

TIP SHEET FOR HOSTS OF BREAKING BREAD, BUILDING BONDS

New York Peace Institute helps thousands of New Yorkers resolve their disagreements peacefully, and free-of-charge, each year. We also train individuals, organizations, and businesses in mediation, conflict response, and communication skills. We are thrilled to partner with the Brooklyn Borough President's Office on the *Breaking Bread, Building Bonds* initiative and share some expert tips on facilitating conversations.

Facilitating a conversation about a topic that could be contentious requires careful planning and consideration. The following tips will help you host a conversation that invites diversity of opinion, is inclusive, and holds the space for shared understanding about complex issues.

Preparation

- **Prepare.** some interesting and open-ended questions. Questions that ask participants to share their experience, knowledge or interpretation of an issue will provide a clear focus for the discussion, create a shared understanding, and give participants a sense of why a particular issue is important.
- **Understand your role as Host and Facilitator.** Being clear about your role as a Facilitator (and not necessarily an advocate or participant) is important so you and others can manage expectations.
- **Know yourself.** Consider these questions before deciding to introduce a hot topic: What are my personal beliefs, values and stereotypes about the issue? Can I present as open-minded on the issue and show respect for the opinions of others?
- **Plan the physical environment** so that participants can talk to each other without visual or physical barriers and/or distractions. Sitting in circles tends to encourage more group discussion.
- **Consider co-facilitating with another person.** Whenever possible, use co-facilitators who represent different gender, racial and/or cultural backgrounds, especially when discussing triggering issues.

Getting the Conversation Started

- **Introduce the purpose** of the discussion and confirm that the participants have the same understanding of the focus.
- **Explain how the conversation will be organized.** The conversation may be part of a series of dialogues or a one-time occurrence. Participants may want to explore the possibility of keeping the conversation going in another setting and be prepared to address the possibility.
- **Describe your role as facilitator.** Your job is to look after the quality of the conversation by making sure it is focused, has energy, and invites all to have the chance to offer views and reflections. Being a facilitator does not mean you are neutral about the topic or do not have an opinion, but it does mean you can play an objective role by not taking sides or engaging in debate.
- **Set a positive tone.** By maintaining a calm and personable demeanor you are signaling to others that this is a safe and open space where opinions and reflections can be shared with candor and honesty.
- **Warm the space with introductions.** Introductions help people connect and build relationships so they will be more comfortable sharing and building understanding from a personal perspective. Consider including an "ice breaker" as well if time allows.
- **Establish ground-rules** so there is a shared understanding of what is expected. Some ground-rules may not be acceptable for everyone because of differences in cultural backgrounds, so check whether the rules make sense to everyone, if the group can abide by them, and if there are any rules missing.

Suggested Ground Rules

- 1) Share your truth - speak from your own perspective.
- 2) Respect the viewpoints of others - listen attentively and withhold judgment about other's views. The goal is to engage in dialogue and hear other voices and perspectives, not to win a debate.
- 3) Show respect for others by keeping your focus on the discussion and allowing other voices to be heard.
- 4) When expressing a disagreement, focus on the idea, not the person expressing a different view from yours.
- 5) Refrain from interruptions and side talk.
- 6) All questions are invited and welcome.

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Practical Facilitation Tips and Phrases

- **Acknowledge contributions, validate people's ideas, and give credit for participation:** *"Thanks for that helpful contribution. It is not easy to share such a personal experience. That was brave of you."*
- **Keep the focus on ideas.** Ask the group to generate ideas and to identify pros and cons of a position, rather than having individuals explain or defend a position.
- **Keep the discussion concrete and specific rather than abstract.** *"Can you tell us from your own experience what led you feel this way?"*
- **Keep the focus on the subject:** *"That is a really interesting point. How do you connect it to what we have been talking about today?"* Encourage participants to "own" their comments rather than speaking in generalizations about what others think.
- **Be comfortable with silence.** There is value in people sitting quietly because it is time for deep reflection and may encourage the quieter voices to contribute. Try not to jump in to fill the silence
- **Be on the lookout for non-verbal cues.** Who is talking the most? Who seems reserved? Are people engaged or checked out? *"It looks as if people have had a reaction to what was just said – is this something we need to explore together?"*
- **Name any disagreement constructively, minimize negative comments, and acknowledge feelings.** If there is disagreement and /or emotions are high, ask people to agree to disagree and move on or ask that someone contribute a new perspective. *"Can we all agree to accept we are not in agreement and introduce some new ideas to build on our thinking about this issue?"* Try not to be reactive to negativity or criticism. You can acknowledge negative comments in a positive way. *"That's an (interesting, unique, different) take on this issue. I appreciate you contributing that different point of view."* When emotions are high, try *"It seems that the discussion has brought up feelings of hurt and harm for people. What would be best at this point?"* or *"It's not easy to share such a deeply held belief."*
- **Manage disruptions such as inappropriate humor, side conversations, cross talk.** Be upfront about behaviors that disrupt the quality of the discussion. *"It is becoming quite difficult to hear what people are saying, I know I am finding it hard to focus because there is so much cross talk."* *"Perhaps you did not intend to offend, but this topic brings up a lot of sensitive feelings, and so your joke/comments could make people uncomfortable."* Be prepared to name your own discomfort over a comment...don't speak on behalf of others or the group.
- **People keep addressing their questions to the Facilitator.** Redirect the question to the group. *"What do you all think?"* Put your head down so you are less physically open to attention and focus.
- **People monopolize the discussion.** Try, *"I'd like to hear what the rest of the group has to say."* Ask another person a question just as soon as the talker takes a breath.
- **You are running out of time.** Be upfront with the group. Ask them to help you manage the remaining time left by being brief with their responses and sticking to the topic.
- **If conflict occurs, remain neutral and refer to the ground-rules.** Validate that conflict can be a healthy as it invites new ideas and learning if managed respectfully Highlight areas of mutual interest and shared understanding. Remind people that they are not there to judge others or to persuade others of their views, but to further mutual understanding.
- **Remember to include a closing reflection and appreciation for participation** so that dinners begin and end with the full group, strengthening the sense of shared purpose. Each participant who would like to should respond to the reflection. *"What has inspired you this evening?"* *What learnings will you share with your community?"* *"What one word best describes this dinner and conversation?"*

CONTACT US

If you or your community are experiencing a conflict, New York Peace Institute can help. We provide free conflict resolution and restorative justice processes to address community, school, housing, and many other disputes. Learn more about New York Peace Institute by visiting at <https://nypeace.org>.