



Connecting the Public to Public Issues

Resources for Community Dialogue

The West Virginia Center for Civic Life is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, working to engage citizens in community discussions of important public issues that affect our state and nation.

www.wvciviclif.org

Interactions with the Public

Process	Description	Leader's Role	Citizen's Role
Public Relations	Builds a positive relationship between person/entity and the public	Initiator	Consumer (passive)
Public Education	Raises awareness about a particular issue	Educator	Pupil (receptive)
Public Input	Collects public preferences, concerns, and/or reactions	Convener & implementer	Customer (somewhat active client)
Public Engagement	Fully engages citizens in deliberation and problem solving	Partner	Partner (fully active)

Coming to Public Judgment: How Public Opinion Really Works

According to much social science research, the public's thinking on issues progresses through seven predictable stages. Public opinion is in fact less like a physical process than a biological one, evolving in seven stages. Unless one knows opinion's stage of development on an issue, poll numbers will usually mislead. Public opinion on any issue develops slowly over a long period -- at least ten years for a complex issue.

PHASE ONE – CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

- Stage 1: Dawning Awareness
People begin to become aware of an issue.

- Stage 2 : Greater Urgency
People develop a sense of urgency about the issue.

PHASE TWO – WORKING THROUGH

- Stage 3: Discovering the Choices
People start to explore the choices for dealing with the issue.

- Stage 4: Wishful Thinking
Resistance to facing costs and trade-offs kicks in, producing wishful thinking.

- Stage 5: Weighing the Choices
People weigh the pros and cons of alternatives.

PHASE THREE – RESOLUTION

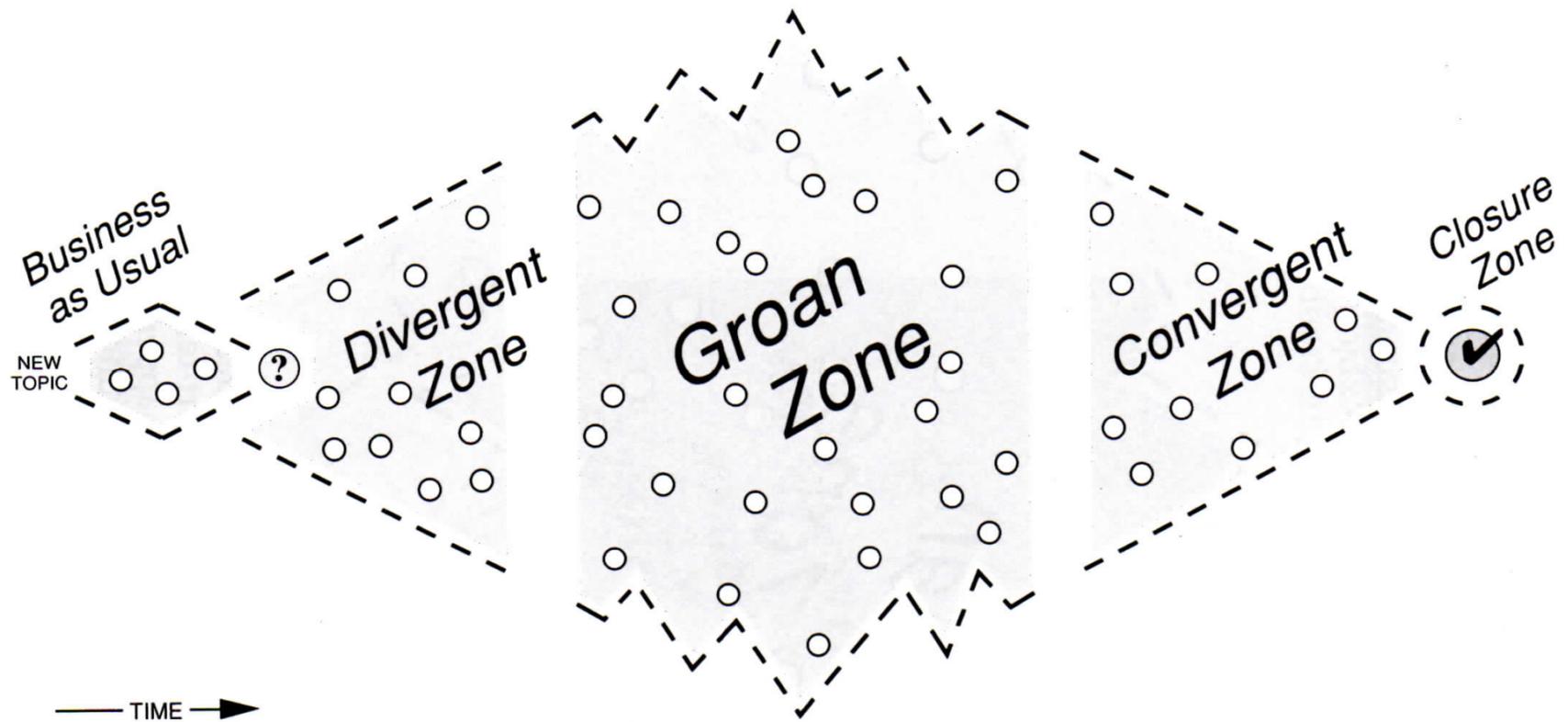
- Stage 6: Taking a Stand
People take a stand intellectually.

- Stage 7: Making a Responsible Judgment
People make a responsible judgment morally and emotionally.

Source: Daniel Yankelovich, "How Public Opinion Really Works," *Fortune*, October 5, 1992

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

THE DIAMOND OF PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING



Asking Powerful Questions

QUESTIONS FOR ALL SEASONS

Here is a series of generative questions that we and other colleagues have found useful to stimulate new knowledge and creative thinking in a wide variety of situations around the world. Look at these questions to stimulate your own thinking about questions related to your own specific situation. Play. Use your imagination.

Questions for Focusing Collective Attention on Your Situation

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your specific situation)?
- What's important to you about (your specific situation) and why do you care?
- What draws you/us to this inquiry?
- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the big "why") that is really worthy of our best effort?
- What opportunities can you see in (your specific situation)?
- What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your specific situation)?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your specific situation)?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your specific situation)?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your specific situation)?

Questions for Connecting Ideas and Finding Deeper Insight

- What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What's in the center of the table?
- What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?

- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discover so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

Questions That Create Forward Movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your specific situation)?
- What's possible here and who cares? (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?

"Human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about."

Source: The Art of Powerful Questions by Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs

Tips for Conducting Community Interviews

- ❖ Begin each interview with the overall purpose in mind: gathering concerns, ideas about potential actions, and perceptions about barriers/challenges from as wide a range of people in the region as possible.
- ❖ Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or in writing--through email or other means. Use your creativity to think of a variety of ways to reach people.
- ❖ Interviews are usually conducted one person at a time, but it can also be useful to interview groups. You could pose the questions in group settings and capture the comments from the range of people who speak, but also distribute paper copies of the interview guide so that group members can add individual comments. (You could use this technique in an organizational meeting, a church group, a high school classroom—any setting that brings people together.)
- ❖ As much as possible, try to set the tone a tone of a *casual conversation* rather than a *formal interview*.
- ❖ Introduce yourself and the make the purpose of the interview very clear: that you would like to listen to their concerns and ideas in order to create a community plan that includes as many citizens as possible
- ❖ Stress the importance of including a *wide range* of ideas in the community plan so that no one feels reluctant to bring up views that are outside the “mainstream.”
- ❖ Feel free to ask questions that are not listed in the interview guide. Follow up on comments so that you leave with the best possible understanding of the person’s concerns. Use your own good judgment and *see where the interview leads you*.
- ❖ **This one is very important:** It is essential that you *not* express your own concerns about the plan and ideas about potential actions during the interviews. It is important *not* to lead the interview in any particular direction or to show bias toward particular perspectives. Note: Your own experiences are very valuable to this process and will be vitally important in developing the plan—just not during the interview process when the purpose is to understand how *others* see the issue.

It is ideal to be able to Invite the people you interview to participate later in the planning or implementation process. Some people you interview may be willing to help organize and implement future civic engagement projects. Enlist their help as well.

Remember: In addition to gathering valuable insights to inform Blueprint planning, the interview process can be a wonderful tool for making connections and building relationships that will enhance the overall impact of the project and your future work.

WORLD CAFÉ CONVERSATIONS

What is it?

For people to act together and collaborate on solving community problems, they first need to be able to talk together. Change most often begins simply, with a conversation. A conversation café is an exchange of thoughts, ideas, and feelings among people who care about getting to know each other. When we understand each other better, trust is built. When we listen to each other, surprising and inspired conclusions may emerge that may lead to inspired change.

How does it work?

- Preparation: Give the room a fun feel. It helps if you can add touches such as decorations, lighting, music and refreshments to set the right mood. Cover the tables with butcher paper for doodling and capturing ideas.
- Set up a progressive menu of (usually two or three) rounds of conversation of about 20-30 minutes each. Ask questions that genuinely matter to your life, work or community. A first question might ask something personal about why people are there, why they are committed to the work, or what excites them. A second question might ask about the work or issue; for example what community development means to them? A third question might probe deeper, such as why poverty persists in our communities despite all the money spent and efforts made to address it. Consider asking powerful questions that get at the contradictions or underlying issues that need to be addressed to make progress.
- The Process: A facilitator explains the process, keeps time, and moves the group through the series of questions. Seat four or five people at small Café-style tables or in circles of chairs forming four-person conversation clusters. Two hours is a good length of time to permit people to move through several table groups for each question, though the time may be much less. Upon completing the initial round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the “host” while the others serve as travelers or “ambassadors of meaning.” The travelers carry key ideas, themes and questions into their new conversations.

*One of the things we
need to learn is that
very great change
starts with very small
conversations, held
among people who
care.*

Ask the table host to welcome the new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes and questions of the initial conversation. Encourage guests to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations—listening carefully and building on each other's contributions.

Encourage both table hosts and members to write, doodle and draw key ideas on their tablecloths or to note key ideas on large index cards or placemats in the center of the group.

- **Closing:** After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing discoveries and insights in a **whole group conversation**. It is in these town meeting-style conversations that patterns can be identified, collective knowledge grows, and possibilities for action emerge.\

When to use it

Conversation cafes are a simple but powerful technique to surface many ideas in a short period of time, and help people see what they have in common and what they could be doing together. It is especially useful early in a collaborative process, but it is also just fun. Once you know what you want to achieve and the amount of time you have to work with, you can decide the appropriate number and length of conversation rounds, the most effective use of questions and the most interesting ways to connect and cross-pollinate ideas.

Adapted from material at <http://www.theworldcafe.com>. See also www.conversationcafe.org for more resources..

OPEN SPACE

What is it?

Open Space is a method for planning and conducting meetings by having the participants develop and carry out the agenda during the meeting. It empowers individuals and groups by putting the opportunity and responsibility for creating a useful experience in their hands and by providing a structure for doing it. It builds energy, commitment, and shared leadership with the least time wasted on complicated logistics and advance planning.

How does it work?

Preparation: Before or during the meeting, organizers articulate a powerful theme statement to galvanize people's interest and define a broad scope for development of session topics.

The Process: At the event, participants convene in a circle, the **Open Space**.

- On a wall is an empty schedule with times and available meeting spaces.
- After explaining the theme and the process, the facilitator invites anyone who feels passionately about a topic within the general theme and is willing to lead a session on the topic to write the title and his/her name on a page.
- Each session leader then comes to the center of the circle, announces/explains the session and its time and place, and places the page on the wall schedule.
- Once all sessions are posted, the Open Space becomes a marketplace, and the whole group moves to the wall to sign up for the sessions they wish to attend.
- Once complete, any necessary scheduling changes are made based on which sessions are filled, and participants then proceed to attend the sessions of their choice just like any conference.
- Session leaders facilitate the participation of everyone in the group.
- Session leaders are asked to provide a brief, simple written report on their session for inclusion in the event's proceedings. This can be done on site on laptops or afterwards.

Closing: A large group meeting is held to close the event at which any participant may comment on what they have learned. If action planning is desired a work group may be formed to follow up after the event, or this may be designed into the Open Space event itself.

When should it be used?

Open Space works for small and large groups, 20 - 2000. It is especially useful to focus attention on strengths and assets, to think outside the box about the future or to respond to some new situation. It requires open leadership. Open Space can fail for only two reasons: if people show up with no passion and/or if somebody tries to control the process in order to achieve some sort of pre-determined outcome(s).

Four Principles and a Law

Whoever comes are the right people. Every effort should be made to invite those critical to the objectives of the gathering. Once it begins, those who have shown up by definition are the right people for whatever they choose to design

Whatever happens is the only thing that could. We all are acting in good faith to do the best we can and will not worry about all the things that might have been.

Whenever it starts is the right time. Creativity and real listening and learning have rhythms of their own and watching the clock can be a hindrance. We all take responsibility for the time we take and the contributions we make.

Whenever it's over, it's over. Sometimes things take longer and sometimes things finish before you expect.

Law of Two Feet

“If during the course of the gathering any person finds him or herself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet and go to some more productive place.” This can be done with grace and sensitivity while leaving each person free to find his or her way to add value to the gathering.

Two helpful roles

Bumblebees may buzz from session to session cross-pollinating and connecting pieces of work.

Butterflies may not join any formal sessions, choosing to float at the edges. Sometimes the most amazing solutions seem to come from nowhere—so that's where butterflies tend to look for them.

Open space is not owned by anyone but owes a great deal to the work of Harrison Owen who wrote a book [Open Space Technology: A User's guide](#) in 1997 and continues to be a guiding force in its development. It is used all over the world. Many resources exist at www.openspaceworld.org.

Living Room Conversations

Open your ears. Open your mind. Open your home.

Living Room Conversations has developed a practical and personal approach to hosting rewarding and productive conversations among people with different political perspectives. Our country's polarized political game has affected how we relate, or avoid relating, across our political differences at the local level and in our everyday lives. We often avoid talking about important (politicized) issues for fear of getting into another argument and further straining relationships with people who are otherwise our friends, family, co-workers and members of our community.

But you might ask: *How could I begin to have these important conversations? How can I better approach someone I usually avoid? How could I possibly invite political opposites to sit face to face and productively explore an issue that usually provokes a heated argument?*

Living Room Conversations is the answer to these questions. It offers you an opportunity to take the initiative and model the change you seek. You can become a “game changer” by hosting a Living Room Conversation. You will bring people together, help them get beyond political differences, and focus on revealing personal and shared purpose and passion to do what is good for the future of our community and country.

Living Room Conversations Principles

- Invite friends-of-friends for a relationship-based, self-hosted and self-guided Living Room Conversation among people with different political perspectives
- Focus the conversation first on revealing shared senses of purpose and passion
- Move the conversation to a subject that may also be highly “politicized”
- Allow everyone to express and take in the full range of one another's priority issues, concerns and / or visions on any topic and at any scale
- Steering away from debating differences of opinion or differences of priority concerns; the intent is to listen and discover intersections of common concern
- Explore the ground that has been established for opportunities to continue the conversation, gather for socializing / further relationship building, or perhaps find opportunities to cooperate on a new or existing project or initiative.

Living Room Conversations are intended to show that it's not difficult and perhaps even easy, to make meaningful connections with people one may disagree with politically. When friends invite friends to a well-designed gathering and are supported with a Conversation Guide and Information Packet we have seen that respectful and meaningful conversations and new relationships often result. (There is more information and details about the intended outcomes of this project at the end of this document.)

How it works

1. Ask a friend who has a different political perspective from yours to co-host the Living Room Conversation. Use this invitation to help invite and inform the other co-host.

2. Schedule the day and time for the Living Room Conversation (LRC). As co-hosts, plan to be there early and to stay a little after the 2 ½ hour “formal” part of the Living Room Conversation.
3. Download and print the Living Room Conversation Packet and find the Participant Invitation along with all the other materials you will need to prepare for and guide the LRC.
4. Each of you (co-hosts) attach a short cover letter to the Participant Invitation and set out to confirm two other friends to attend; the goal being to have six participants total.
5. Have at least one co-host planning meeting and carefully go over all the materials, print the needed handouts and get prepared for hosting and guiding the LRC.
6. All participants are asked to fill out a feedback form about their experience to contribute to the open-source community. Please collect these forms and send them to Living Room Conversations via email or fax.

Who should come

- Friends
- Neighbors
- Colleagues
- Family
- Anyone who is curious about, and interested in reaching out to, those they usually avoid

The intended outcomes of a Living Room Conversation are:

- To generate a spirit of mutual curiosity, respect and appreciation among those of differing political / issue perspectives
- To bring forth the trust and courage to generously express and actively appreciate one another’s revealing of heartfelt values, principles and deeper sense of purpose
- To listen generously and actively support the discovery of common interest and concern
- To inspire a sense of openness, willingness and even partnership for further connecting or cooperating in some way about shared concerns
- To evoke a direct experience of an authentic, meaningful and rewarding conversation
- To foster a sense of confidence and willingness in participants to take initiative to reach out to those they usually avoid or even host a Living Room Conversation of their own

Source: www.Livingroomconversations.org

NeighborCircles

“Good Food, Good Conversation and Good Connection”

NeighborCircles is the principle organizing strategy of Lawrence CommunityWorks

If we are honest with ourselves we will admit that most of us don't know our neighbors and they don't know us. We are too busy, too shy, or too intimidated to make connections and build relationships with people on our street or on our block. The fact is, in this day and age, getting to know neighbors can be hard and a bit scary.

In our view, the costs of this neighbor to neighbor disconnection are enormous. Behind poor communication lurk distrust, bigotry, and countless lost opportunities to improve our lives and our communities. Some believe that the days of neighbors knowing each other and looking after each other's children are over. We think that we all just need more practice and a safer environment to get it started. NeighborCircles is one way of starting up the long-interrupted, neighbor-to-neighbor conversation once again.

How does it work?

Under the leadership of a resident “host” and trained facilitator, 8-10 families come together 3 times over the course of a month for dinner and conversation. They get to know each other, talk about the neighborhood or the city, and decide as group if there is something that they can do together to help build community.

What next?

A NeighborCircle can continue to meet regularly after the third meeting to address neighborhood issues or organize activities to bring neighbors together and build community. NeighborCircles have led to projects and collective action on specific issues. Some Circles have worked together on ally and playground cleanups, improving street lighting, safety and parking, and organizing block parties.

NeighborCircles are a highly adaptable approach:

Recognizing that every community is different and that different situations require different approaches we are continually adapting NeighborCircles while maintaining the core belief that bringing people together to have good conversations in a safe, comfortable environment can yield significant community change.

For more information: <http://www.lawrencecommunityworks.org/network-organizing/neighbor-circles>

Dialogue to Action

Community dialogues and issues forums invariably help citizens better understand the complexity of community problems and have a better command of the basic facts of the issue. Citizens also gain a better understanding of other points of view which helps develop a tolerance for the reasons others may disagree. This deeper understanding of the facts and an appreciation for the emotions and values that are in tension when facing choices about complex issues is necessary to build a common ground for taking action about the issue or problem.

Many people in West Virginia, in other states, and around the world, have used community dialogue processes as the first step in mobilizing citizens to take action to improve their community. The wisdom that emerges through open discussion among a diverse cross-section of citizens can serve as the basis for community action planning processes that can effect significant change in a community.

The following principles are shared by Everyday Democracy, www.everyday_democracy.org:

Dialogue-to-change organizers usually approach their work with the following principles in mind:

- The most effective efforts are led by a cross-sector group of leaders who come from all parts of the community and hold a range of viewpoints.
- These organizers include “traditional” leaders/decision makers, who are part of the power structure, and non-traditional or grassroots leaders.
- Measurable action and change is more likely to happen when key leaders are onboard from the beginning, and work in partnership with citizens to solve problems.

Dialogue-to-change initiatives can be structured in a variety of ways:

Single dialogue: A community discussion is held to introduce the issue and gauge the community’s interest in a dialogue-to-change initiative.

Two step dialogue-to-action: A community discussion on an issue is followed by an action planning event scheduled soon after to define priorities for action and recruit action work groups.

Multiple session dialogue circles: In this approach, the one session dialogue is extended into 2-4 dialogue circles that build relationships for action through more time to share personal



“Very great change starts with very small conversations, held among people who care.”
Margaret Wheatley

connections to the issue, understand the strategic facts, explore the options, and identify common ground for action.

Community-wide dialogue series: Many forums and/or dialogue circles happen simultaneously in the community, everyone talking about the same issue at the same time. A large group meeting follows a 6 -8 week deliberation time frame, bringing all participants together to share ideas for change. This meeting launches new activity for a range of action efforts. This approach can result in heightened awareness and can make a significant impact in the community. It is also labor intensive.

Summits or other one-day events: Small-group, facilitated dialogues are included in day-long events, along with large-group activities, such as panel discussions, data presentation, and planning for action. These events generate excitement and energy, and raise public awareness. This option, on the other hand, means less chance to form real relationships, less time for thoughtful reflection, and less commitment to meaningful follow through.