon as much as possible, people will be more inclined to participate and better able to get to the root of the issue.

What do you hope to achieve through public dialogue?

It is important to consider what you hope the dialogue process will achieve, since that should affect how you design it.

An hour of dialogue may not be sufficient to meet your goals, but a series of meetings or a well-planned event can achieve several or all of them. Keep your goals in mind as you develop your dialogue activities.

POSSIBLE GOALS FOR DIALOGUE FORMATS

- *Ensuring that citizens are **informed** and connected;*
- ***Resolving** conflicts and bridging divisions in the community;*
- *Involving citizens in important **policy decisions,** or in the development of a plan;*
- ***Generating new solutions** to community problems and encouraging citizens and citizen groups to help implement action efforts; and*
- ***Involving new people** who haven't been active in the community before.*

Who are you trying to involve, and who are you trying to influence?

No matter what kinds of meetings you are convening (small dialogues, large forums, online discussions or some combination), you will probably want to involve as many people, from as many different backgrounds, as possible. This makes sense: a large, diverse, 'critical mass' of citizens is almost always more powerful, knowledgeable and effective than a small, homogeneous group. In some cases, you may start out with a small group, as a step toward assembling a larger one.

There may be certain segments of the community that you particularly want to have in the mix. If there is a major policy decision at stake, for example, it will be crucial to have public officials and other key decision-makers involved in the dialogue or at least listening to it. If there is a major conflict in the community, it will be important to recruit people on both sides of that divide. You may want to pay special attention to recruiting young people, low-income people, people who haven't been active in the community before or people who have been significantly or inordinately affected by the issue.

Why would people want to get involved?

Understanding the interests or motivation of the potential participants is just as important as deciding your own priorities. You have to convince people that your activities will help them achieve what they want, or they won't take part. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the people you are trying to recruit:
- Why would a young person get involved?
- Why would a citizen with conservative (or liberal) views participate?
- Why would a citizen from a particular racial or ethnic group want to take part?
- Why would a public official want to join in?

Some people may participate because they are hopeful about what the dialogue events can accomplish; others may participate only because they are concerned about how they will be perceived if they don't. As you begin talking about your project with various people, be sure to ask lots of questions and listen carefully to the answers. People will often tell you the reasons why they will (or won't) get involved.

You may feel a natural inclination to be very focused and specific about the goals of your public dialogue project, but beware. Your focus may be too narrow to attract more than a small slice of the population. Citizens generally have a wide range of interests:
- They often want to learn more about an important issue in an enjoyable, interesting way.
- They usually want to share their own views and opinions.
- They often want those views to have some kind of influence on policy decisions.
- They want to feel that their time is spent well and effectively.
- They may want to generate new ideas and solutions.
- They may want to volunteer for committees that will work on solutions.
- They may want to form connections with public employees or other practitioners who have some kind of official role in addressing the issue.

When a public dialogue project is focused so narrowly that it doesn't allow citizens to work toward a variety of goals, it may just leave people frustrated. This is one reason why most successful public dialogue efforts combine meetings of different types and sizes. In general:

- Small-group discussions of 8-12 people are useful for some kinds of purposes (learning, sharing experiences, making choices, developing action plans);
- Large-group meetings of 50-1,000 people are useful for other purposes (giving momentum to the dialogue project, providing information, summarizing shared conclusions, connecting with key resources, providing a sense that change is possible); and
- Online groups can provide information resources, connect people who can't (or don't want to) meet, or help prepare or follow up face-to-face events.

Don't overlook some of the most basic incentives. Citizens are usually more likely to come to an event if they know there will be time for socializing, if child care will be provided, if transportation or parking is accessible, and if there will be food.

How will you provide participants with the information they need?
Providing balanced, nonpartisan information can be very important to the success of a public dialogue effort. There are, of course, many ways to communicate that information, including written guides, handouts, e-mail, Web sites, videos, and presentations by speakers or panelists. Also, because different people learn in different ways (e.g., by hearing, seeing or talking), it is important to provide information through multiple means whenever possible.

Two main challenges to consider are balance and accessibility.

- The background information must be factual and non-controversial.
- The choices, approaches or arguments you want citizens to consider must be described fairly, and none of the major viewpoints should be omitted.
- Information accessibility is especially important for the participation of young people, people with lower levels of education and people who speak little or no English. (Is it provided in plain, jargon-free language? Will translation into other languages be provided? Are graphics, charts and other visuals effectively used?)

Equip your facilitators or moderators with written materials so that they can be knowledgeable, but do not ask them to be "experts" who provide their opinions on the topic. To maintain a neutral arena where all views can be expressed, you need facilitators or moderators who can manage the discussion in an impartial way.

What kinds of financial resources will you need?
Budgets for public dialogue efforts can vary dramatically. Some have been conducted entirely on an in-kind basis: that is, the organizing was accomplished by volunteers or by people who did the work as part of their existing jobs, and all of the other elements (food, supplies, meeting sites, etc.) were donated by governments, businesses or other organizations. Many other efforts have had budgets that ran well over $200,000 – and were worth every penny. It all depends on the goals, available resources and design of your dialogue project. But no matter what their budgets look like, the best public dialogue events rely on a substantial amount of work and commitment by local organizers, facilitators and recruiters.

Who are your key partners?

Productive public dialogue efforts require a high degree of collaboration. In most situations, no single organization can reach a sufficiently wide range of people to recruit a diverse critical mass of participants. Partners may also:

- Provide facilitators or moderators;
- Demonstrate that the dialogue project is balanced and will allow a range of views to be heard;
- Provide necessary funding or in-kind support;
- Provide background information or other materials; or
- Assist action efforts that emerge from the dialogue.

The partnerships, coalitions or associations you form in the process of convening a public dialogue effort can also be valuable to your organization in the long run. By working with other groups to connect with citizens, handle conflicts productively and solve public problems, you can raise the credibility, membership and relevance of your own organization.
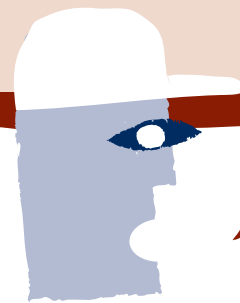
How should you get started?

Planning one of these dialogue events can be intimidating. Involving large numbers of people in public life is a lot of work. But even the largest and most successful public dialogue efforts have had very humble beginnings. Invite a few potential partners to an initial meeting. Tell them why you're interested in this, and talk about – or try out, if possible – the format(s) in this guide that you think might be helpful. Ask them what they think: What benefits would this have for the community? How could we combine or adapt formats to fit our specific needs? This initial group of people could become the steering committee for a much larger dialogue project.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Newspapers and other media organizations have played a wide range of roles in public dialogue efforts, including:

- *Covering the dialogue event;*
- *Encouraging people to take part in the dialogue program;*
- *Creating discussion materials for the participants;*
- *Ensuring that their coverage of the issue or decision being addressed is timed so that the articles can be used to inform the discussions; and*
- *Initiating and coordinating the dialogue event themselves.*

Some communities have used "preview forums," a format designed to open new lines of communication between local news organizations and their communities, and to foster news coverage that reflects deeper connections and fresh perspectives (see www.previewforum.com).

A set of best practices has emerged from successful public dialogue events. These ideas have been applied in different ways in different communities, and they apply to both online and face-to-face meetings:

- If you want to have *large numbers* of partici-pants, sending out an e-mail or advertising your meeting in the newspaper usually will not be enough. This is particularly true if you want to attract a wide variety of people, including those who haven't been active in the community before. You need to reach out through all kinds of networks, enlisting the help of different kinds of leaders, so that people are recruited by someone they already know.

- If you want citizens to *develop trust* across community divides or find common ground on contentious issues, you need to give them opportunities to form relationships with people who are different from themselves. Give them time to share experiences, concerns, and values before they begin talking about policy options and action plans.

- If you want citizens to provide specific, *meaningful input* on questions of public policy, you need to present a range of policy options in a clear and balanced way. Give them background information written in plain language, and allow them to discuss the bigger questions that often lie behind the policy debate: How does this affect us? What is the problem? What are the root causes? Work with public officials, whenever possible, to decide how best to capture, analyze, and report the input so that it will be useful in the policymaking process.

- If you want citizens to *take action* on public problems – beyond simply recommending solutions for others to implement – you need to make that expectation clear from the begin-ning. They need time to "take ownership" of issues and solutions. Help them think about ways to work together, either as individual volunteers or as members of organizations (including churches, businesses, nonprofits and neighborhood associations).

- If you want people to shoulder more *civic responsibility* and remain engaged in the community, you need to give them a greater sense of political status and membership, a feeling that ordinary citizens have a place on the public stage. To encourage new leaders to step forward, give them opportunities to make new connections and hone their leadership skills.

Large-Group Formats for Public Dialogue

Most successful public dialogue efforts combine large-group and small-group meetings. Of course, large is a relative term: in a neighbor-hood, 30-50 people might be considered a large group, whereas a city-wide forum might include hundreds of participants. Large forums are useful because they can disseminate infor-mation, amplify citizen opinions, attract decision-makers and the media, connect people with resources and inspire collective confidence. The following list separates these different functions, but many large-group meetings are a combina-tion of several functions.

INFORMATIONAL FORUMS

Description:
- Rely on speakers or an expert panel, followed by questions from the audience.
- Most direct way of disseminating information to the community.

Goal that can be achieved with this format:
- Ensuring that citizens are *informed* and connected.

Best when combined with:
- Small-group meetings to help citizens better understand the information they receive.

Role of handout materials:
- Generally, to inform participants.

Special requirements:
- Expert speakers or panelists who are engaging, informative and plain-spoken.
- For many forums, ensuring a balance of multiple perspectives on the panel is important (the League of Women Voters holds this principle as especially significant).

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section for contact information):
- League of Women Voters
- Public Forum Institute

DECISION-MAKING FORUMS

Description:
- Designed to foster communication among citizens, sometimes between citizens and public officials, to influence a policy decision.
- Often designed to be deliberative: to help people carefully consider different sides of an issue and to uncover the values underlying different options.
- Main policy options may have been spelled out beforehand, or they may be determined by the participants during the course of the meeting.
- Often include small-group breakout sessions; these dialogues often adhere to the democratic small-group meeting format described in the next section.
- May utilize technology, such as polling keypads, video projection and laptops, to move between large- and small-group discussions and summarize conclusions quickly.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Involving citizens in important *policy decisions*, or in the development of a plan.
- When combined with elements of an action forum, encouraging and coordinating *action efforts* by citizens and citizen groups.

Best when combined with:
- Focus groups or democratic small-group meetings that can be used as breakout sessions.
- Smaller meetings that can be used as a lead-in to the forum.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.
- To lay out the main views or options being considered.
- To offer questions to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Special requirements:
- Spell out main policy options beforehand in a guide (or adapting a national version).
- A moderator with special training or professional expertise.
- Software, hardware, site licenses and/or professional expertise for versions that rely on technology.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- AmericaSpeaks
- Center for Deliberative Democracy (Stanford University)
- National Issues Forums Institute
- Study Circles Resource Center

VISIONING FORUMS

Description:
- Similar to decision-making forums, but used for planning the "built environment," i.e. the buildings, parks, streets and sidewalks of a neighborhood, city or metro region.
- Sometimes use tools that help citizens visualize proposals: maps, three-dimensional models, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data, for example.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Involving citizens in important *planning decisions* or in the development of shared priorities;
- Combined sometimes with elements of an action forum (see box), encouraging and coordinating *action efforts* by citizens and citizen groups.

SINGLE EVENT OR SUSTAINED EFFORT?

Whether they are large, small or on-line, most public dialogue formats work best when they are part of a larger effort that includes different kinds of meetings. Depending on your goals, your program will probably be more successful if you give people a number of ways to participate over several weeks or months.

Best when combined with:
- Focus groups or democratic small-group meetings that can be used as breakout sessions.
- Smaller meetings that can be used as a lead-in to the forum.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.
- To lay out the main views or options being considered.
- To offer questions to help stimulate thinking and discussion.

Special requirements:
- Expertise of architects or planners for illustrating options, responding to public input and ensuring that plans are feasible.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- AmericaSpeaks
- National Charrette Institute
- National Civic League
- NeighborWorks Training Institute

ACTION FORUMS

Description:
- Often used after a series of small-group meetings to help citizens act on the ideas they generated in their discussions; sometimes called "next steps forums."
- Sometimes used to help citizens move directly into action planning; action groups will usually require further support and assistance in order to succeed.
- May have different elements: the opportunity for citizens to join committees or task forces to work on particular dialogue events; the involvement of public officials or other decision-makers, who listen to citizen recommendations; booths set up by different organizations to recruit volunteers; or all of the above.

Goal that can be achieved with this format:
- Encouraging and coordinating *action efforts* by citizens and citizen groups, including churches, businesses, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations.

Best when combined with:
- Democratic small-group meetings as a lead-in.
- Some events that incorporate action forum elements into decision-making forums.

Role of handout materials:
- To provide background information.
- To describe action opportunities (either existing organizations and projects, or new committees or task forces) available to participants.

Special requirements:
- Support of public officials and other decision-makers.
- Involvement of public employees (police officers, planners, educators, etc.) and other professionals who work on public issues.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- NeighborWorks Training Institute
- Study Circles Resource Center

Small–Group Formats for Public Dialogue

Small-group public dialogues usually involve about ten people, and the discussions are usually facilitated. Beyond those similarities, the key differences among small-group formats include: the purpose of the group, the specific role of the facilitator, the kind of discussion materials handed out and the total amount of time spent in the discussion.

As a vehicle for public dialogue, small-group formats work best when large numbers of people are participating – in other words, when many small groups are meeting at the same time. Organizers will often then use large-group events to summarize and build on the conclusions of the small groups.

DEMOCRATIC SMALL-GROUP MEETINGS

Description:
- Features an impartial facilitator, ground rules set by the group and a guide that lays out open-ended questions and sample viewpoints to structure the dialogue.
- Discussion usually begins with participants sharing their experiences on the topic.
- Groups usually meet for several sessions, though not always; sometimes they take the form of breakout groups in the midst of large forums.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Single-session groups can be used to *inform* citizens and affect *policy decisions* by gathering information from the participants. However, a single session usually won't lead to greater consensus around a policy decision or more willingness by citizens to help implement the policy.
- With multiple sessions, groups can *resolve conflicts*, build consensus around *policy decisions*, encourage *action efforts* and *involve new people*. However, a concluding large-group meeting is usually necessary to follow up the small-group sessions.

Role of facilitator:
- Facilitator remains impartial, helps the group set ground rules and uses the guide to structure the discussion and introduce a range of arguments for consideration.

Role of handout materials:
- In some cases, the guide is critical for structuring the sessions.
- Questions in the beginning elicit relevant stories and experiences from participants that help the process of developing relationships and strengthening ongoing action.
- Sample viewpoints or choices help the group consider larger, more abstract questions: What are the root causes of this problem? What are the policy options?
- Brainstorming exercises at the end help participants plan how they might take action.

Best when combined with:
- Any of the large-group formats, depending on dialogue project goals. For affecting *policy decisions*, use informational forums at the beginning of the small-group sessions, and decision-making forums at the end. To encourage *action efforts*, use an action forum (see previous section).

Special requirements:
- Writing a locally specific guide is ideal but can be difficult; guides are also provided by national organizations.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- National Issues Forums
- NeighborWorks Training Institute
- Public Conversations Project
- Study Circles Resource Center
- Viewpoint Learning

FOCUS GROUPS

Description:
- Used primarily as a way of gathering information.
- Groups usually meet only once, for two hours or less.
- Used instead of surveys, or in combination with them, because they can provide much more nuanced, comprehensive information about public views.
- Sometimes used to "frame" the various views and options on an issue in order to create a discussion guide to be used in one of the other formats.

Goal that can be achieved with this format:
- Affecting *policy decisions*, mainly by helping decision makers understand what citizens think about an issue or plan and why.

Role of facilitator:
- Expert interviewer who asks probing, thought-provoking questions without trying to bias the participants.

Role of handout materials:
- To stimulate discussion; facilitator explores participants' reactions; materials could include pictures or video clips as well as written materials.

Best when combined with:
- A large-group forum to summarize the conclusions and explain to participants how the input will be used. Another forum could be held sometime later, after the decision is made, to explain how the input was influential. It is a mistake to expect that participants will get this information through the media or in some other way.
- An action forum to help participants work on their own action plans.

Special requirements:
- Trained focus group facilitators (usually paid professionals; occasionally graduate students).
- An interview guide or "protocol" for facilitators to use.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- Public Agenda
- NeighborWorks Training Institute
- Harwood Institute

STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS

Description:
- Many different kinds of dialogues fall under this category. Some are quite simple and easy to organize (in earlier times called salons), while others are highly structured and require a specific kind of facilitation (sometimes used for conflict resolution).
- One common use of structured conversations is at the beginning of a public dialogue project, to engage a small number of people who will then work together to involve much larger numbers of citizens.
- Variations include conversation cafés, wisdom councils, wisdom circles and world cafés.
- Sometimes used to "frame" the various views and options on an issue in order to create a discussion guide to be used in one of the other formats.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Providing in-depth information to smaller numbers of people rather than basic information to larger numbers so they are well *informed.*
- *Resolving conflicts*, though building in more action-related elements is critical for recruiting more than just a small set of participants.

Role of facilitator:
- Depends on type. Some don't require a facilitator at all; others require a trained facilitator who will direct the conversation.

Role of handout materials:
- Depends on type; usually, to enrich and inform the discussion.

Best when combined with:
- Any of the large-group or online formats that can be complemented through the addition of structured conversations, as a way of deepening the dialogue and helping people learn more from each other.

Special requirements:
- Depends on type.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- Center for Wise Democratic Processes
- Conversation Café
- Public Conversations Project
- World Café Community Foundation
- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation also lists a number of organizations promoting various kinds of structured conversations.

Online Formats for Public Dialogue

When Internet use proliferated in the 1990s, some claimed it would make face-to-face meetings obsolete. Others expressed doubt about the value of online public dialogue. More recently, it has become clear that this is not an all-or-nothing proposition: both online and face-to-face formats have unique strengths, and using them in combination seems to hold the greatest potential.

"LISTSERVS," BULLETIN BOARDS AND GROUP BLOGS

Description:
- A "listserv" is an electronic mailing list, generally on a particular topic; each message goes to the entire group, often generating discussion.
- Bulletin boards, blogs, and Wiki's are all Web-based formats. Bulletin boards allow users to "post" a comment; other people may reply or post their own comments. Weblogs ("blogs") are diary-like sites constructed by individuals or groups; messages appear on a Web site, often in summary form to allow a quick overview. A Wiki Web site allows users to post or edit previous postings; this facilitates collaborative work including the production of text.
- Number of participants can be small or extremely large.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- Broadcasting information to help ensure that citizens are informed; participants can easily get more information if links are provided to relevant Web sites.
- Brainstorming ideas for new solutions or requesting help in action efforts; also, a group can use a Wiki to work together on text or action plans.
- *Involving new people* who haven't been active before, if they are at ease with computers and online communication.

Role of facilitator:
- If there is a facilitator or moderator, that person may suggest topics, pose questions and monitor rules for participation and brainstorming.
- In some "listservs" and most blogs, a facilitator or moderator must approve each message before posting.

Role of background materials:
- To inform and encourage an informed discussion.

Best when combined with:
- Any of the other formats or used alone to disseminate information, provide coordination or connect people who can't meet face-to-face.

Special requirements and resources needed:
- Software, commercial or free "open source" (requires access to some technical skills).
- Space on a server and a facilitator or moderator who is comfortable with the technology.
- Public sites, e.g., libraries, for participants without access to a networked computer.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- E-democracy.org
- E-thePeople (somewhat similar to bulletin boards)
- Wikipedia (a Wiki encyclopedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) for background and "Help" to learn how to use this Wiki

ONLINE DIALOGUE

Description:
- Several models have been used. Some attempt to reproduce face-to-face dialogue, assigning participants to groups. In others, "threaded discussions" (messages grouped with their replies) allow multiple conversations in one space. All messages are available online.
- Can be used with small or large groups.

Goals that can be achieved with this format:
- An online library or links to relevant Web sites can help citizens be *informed* and connected. Participants can call up information as needed, at the level of detail they want.
- Involving citizens in *policy decisions* or in the development of a plan; for example, a large or small group can hear directly from decision makers and staff, and ask questions, give comments or discuss possibilities.
- Encouraging and coordinating *action* by citizens and citizen groups.
- *Involving new people* who haven't been active before, if they are at ease with computers and online communication.

Role of facilitator:
- Facilitators may help structure the discussion by suggesting topics or posing questions; they also monitor any rules set for participation.
- Moderator or facilitator may approve each message before it is posted to the entire group.

Role of background materials:
- To inform the discussion, and to present and explain discussion topics and questions.
- To encourage group feeling by giving short biographies of participants and staff.
- To give tips on use of the Web site (may also be done by e-mail).

Best when combined with:
- Nothing else or alongside any other format to disseminate information and connect people who can't meet face-to-face, or to prepare or follow up on face-to-face events.

Special requirements and resources needed:
- Software, commercial or free "open source" (requires access to some technical skills).
- Space on a server and a facilitator or moderator who is comfortable with the technology.
- Public sites, e.g., libraries, for participants without access to a networked computer.
- Events should be structured to maintain focus and promote constructive discussion.

Organizational resources to consult (see Resources section):
- Group Jazz
- Information Renaissance
- Information Society Project
- Web Lab

Conclusion

We hope this publication and the described processes will inspire you to build on democracy's greatest strength: the commitment and capacity of ordinary people to address difficult public challenges. By engaging citizens in dialogue and action on the issues that affect their lives, you can create new arenas in which all kinds of people can make progress on important public issues.

This publication has introduced you to a number of dialogue techniques and groups that can assist you as you create your own community dialogues. Because of the importance of citizen involvement and the evolution of technology, dialogue processes continue to be a growing body of work. There are, and will continue to be, other groups out there that can also be important collaborators in your efforts.

While some of the names and techniques of dialogue models might change over time and with new technologies, the fundamental importance of people collaborating – coming together to learn about issues and discuss solutions in small groups, large groups or online – will not diminish. The principles and core values in citizen engagement through these processes also remain constant:

- The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.
- Dialogue processes can create a trusting and interactive space to accomplish this goal.
- The public's contribution has an important place in influencing policy decisions.
- Meaningful public participation processes seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.
- Dialogue models provide participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.

For anyone who has participated in dialogue work or joined other public participation efforts, there is nothing more inspiring than people coming together to create new solutions. Facilitating the process of human bonding, with new ideas brought to the table and opinions shared with policy makers or conflicts resolved, provides deep rewards. And there's nothing more empowering than the participation of those who experience the direct impact of policy decisions and their having a meaningful voice in those policies.

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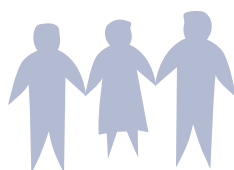
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"By following the principles and processes described in this publication, people can find their voice, and create new ways to work with each other and public officials to make progress on our country's most pressing issues. With this guide, the League is furthering its reputation as a "trusted convener," and providing an accessible tool for all kinds of people to realize the power of citizen engagement through dialogue and deliberation."

— **MARTHA MCCOY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STUDY CIRCLES RESOURCE CENTER**

"As the first accessible, affordable primer on the variety of successful methods out there for engaging the public in dialogue, *Citizens Building Communities* is a landmark resource for the rapidly growing field of public dialogue and deliberation. With this sorely needed resource, Leighninger and the League of Women Voters have paved the way for thousands – if not millions – of citizens to engage and mobilize around today's critical issues."

— **SANDY HEIERBACHER, CONVENER, THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION**

Various models of public engagement through dialogue have emerged over the last decade. The League of Women Voters believes it is important to share some of these models and the resources many groups offer to help move dialogue into citizen action.

Local leaders across the country recognize the need to get more people involved in addressing public issues, and to make that participation more meaningful and productive. In most of these efforts, local organizers have combined different kinds of meetings and adapted models to fit the particular needs of their communities.

Local innovations have created a wealth of information on how to organize public dialogue. This introductory League publication shares some of the basic principles and looks at various types of gatherings, from small- and large-group interactions to online formats. We present basic planning questions to achieve various goals and include resources to help the reader conduct citizen engagement through community dialogue.

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