

CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER: A How-To Guide for Hosting Discussions about Race, Racism, and Public Health

Commissioned by:



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THE LEE INSTITUTE
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“ Those who are always learning are those who can ride the waves of change and who see a changing world as full of opportunities rather than of damage. They are the ones most likely to be the survivors in a time of discontinuity. They are also the enthusiasts and the architects of new ways and forms and ideas. ”

*Charles Handy
(1989)*

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INTRODUCTION

Background

This guide is intended to help public health professionals unlock the possibilities for what “can be” by opening the doors to positive, productive conversations about the impact of racism on maternal and child health outcomes. By talking openly about the role of racism in our country, our local community leaders are helping to build a future without race-associated differences in health outcomes. Talking about race is, of course, easier said than done. Productive conversations—one-on-one or in groups—do not guarantee a positive outcome and are certainly not a quick fix to a problem that is steeped in generations of cultural, political and social norms. When it comes to racism, it is hard work to build bridges, not walls, between people and to eventually change customs, policies and practices that are not evident to many.

Racism: “Any type of action or attitude, individual or institutional, which prescribes and legitimizes a minority group’s subordination by claiming that the minority group is biogenetically or culturally inferior.”

(Barnes-Josiah, 2004, p. 18)

This guide is written at the request of City**MatCH**, a national public health organization dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of urban women, children and families. City**MatCH** has adopted the goal of ‘undoing racism’ as a necessary ingredient to improving health outcomes. Over the last decade, City**MatCH** has initiated numerous projects across the country with its local member health departments to eliminate health disparities, published a blueprint for undoing racism in public health and focused its annual conference around issues of social justice, eliminating disparities and undoing racism. From discussions with its membership, City**MatCH** has discovered a gap in its resources to support its members: there is a huge difference between *understanding* (and *believing*) how racism and health outcomes are connected and *feeling equipped to talk* about those connections, with the aim of cultivating that understanding in others and shifting local public health delivery toward a model that is truly responsive to those connections.

Undoing racism: “People working together for systems change to ‘undo’ the social construct of racism through assessment, education, training and programmatic/policy change.”

(Barnes-Josiah, 2004, p. 18)

The work of City**MatCH** and others has established the connection between racism and health outcomes. This guide is not written to strengthen—or challenge—the case that City**MatCH** and others have built regarding racism and health outcomes. Rather, the focus of this guide is to help the reader to use his/her knowledge about racism and health in engaging others. This guide is intended to assist public health leaders in *taking the lead* to open and sustain constructive conversations—one-on-one or in groups—including both one-time meetings and consecutive meetings, such as those of a planning

team. This guide is geared for those who already have a working knowledge of racism, public health, and the connection between the two, but who have not necessarily been in a position (or taken it upon themselves) to open the door to a thoughtfully planned and deliberate dialogue and examination of racism as a factor in determining health outcomes.

Premises

This guide is built upon several important premises:

Premise #1: Racism exists at three levels.

- Institutionalized Racism – “differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race. Institutionalized racism is normative, sometimes legalized, and often manifests as inherited disadvantage. It is structural, having been codified in our institutions of custom, practice, and law, so there need not be an identifiable perpetrator. Indeed, institutionalized racism is often evident as inaction in the face of need” (Jones, 2000).
- Personally mediated racism – “prejudice and discrimination, where prejudice means differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intentions of others according to their race, and discrimination means differential actions toward others according to their race. This is what most people think of when they hear the word “racism.” Personally mediated racism can be intentional as well as unintentional, and it includes acts of commission as well as acts of omission” (Jones, 2000).
- Internalized racism – “acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth. It is characterized by their not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves. It involves accepting limitations to one’s own full humanity, including one’s spectrum of dreams, one’s right to self-determination, and one’s range of allowable self-expression” (Jones, 2000).

“Institutionalized racism manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power. With regard to material conditions, examples include differential access to quality education, sound housing, gainful employment, appropriate medical facilities, and a clean environment.”

(Jones, 2000, p. 1212)

These three levels of racism come from Dr. Camara Jones who proposes that if you want to “set things right” at all three levels you need to address institutionalized racism specifically. Making the connections between racism and health outcomes requires specific attention by public health leaders to institutionalized racism (Jones, 2008).

Premise #2: Developing a culture where the connection between racism and health outcomes is openly and sensitively discussed will, in the long term, produce changes in knowledge, attitudes and behavior on a *personal* level and changes in customs, practices and policies on a *societal* level. This is the work of undoing *institutionalized* racism that will improve the health status of our citizens as a whole. The *Unnatural Causes* documentary series makes the connections between health, poverty, race and stress (2008).

Premise #3: Change is disorienting and takes time, especially at a societal level. It can produce anxiety because it requires coming to grips with the fact that a familiar and predictable way of seeing and doing is not working and must therefore be replaced with a less familiar way of seeing and interacting with the world. Change at a societal level requires culture shifts where new collective behaviors take hold (McCarthy, 2008, p. 2-3).

“People are veterans of perception. People have a way of understanding the world and go back to that over and over again. People recreate what they know. They already have ways of thinking about issues; your information has to contend with all of the other things people are already thinking. The challenge is how to lift people up to a vision of what they could be when they don’t see that vision.”


(Manuel, 2011)

Premise #4: Intentionally naming the issue of racism—“putting it into the room”—is necessary in order to carry out conversations about the connection between racism and health outcomes. It must be done in a way that opens the doors to conversation and does not shut it down. Most people do not come by the skills to participate in especially difficult conversations—like racism—naturally. For most people, these skills are learned and practiced over time.

USING THIS GUIDE

The resources used to develop this guide have been drawn from what is known in the field about skilled facilitation, community building and holding difficult conversations. In addition to written publications, the sources listed at the end include the names of several individuals we interviewed in order to capture the perspectives of leaders “on the ground” doing this work on a regular basis. We have chosen an assets-based approach for this guide, that is, a bias in favor of focusing on possibilities rather than deficits. While facing the facts and events of the past, the focus must be on the future that people want to create—what people want to see more of. From our experience, to engage people in authentic conversations about difficult topics, leaders must meet people where they are, invite rather than force the conversation, never blame and remain sensitive and flexible to the individual situation—or as we say, “read the room.” Moreover, we have seen over and over that bringing the right people to the table, presenting them with solid data and following a fair and engaging process will produce amazing results.

In reality, public health leaders and others may be in a position to introduce the topic of racism and its impact on health outcomes in both one-on-one conversations and in groups, including one-time meetings and planning teams such as those undertaking longer-term organizational or community change efforts. For that reason, this guide is organized with suggestions and resources under three main headings: Conversation Essentials, Essentials for Group Meetings and Essentials for Planning Teams. Please note that this guide is written in a cumulative fashion; what we present under Conversation Essentials also applies to group meetings and planning teams. Similarly, what we present under Essentials for Group Meetings also applies to planning teams.

Virtually all of the material in this guide is applicable to these three contexts whether or not the topic is racism. A layer of complexity is added when the topic is racism. Woven throughout this guide are suggested practices that are especially relevant when talking about racism. You will find those items by looking for the  icon.

You may find that some of the tools and advice offered in this guide are familiar. It is our experience that people can *know about* something, but not necessarily *practice it* on a regular basis. Similarly, it is a lot easier to observe and critique the behavior of others than ourselves.

So, as you consult this guide we suggest that you keep the following questions in mind:

- *Have I integrated this practice into my everyday work?*
- *What do I do well that I could do even better?*
- *When it comes to difficult conversations, who could give me some honest feedback about how I interact with others?*
- *What opportunities are coming up where I might intentionally use one or more of the tools or techniques described in this guide?*

One final point about using this guide: interspersed in many locations, such as those listed above, are questions in italics for you to ask yourself. These questions will help you assess your comfort with the material in this guide. You will find a consolidated list of these questions beginning on page 36.

START HERE: CONVERSATION ESSENTIALS

1. BEFORE YOU RAISE THE ISSUE:

- Adopt a real sense of curiosity
- Do your homework
- Unpack your own baggage first
- Know that words matter

2. EXTENDING THE INVITATION:

- Be clear about your purpose
- Share a little about your own fears

3. OPENING THE CONVERSATION & WORKING THROUGH THE ISSUES:

- Assume good intentions
- Play out the “what ifs”
- Well begun is half done
- Don’t expect too much at once
- Start with values
- Know that your questions can be just as powerful as your statements
- Pay attention to non-verbal communication
- Listen as if you might be wrong
- Use stories to illustrate your meaning
- Use stories to illustrate shared values
- Beware of intent vs. impact
- Encourage elaboration
- Take a break



ESSENTIALS FOR GROUP MEETINGS

1. BEFORE YOU BRING THE GROUP TOGETHER:

- Know when to call on a facilitator
- Two is better than one
- Know thyself

2. BRINGING THE GROUP TOGETHER:

- Cultivate a sense of belonging
- Set working agreements
- Be clear about confidentiality
- Establish a common language
- Determine a decision-making method

3. WORKING THROUGH THE ISSUES:

- Get people talking early in the meeting
- Use resources already prepared for this purpose
- Create a safe environment
- Make data accessible
- Validate the work of the group
- Keep the group memory
- Stay on track
- Use humor, but never at anyone’s expense
- Wrap it up



ESSENTIALS FOR PLANNING TEAMS

1. BRINGING THE TEAM TOGETHER:

- Share vested interests
- Share strengths
- Use paired conversations to build community

2. WORKING THROUGH THE ISSUES:

- Check with colleagues between meetings
- Encourage shared ownership
- Practice full-vision leadership
- Help the group stay organized
- Revisit the need for facilitation
- Use well-designed group activities to take your group to the next level

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ESSENTIALS FOR GROUP MEETINGS

ESSENTIALS FOR PLANNING TEAMS

We will start by discussing one-on-one conversations, in particular, those that could surface strong views and emotions. As you read this section keep the following two overarching concepts in mind. You will see them woven in different ways into the material.

- *While you may be initiating the conversation, you are only one half of it. As a leader, you must anticipate the needs and reactions of the other person. And especially when issues of race and racism are involved, you must enter the conversation respectfully and with a spirit of curiosity to create the results you want.*
- *Much is expected of you as a leader. Your choice of words when you make statements and when you ask questions will be scrutinized. Pay attention to how you ask your questions; they are at least as powerful as your statements.*

Before You Raise the Issue


Adopt a real sense of curiosity. The set-up for conversations of this nature should include a genuine sense of curiosity—a desire to understand and learn from the other person as much as to get your own views heard. Projecting this open frame to the other person will go a long way to keeping defensiveness—on the part of both people—to a minimum.

Showing respect and interest for alternative views provides an opportunity for people to practice empathy and grow through understanding. Our perspectives—our stories—are built on how we experience, interpret, and make sense of the world. Listening to find out what’s behind the viewpoints of another person may need to happen before you begin to advocate for your perspective. Being truly curious about the experiences and thought processes behind the other person’s positions could help you to modify your approach to the conversation to one that will lead to the results you want.

“Instead of asking yourself, “how can they think that?” ask yourself, “I wonder what information they have that I don’t?” ...Instead of “how can they be so irrational?” ask “how might they see the world so that their view makes sense?”...Part of the stress of staying curious can be relieved by adopting the “and stance.” This means to adopt and embrace both stories and positions. The “and stance” is based on the assumption that the world is complex; it gives you a place from which to assert the full strength of your views and feelings without having to diminish the views and feelings of someone else.”

(Stone et al., 2010, p. 37)

- *What was the last “dicey” conversation you had that you approached with genuine curiosity?*
- *What happened? What progress did you make? Did it help you get the results you wanted?*
- *What worked especially well?*
- *What might you do differently next time?*

 **Do your homework.** Become well-versed in the best research on the connections between racism and health outcomes before your conversation. Your preparation will help you build your confidence and determine the best way to bring data into the room for others. There are numerous websites and DVDs that offer polished, well-researched information connecting institutionalized racism to poor public health outcomes.



The following sites will get you started:

www.kirwaninstitute.org


www.unnaturalcauses.org



agjohnson.us

www.pbs.org/race

 **Weigh the pros and cons; understand the consequences; evaluate the environment; it may not be the appropriate time to raise the issues.** 

Kimberlee Wyche Etheridge, MD, MPH


 **Unpack your own baggage first.** It is difficult for some people to accept that racism really exists. It is a thorny and deeply personal issue. Make sure that you have deeply examined your own views about racism and its role in maternal and child health outcomes before you initiate a conversation about it. While the level of preparation needed may depend in part on the participants and the context

 **Make sure you've already unpacked your own baggage so you won't be triggered.** 



Octavia Seawell, MA

for the conversation, we advise you not to assume that others feel the same way about racism that you do—or that they think the issue even exists. Do your research and be clear with yourself about your intentions. Even if you feel well-informed and resolved in your convictions, it will still be very important for you to enter the conversation with a sense of curiosity.

- *How have your own perceptions about race and racism changed over time? What experiences brought about those shifts?*
- *Have you had the opportunity to examine your own views about racism with someone who can listen critically and give you candid feedback?*
- *Is there a trusted colleague with whom you can talk about your planned conversation in advance?*

 **Know that words matter.** There are different views on how to use or even whether to use the term “racism” in conversations intended to inspire social change. Some people maintain that it has to be named—put in the room directly. We are all part of a system; our experiences within the system may be different, but the system is there. That’s one view. On the other hand, racism can imply intention. A lot of racist outcomes in health care are unintentional. It might be more effective to describe the impact of past (or current) policies and practices without attributing them to “racism” per se. We do not recommend one approach versus the other; rather, we want you to be intentional about your use of the term and its possible effect on the conversation.

The FrameWorks Institute, an independent non-profit research organization, has conducted research to uncover the best ways to frame public discourse to improve support for public policies that would reduce racial inequality. They question the benefits of talking about the historical legacy of racism as a strategy for garnering support for policies that seek to redress differential outcomes across a variety of issue areas, including public health. They have found that “being explicit about discrimination and the structural roots of inequality does not, as a communications strategy, improve support to the very policies that will reduce inequity” (Davey, 2009, p. 6). The FrameWorks Institute offers several alternative frames for addressing racial disparities that have been shown to increase support for policies to reduce racial inequality.

 **Be clear on your own expectations. Sometimes the people who really ‘get’ this work have grandiose expectations for the conversations and what the outcomes will be. Just having a conversation is a start. The ‘light bulb’ may not go off for everyone.** 

Carrie Hepburn, MS

“DON’T lodge race, racism or racial disparities at the top of a communications [strategy]... DO invoke common values that apply to all...and subsequently explain how these values are derailed in minority communities.”

(Davey, 2009, p. 11)

We recommend that you become familiar with the findings of the FrameWorks Institute before you raise the issue of racism in your public health conversations. While not skirting the issue of racism entirely, to be effective you will need to be cognizant of the values and concepts that will appeal to others in your conversation, that is, what will open doors instead of close them.


Further, when you use terms like “race” and “racism” be aware of whether you are referring to Caucasians and African Americans specifically or whether you are using the terms more broadly. We suggest that you acknowledge up front what racial and/or ethnic groups you are addressing.

“The risk of making it a Black/White issue is that it can make others feel invisible.”

Octavia Seawell, MA

Extending the Invitation

Be clear about your purpose. Your invitation ought to include your purpose—what you hope to accomplish or what might be an ideal outcome, at least for the initial conversation. As with any conversation, both parties need to come to the table willingly. You cannot impose it upon another person. For an invitation to be open, you must be transparent and clear about your purpose. You must also be willing to be turned down, at least initially. Check in with yourself about your intentions. You might even partner with the other person to figure out how best to approach the topic, as long as you’re truly open to hearing what that person suggests.

 **Share a little about your own fears.** Your invitation might include sharing with the other person your apprehensions—as well as your aspirations. This sort of self-disclosure connotes vulnerability—that is, you have thought this through and are dedicated enough to this topic to take the chance even though you cannot guarantee a particular outcome. You might describe the process you went through to come to terms with your own experiences and observations concerning racism and the social determinants of health.

“It’s a hot button issue. There’s been a lot of hurt and negativity associated with racism. It has affected us in such awful ways. We have the historical experience of not dealing with it. Not acknowledging it makes it harder to frame the conversations.”

Zenobia Harris, DNP, MPH, RNP

"In my experience, sharing your own fear helps all parties involved access compassion for one another and listen more for intent than specific word choices."

(Schwarz et al., 2005, p. 251)

- *Can you think of a difficult conversation that someone else initiated and where you felt coerced or pressured to participate?*
- *How did it go? How did you feel? What did you do?*
- *How could the other person have handled it so that you felt invited?*
- *What discoveries regarding racism, and institutionalized racism in particular, might you share as part of the invitation to the conversation?*

Opening the Conversation and Working through the Issues

Assume good intentions. Wrapped up in your spirit of curiosity and clarity of purpose are your own good intentions. It is equally important to assume that the other person has good intentions as well. This attitude will put you in a positive frame of mind which the other person will likely notice. Unless you have evidence to the contrary, you must approach the conversation with belief that the other person wants a constructive, positive outcome, even though neither of you is certain at this point what exactly the outcome will be.

"Intentions matter, and guessing wrong is hazardous to your relationship."

(Stone et al., 2010, p. 48)

Play out the "what ifs." Plan how your conversation might proceed, but be flexible. A plan will give you the confidence to proceed and increase the likelihood for a positive outcome. Remember, you are only one half of the equation and your ability and willingness to listen, adjust and rethink on the spot is as important to the outcome as your initial planning. Use your professional or personal network for feedback about your plan. It really helps to verbalize (share out loud) what you are planning. What you are planning to say will sound different when you say it out loud to someone else.

- *Who do you know who can serve as an effective sounding board for you before you begin your conversation?*

Well begun is half done! How you open the conversation is very important, especially if you were not able to share much about the purpose of the conversation as part of your invitation to talk. Think in advance about what you will say to open the dialogue. If you are more comfortable holding a few talking points on a note card, do so. Either way, speak from the heart.

Possible conversation openers: (adapted from Ringer, 2006)


Think about a conversation you are considering with a co-worker or that you could have had with a co-worker at some point in the past. Which of the questions below would work or would have worked best for you?



“Thanks for meeting with me—I appreciate it.”

- *“I’ve been learning about something recently that I’d like to check out with you. I think that hearing each other’s views will help us work together more effectively.”*
- *“I have some ideas about how we can move our organization forward, but it could only happen if you and I are together on this. I’m curious to get your reaction and ideas about possible next steps.”*
- *“I’d like to talk about what happened yesterday in our management meeting with you, but first I’d like to get your point of view.”*
- *“I need your help with what happened yesterday. I think we may have different viewpoints on what took place.”*
- *“It’s so important to me that we operate as a team. I fear we’re split on this issue and I don’t want it to damage our working relationship. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.”*

“Both inquiry and advocacy are needed at different times. Try to be conscious of which you are employing at a particular point and leave space for the other. They both create the conditions for learning—the yin and the yang. Explain your point of view including your interests and the reasoning you used to get there. Ask others about their point of view; invite them to ask you questions too.”

(Schwarz, et al., 1994, p. 65)

 **Don’t expect too much at once.** Whether or not you use the term “racism” once you’re in the conversation, sticky issues regarding differential access to goods, services and societal opportunities by race will produce discomfort. Expect some level of defensiveness. Working through the issues will be hard work, like peeling away the many layers of an onion. Tackling this issue requires more than a one-time conversation. You may only scratch the surface in a single meeting, perhaps laying the foundation for a more in-depth exploration of the connections between institutional racism and health outcomes. Progress can be measured in small increments; small successes may be needed before big successes can be obtained.

 **Go slow to go fast – take baby steps and have patience; assume an incremental approach.** 

Kimberlee Wyche Etheridge, MD, MPH



Start with values. Connecting with people around shared values creates common ground as a starting point. A statement like “the prosperity of our community is dependent on educating our young people at the earliest stages of life” convenes people around shared meaning. When beginning the conversation with a strong shared values statement, people are more likely to want to talk about it and understand why they should care and how they have a stake in the discussion (Manuel, 2011).

Know that your questions can be as powerful as your statements.

When most of us think about a difficult conversation, we focus on what information we want to share and what statements we want to make. Just as important—maybe even more important—is what questions to ask. Craft some of your questions in advance of your meeting; other questions will emerge as you dig into the issues. Powerful questions are designed to do the following (adapted from Strachan, 2007):

- *Customize for context.* Word your questions with your audience’s history, literacy level, personalities, relationships and stress level in mind.
- *Create inviting questions.* Avoid leading questions, trick questions and questions that cause people to lose face in a group. Focus on questions that generate curiosity, invite creativity and stimulate reflective conversation.
- *Minimize assumptions.* Most questions have assumptions built in that influence their meaning, impact and effectiveness. Questions with erroneous assumptions can derail a conversation or delay progress. For example, the question “*How can we improve morale in our office in the coming weeks?*” assumes that morale is poor and that it can be improved within the coming weeks. To avoid these assumptions, the question might be better phrased “*How would you describe the morale in our office?*” Depending on the response, the next questions could delve into ideas for improvements.
- *Ask with sensitivity.* Sometimes using a bridging or linking sentence to introduce a provocative question shows sensitivity to the other person. As noted earlier, disclosing your own hesitations or fears around the issue can express sensitivity. Use humor carefully, especially sarcasm which can be easily misinterpreted by people who don’t know you well.
- *Accommodate risk and anxiety.* Clarify your expectations about confidentiality. Start with low-risk questions that build comfort. You might also give people a few moments to think on their own about a potentially difficult question. Some people talk to think; others need to think before talking. The latter group will appreciate the space to consider a response before being expected to answer. When leading groups, providing people with the option of responding anonymously or talking through a response in pairs can help to build a safe space for conversation.
- *Consider “why” carefully.* You can put people on the defensive by using “why” in a question. Substituting “how”, “what” or “when” are more neutral options. Instead of “Why did you...” you might ask “What made you decide...”



Prepare people for it. Invite them to consider that the messiness is part of transformation – to sit in the fire is a fundamental, transitional part of learning and racism.



Kinneil Coltman, MA

- *When in doubt, check it out.* Consult with others regarding clarity, tone, timing and whether the question will likely produce the desired result. The questions might be crystal clear to you, but ambiguous, leading or aggressive to others. Take the time to brainstorm alternative questions when the stakes are high to be sure you are effectively communicating.

In *Making Questions Work*, Strachan shows how many questions can be reframed to be more inviting (2007, p. 27). The reframing is subtle; the potential impact on the other person may be profound, depending on the situation.

Here are a few reframing examples:


Instead of Asking...	Try Asking...	So That...
Do you understand the question? Do you understand the task? Who doesn't understand this?	Did I explain the task clearly?	The responsibility for making the question or task clear remains with the person leading, not with the participant.
Who is responsible for supplying the coffee?	Where can we get the coffee refilled?	The focus is on correcting the problem rather than placing the blame.
Why are you feeling so angry?	How did the situation get to this point?	The question invites a response rather than discouraging one.
What are your options for ensuring that this project is successful?	Let's brainstorm some options for addressing this problem. Be creative – in brainstorming there are no wrong answers.	The respondent is not made to feel defensive about answering the question; the respondent doesn't feel that he/she has to come up with all the right possibilities.

Pay attention to non-verbal communication. As we've discussed, you are setting the tone for the conversation. We've all heard about the vast majority of communication being non-verbal in nature. In addition to your words, the tone is impacted by your body language, the meeting location, the room set up and other potential distractions around you.

- *Are you sitting behind your desk or together at a table?*
- *Are you maintaining respectful eye contact?*
- *Have you put away anything electronic that could interrupt the conversation?*
- *Could meeting in a neutral space or a quiet space get you off to a good start?*
- *What worked well in terms of time, space and non-verbal communication in your last difficult conversation? How can you replicate that?*

“Practice the conversation with a friend before holding the real one.”

(Ringer, 2006)

 **Listen as if you might be wrong.** While this can be difficult in the heat of the moment, never interrupt. Avoid competitive or combative listening where you are more interested in promoting your own view and finding fault in the other person’s views. Nod when you agree. Occasionally reflect to the other person what you think you’ve heard in order to test your understanding and demonstrate your desire to understand (Mind Tools, 2012).


If someone takes a position that disagrees with your own, find out what is behind that person’s viewpoint. What needs, desires or concerns cause the person to hold that position? What assumptions lie at the base of the person’s position? How else could that person get his or her needs, desires or concerns met? What alternative position might serve as a win-win solution?

For example, it would be easy to find yourself triggered by someone’s generalization about a racial or ethnic group or nationality. If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so, and ask for more information: “I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself puzzled. What I thought you just said is ___; is that what you meant?” If you find that you’ve heard the person correctly, take a deep breath! To dig deeper, you might ask: “What experiences have you had that cause you to hold this view?” After listening thoughtfully, you might share some of your own experiences, and then ask: “What can we agree on here?”

“I have found that talking about what it is about the solution or decision that you feel is important helps move the conversation in a more productive direction. Group members talk about what their needs are. This discussion opens up the possibility of many more solutions than may be originally proposed.”

(Schwarz, et al., 2005, p. 132)

Use stories to illustrate your meaning. Describing an event or an experience from your perspective—and giving the other person the same opportunity—can help both parties see the situation from the other’s perspective and foster empathy. While you are telling your story, share the impact that the experience had on you and describe your feelings. Ask the other person questions along the same lines if they do not disclose this level of information on their own. Stories illustrate your point; they move the conversation from the abstract to the concrete.

 **Use stories to illustrate shared values.** As the research from the FrameWorks Institute shows, as a communications strategy, it is more effective to lead with shared values rather than to lead with the statements about the prevalence of racism when appealing to others about the need for policy shifts. While stories about people’s personal experiences with racism are especially powerful and disarming, they might produce a better result if tied to the key values that you want to promote in the conversation (Davey, 2009).

- *What experiences have you had or stories have you heard that illustrate how shared values and common beliefs do not necessarily play out in minority communities?*

- *When did you first become aware of policies and practices that impede access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race?*
- *What stories have others shared with you that illustrate how they have been affected by racism, and how can you frame those stories consistently with the approach proposed by the FrameWorks Institute?*

Be aware of intent versus impact. By sharing your stories, you may discover that the impact of one person’s actions or words was not intended by the other person. Discovering the “disconnect” between intent and impact can provide an “ah-ha” moment in a difficult conversation and open the door to a solution or a different approach for the future. Check out the impact of your actions in the course of the conversation, if appropriate. Share the impact of the other person’s action on you by disclosing your own feelings, and check out the other person’s intentions. Be prepared for—and encourage—the other person to do the same.

- *What story best describes how you feel or what your experience has been?*
- *Where might there be a “disconnect” between the other person’s intentions and the actual impact on you?*
- *What do you want to know about the other person’s experience of the same events?*

“Are you aware of when you are climbing up the “ladder of inference?”

(Schwarz, et al., 1994, p. 63)

We all do it—we all need to make inferences based on the data we have in front of us every day. We interpret and make assumptions to make sense of the world—but we can be mistaken. We may infer meaning incorrectly, causing us to misinterpret and possibly feel hurt, angry or sad. On the bottom rung of the “ladder of inference” is directly observable data. On the second rung, we observe and select data, then translate and label, then evaluate and causally explain, then decide whether to and how to respond. The self-aware person is cognizant of his or her assumptions and checks them out before getting too far up that ladder.

Encourage elaboration. As you dig into the issue, you may need to encourage the other person to elaborate. You probably do this every day in the normal course of events. In the context of a difficult conversation, it may be useful to have a few such inquiries handy. By having the other person expand upon their statements, they might make some discoveries of their own about their motivations and conclusions that could get you closer to agreement. Here are several ways to ask the other person for more information:

- *“Would you give me an example?”*
- *“Could you be more specific?”*
- *“How did that affect the situation?”*
- *“How did you feel about that?”*
- *“How do you interpret that?”*
- *“Help me understand that better.”*
- *“What surprised you about that?”*
- *“Why was that disappointing to you?”*

Take a break. Keep in mind that you can always take a break in the middle of a conversation if you need to gather your thoughts or regain your composure. A quick stretch break, a drink of water or a breath of fresh air can help reduce the tension and help you to make a mid-course correction, if needed.

- *Are you aware of what pushes your buttons?*
- *Can you think of a time when you wish you had called for a brief “time-out” during a difficult conversation, but didn’t? How might that have changed the outcome?*
- *When have you been in a situation when your buttons could have really gotten pushed, but you were able to retain composure? What helped you stay cool?*

“A final thought – empathy is a journey, not a destination – the deepest form of understanding another person is empathy. Empathy involves a shift from my observing how you seem on the outside, to my imagining what it feels like to be you on the inside, wrapped in your skin with your set of experiences and background, and looking out at the world through your eyes.”

(Stone et al., 2010, p. 183)

ESSENTIALS FOR GROUP MEETINGS

START HERE: CONVERSATION ESSENTIALS



ESSENTIALS FOR GROUP MEETINGS

1. BEFORE YOU BRING THE GROUP TOGETHER:

- Know when to call on a facilitator
- Two is better than one
- Know thyself

2. BRINGING THE GROUP TOGETHER:

- Cultivate a sense of belonging
- Set working agreements
- Be clear about confidentiality
- Establish a common language
- Determine a decision-making method

3. WORKING THROUGH THE ISSUES:

- Get people talking early in the meeting
- Use resources already prepared for this purpose
- Create a safe environment
- Make data accessible
- Validate the work of the group
- Keep the group memory
- Stay on track
- Use humor, but never at anyone's expense
- Wrap it up



ESSENTIALS FOR PLANNING TEAMS

All of the ground covered in the previous section on holding conversations between two people applies to group conversations as well. We suggest that you keep in mind all of the Conversation Essentials described in the prior section as we shift our focus to Essentials for Group Meetings. The context becomes slightly more complex with several people in the room, yet potentially more exciting as well. As you read this section keep the following two overarching concepts in mind. You will see them woven in different ways into the material.

- *People participating in group conversations around difficult topics, especially race and racism, must feel valued and safe when they share their experiences, stories and viewpoints with others. As a leader, you are responsible for creating and sustaining the environment in which the group operates.*
- *Preparation involves researching and understanding the content to be put into the room and designing a fair process that is worth the time that participants will be investing. As a public health leader, you are responsible for the quality of both the group process and content.*

Before You Bring the Group Together

Know when to call on a facilitator. When the conversation moves from between two people to a group, you, as the leader, face a decision: What role do you assume in the group? Are you:

- The *convener* for purposes of getting the group together but with no authority in the room?
- The *chair* with some level of authority in the room?
- Planning to play the role of *facilitator*?

You are no longer the other half of a conversation and you need to be very clear—with yourself and others—about your role. Depending on the possible tension in the room or the strength of your vested interest in the outcome, you may serve your cause well to arrange for an external facilitator to guide the conversation so that you can interact as a participant rather than the leader. It is virtually impossible for a person with a strong interest in the outcome to serve in a neutral capacity to facilitate a meeting and pay adequate attention to the group as a whole. Your greatest contribution as a leader might be to hire a trained facilitator.

A *convener* is typically a well-known public figure with credibility and stature, someone who is usually associated with important causes and successful community initiatives. This person does not necessarily hold any formal authority over the topic at hand and does not seek to impose a particular policy or solution. This person may or may not become the chair of the group.

A *chair* is the person designated to preside over the group as the leader. The chair typically holds a level of authority over the group, setting the agenda and carrying overall responsibility for the achievements of the group. He or she may have a vested interest in the decisions made by the group. If there is no assigned facilitator, the chair takes responsibility for the group process as well as the content.

The *facilitator* is the neutral party delegated the responsibility by the chair—or the whole group—to guide the group through the agreed upon agenda. The facilitator, the expert in group process, has no formal authority over the group and has no direct vested interest in the decisions to be made by the group.

You have a stake in the outcome. Regardless of your role, it will be to your group's advantage for you to understand the Essentials described throughout this guide and to make sure that whoever is leading the meeting—as convener, chair or facilitator—is hosting the conversation using techniques that bring out the best in the group.

Key responsibilities of facilitators:

Serve the group as a whole. Keep the interests of the whole group above those of any individual in the group.


Stay neutral. Resist interjecting your own viewpoints or judging the comments or contributions of others. The facilitator owns the process, not the content of the group's work.

Be fair. Keep in mind the need to maintain an even playing field for all participants. Make sure no one person dominates or operates in a way that discourages others from participating. Resolve conflict that may occur within a group with directness and respect, and distinguish between interests and positions.

Be flexible. While sticking to an agenda and following instructions are important, it is also important to know how to "read" your group and make adjustments in the process in order to suit circumstances in the moment. Great facilitators have the ability to work off of a well-thought out plan for the day while being able to "go with their gut".

Help the group accomplish its goals. Help the group organize its thinking. Thoughtfully reflect to the group what you think you are hearing them say. Find areas of agreement among participants; note areas of disagreement. Be a stickler for upholding the methods that the group agreed to for listening and making decisions.

Create a safe environment for open, honest dialogue. A warm, friendly, welcoming, non-judgmental demeanor is important. Be a source of positive energy and encouragement.

 **Two is better than one.** Speaking of the facilitator role, we strongly recommend using two people of different racial groups as facilitators if you plan to introduce the issue of race or racism to the group. And they must have equal responsibility in the facilitator roles. This pairing will provide the conversation with credibility and balance in the eyes of the participants.

Know thyself. We discussed in the prior section about "unpacking your own baggage" before you engage in a conversation that involves issues related to racism. We are revisiting this concept here—this time with the challenges of leading a group in mind. Whether or not the topic is race or racism, when you are the chair, convener or facilitator of a group, it will serve you well to understand your own biases and triggers. We all have our "buttons" that can be pushed when we least expect it. Knowing what those points of vulnerability are for you in advance can help you maintain poise and manage yourself with healthy detachment when needed. Knowing what pushes your buttons reduces the chance that you will be pulled off course or unable to intervene effectively on behalf of the group.

The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook provides a brief exercise to help identify those hot buttons (Schwarz, 2005, p. 281). By yourself or with someone who knows you well and whom you trust to give you honest feedback, identify:

- Things that people do that really bother you
- Group situations you find embarrassing and/or threatening
- Things you really dislike about yourself
- The values and beliefs you consider most important
- Prejudices you have

Take one or more of the items from your list and think of a situation where those situations reduced your effectiveness in a group. What happened? If you could go back in time for a “do-over” what would you do differently?

- *Can you think of a meeting in which you faced something that triggered you but you were able to keep the meeting running smoothly?*
- *To what do you attribute your ability to maintain poise and not be pulled off track?*

“Have a plan AND go with your gut. Facilitating with no objectives makes it difficult to be intentional. Facilitating without listening to your intuition makes it difficult to achieve anything beyond your original objectives.”

(Kansas Community Leadership Initiative, 2010, p. 2)

Bringing the Group Together

Cultivate a sense of belonging. We find Peter Block’s *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2008) a particularly useful frame and a great place to start when thinking about convening a group and building group norms. Block stresses that, for groups looking to create change to be effective, members need to feel a sense of belonging and accountability. Among his many areas of focus, Block urges that leaders developing a community of accountability and belonging to:

- Shift the focus from problem solving to a conversation about possibilities. “The possibility conversation frees us to be pulled in by a new future.” (p. 124)
- Create personal and authentic connections between people such as by asking powerful questions and giving individuals the opportunity to connect one-on-one.
- Welcome diversity of thinking and allow space for dissent. “The moment people experience the fact that they can dissent, or, in softer terms, express doubts, and not lose their place in the circle, they begin to join as full-fledged citizens. When dissent is truly valued and becomes the object of genuine curiosity, the chance of showing up as an owner of that circle, that room, that neighborhood goes up dramatically.” (p. 133)
- Assure that the physical space supports community such as sitting in circles and having refreshments available.

You will see these themes underscored in the sections below. What's important at this point is building that sense of belonging—and ultimately of commitment and accountability—within your group.

- *What are the differences between really effective meeting spaces and meeting spaces that sap everyone's energy? How might you relocate more meetings into spaces that give you and others energy?*
- *What meetings do you attend where you feel the greatest sense of belonging? What makes those gatherings stand out?*
- *What groups have you been part of where the people openly shared their doubts and reservations? Did the group work through its issues together in a way that ultimately led to commitment to the group's final decisions? What could have been done differently?*
- *In what other ways might you foster a stronger sense of belonging in the groups you lead?*


"In community building, we choose the people and the conversation that will produce the accountability to build relatedness, structure belonging, and move the action forward...The essence of creating an alternative future comes from citizen-to-citizen engagements that focuses at each step on the well-being of the whole."

(Block, 2008, p. 11)

Set working agreements. In a group setting, you are building a community through group norms about information sharing, problem solving, making decisions and dealing with conflict. Groups that do not intentionally develop norms, will unintentionally develop them—norms are inevitable. We recommend being deliberate about it to avoid behaviors that will be counterproductive and to grow those that will produce the community you want. We suggest you come into the room with a proposed set of working agreements tailored for the type of work to be done by the group and the personalities involved. You can ask the group members for changes and additions. Of course, you need to be willing to *use* them after you've introduced them, which could require you during a meeting to gently suggest to a person or group of people an alternative behavior more in keeping with the group norms. Here is a set of possible working agreements to choose from; six to eight is plenty for most groups.

- Assume good intentions
- Share air time
- Bring the parking lot conversation into the room—say it here
- Focus on interests, not positions
- Take responsibility for your own learning
- Allow all members the opportunity to express their thoughts
- Put your thinking on the table and not your finished thought
- Be respectful of time
- E-etiquette—turn phones on silent or off
- Acknowledge successes—even the small ones
- Listen actively—hear and inquire
- Discuss the un-discussable
- Share information
- Disagree openly
- Maintain confidentiality—what's said in this room stays in this room
- Variation: Feel free to tell others about this meeting, but do not attribute what was said to an individual

- *What other working agreements would you like to add to this list?*
- *Which ones would have been the most helpful if they had been used in your last difficult group conversation?*



 **Be clear about confidentiality.** The last item on the list of possible working agreements refers to confidentiality. To sustain a safe environment for candid conversation about issues of racism, let's focus on confidentiality for a moment. You may need your group's participants to share certain aspects of your meetings with others outside the group in order to solicit feedback or test possible future courses of action. At the same time, it would be damaging to the group's momentum and to the trust between its members for comments by others to be shared outside the group. Even amidst the best of intentions, a comment made in the meeting could be taken out of context outside of the meeting. While your group may set its own norms when it comes to sharing the nature of its discussion and its decisions with others, we recommend a ground rule that, when it comes to who said what about racism and related topics, nothing leaves the room. Without a safe space for exploring these difficult issues, voicing different points of view and being vulnerable, your group's progress will stop dead in its tracks.

Everyday Democracy offers a few additional working agreements for groups dealing with issues of race and racism (Abdullah & McCormack, 2008).

- If you are offended or uncomfortable say so; and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't personalize it. Stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Everyone helps the facilitator keep the discussion moving and on track.
- Personal stories remain confidential unless the group decides it's OK to tell them to other people.

 **Establish a common language.**

Depending on the context of your meeting, consider investing time early on defining terms as a group. If you are delving deeply into racism with your group, it is important to establish shared language around traditionally "hot-button" terms such as race, racism, discrimination, white privilege and prejudice. While we recommend that you have commonly accepted definitions on hand, you may find it productive for the group to propose their own definitions for key terms. For example, you might ask participants to write down their responses to "What is racism?" on a note card. Then collect the responses and read each aloud to surface what people are thinking. This technique assures that everyone

 **Using shock value is a mistake. You must be intentional about what you're trying to achieve; you can't shock people about [racism]. That shuts people down. You must approach these issues from a loving perspective, respecting the humanity of individuals so you can get at the very issue you seek to address.** 

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participates while you (or the facilitators) maintain a safe, non-threatening environment. Together, the group can then discuss what they heard and which responses, or combination of responses, best capture their collective thinking. This exercise may surface areas of divergent thinking which can also serve as a jumping off point for further conversation. There is no need for the group to agree on precise definitions if there are different interpretations. Find points of agreement and acknowledge areas of disagreement as applicable.

Determine a decision-making method. As part of establishing group norms, be very clear about how decisions will be made – and stick to it. Some groups will adopt more than one decision-making method depending on the issue at hand. The table below summarizes three common methods.

	PROS	CONS	USES
Consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collaborative effort that unites the group · High involvement · Builds buy-in and high commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Time consuming · Can develop poor decisions if data is weak and/or trust is low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Important issues · When total buy-in matters
Democratic, i.e., voting by majority or super-majority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Fast · Decisions can be of high quality if time is taken for a thorough discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · May be too fast · Majority and minority in the room · Pressure to conform if public voting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Less important matter · When there is enough trust · If division of the group is okay on a decision
Delegated to group member or subgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Fast · Accountability is very clear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Can divide the group · Lacks buy-in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · When the issue is unimportant · When there is a clear expert · When one person is solely responsible for an outcome

Definition of Consensus: Agreement by all to support the decision. Consensus occurs when everyone can say or agree to these three statements:

1. "I believe that everyone understands my point of view."
2. "I believe that I understand everyone's point of view."
3. "I support the decision - because it was obtained in an open and fair manner."

If whole-hearted commitment of all members is important to a particular decision, then asking these questions is helpful for moving forward:


- "What stops you from supporting this idea?"
- "What are your specific objections?"
- "What changes, amendments, or additions would make this an idea you could live with?"

Consensus is a great way to get everybody on board. At the end of a great consensus process, people have usually made concessions and are likely not getting everything they "wanted." This is okay. Consensus isn't designed to make people happy or leave them in 100 percent agreement. Consensus can be reached by a vote or with the understanding that different pieces can be delegated to different stakeholders. Its goal is to create an outcome that represents the best feasible course of action after all views have been heard.

Working through the Issues

Whether your group is meeting one time only or serves as a planning team that will meet several times, you, in whatever your leadership capacity may be, should consider the following practices for working through the issues.

Get people talking *early* in the meeting. The sooner you develop a sense of belonging for group members, the better. Foster conversations in pairs or small groups to establish connections and build relationships. Do not assume people know each other, and, even if they do, you may want to help them establish more significant working relationships.

 **Use resources already prepared for this purpose.** A number of professional videos do a great job of introducing the connections between institutionalized racism and public health outcomes. Providing materials for your group to watch and listen to together builds a foundation of knowledge, gives them a shared experience and takes the pressure off you or the facilitator to explain key concepts and research. Just make sure you have viewed the video in advance and that the video you select introduces the concepts in the way and at the time that works best for your group. After viewing the video, take time to share reactions as a group. The resources listed throughout this guide and in the back are good places to start.

Prepare questions to open dialogue about what they've just viewed. Use questions, such as these below, that invite different perspectives.

- What strikes you about what you've just seen?
- What are the biggest gaps among people from different racial or ethnic groups?
- What are the hardest to overcome?
- What are some parallel circumstances here in your local community?
- What have you seen that you would like to learn more about?
- When you look at the data, do you see anything that surprises you?

Create a safe environment. Spend time building (and maintaining) a safe place to have the conversation. It doesn't just happen. For example, pay attention to how the room is set up, make refreshments available, establish group norms and role model a generous, not exclusionary, use of humor.

Make data accessible. Provide people with information about key issues. Information can take the form of videos, stories, photographs, research articles, graphs and charts. When the information takes the form of hard data, such as numbers, percentages or statistics, some people will feel confused and intimidated, making it difficult to make your points. You can minimize that situation by:

Give everyone the opportunity to interact with someone different from themselves. Do anything you can to pair people across racial lines for conversations; this can be transformative once people build trust at that level.

Octavia Seawell, MA

- Taking the time to determine what data is the most important to support your main points and what data would be too much information for your audience.
- Providing data in advance when possible to give people the time to absorb it.
- Giving people time during your group meeting to digest what they have heard or seen, letting them develop their own meaning from the data. This is a great opportunity to kindle more conversations in pairs or trios. It may be more comfortable for people to ask questions about the data to a couple of people than to the whole room.
- Finding ways to illustrate the hard data with pictures, simple graphs and the spoken word.
- *How likely is your group to be comfortable assimilating data on the spot?*
- *Are you able to provide data to your group before the meeting?*
- *Are there ways to present your data in a way that is sensitive to different learning styles, such as in a DVD, graphically or via small group facilitated conversations?*
- *When you are a member of a group, how do you prefer to receive data?*
- *What questions can you anticipate that your group will raise about the data? Can a data expert be part of the group?*

Sometimes silence in a group just means that people are thinking about their response to a question. It is tempting to fill that silence, but resist; try counting to ten slowly. Usually someone will speak up and get the conversation going again before you reach seven.

Validate the work of the group. Be sure that someone is tracking and validating the work of the group by displaying main ideas and decisions (such as by flip charting or using a smart board or projector) in real time.

Keep the group memory. Also be sure that someone is creating the “group memory” which can take the form of meeting minutes or summaries prepared and distributed shortly after the meeting. Meeting summaries completed soon after the gathering help to assure accuracy and remind participants of their assignments and responsibilities. It can be difficult, but is crucial to keep people informed, engaged and focused.

Stay on track. Keep the group on topic with the help of a thoughtful agenda that lists desired outcomes for the meeting front and center. Outcomes are statements of results, rather than a list of actions or topics. Here are a few examples of wording for desired meeting outcomes:

- Shared understanding of...
- Agreement around...
- A final version of...
- Clear next steps for...

Unless the group agrees as a unit to digress, try to stay true to the agenda agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting. Capture issues that are not relevant to the current conversation but appropriate for another time by placing them on a flip chart and in meeting notes. Having a separate list where you can acknowledge people’s issues when they get off topic validates their interests, but avoids an unnecessary digression. If you sense that a person or the group as a whole is straying off topic, you might use one or more of the following sorts of inquiries depending on the situation:

- “I’m wondering about the connection between ___ and our current topic. Could you help me understand?”
- “This sounds to me like an important issue for us to explore another time. Would it be okay with you if we tabled this topic for another meeting when we have more time?”
- “I believe it is really important for us to get through our agenda today. It seems to me that ___ is not germane to this conversation. I’d like to put it on a separate list so that we can revisit it another time. Are there any objections?”
- “Let me call a time-out for a moment. It seems we are at a decision point. If we continue this conversation, we won’t have time to get through the material we planned. Which is more important to all of you today: to continue this conversation or place it on hold until next time and return to the original agenda?”

Ten questions to help the group look at different points of view and find agreements:

1. "What doubts or reservations do you have?"
2. "What has anyone changed his or her mind about today?"
3. "What questions do you have about this idea?"
4. "What three wishes do you have at this point?"
5. "What would someone who would resist this idea have to say now?"
6. "What experiences have you had with this?"
7. "Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?"
8. "What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?"
9. "What would need to happen in order for you to support this position?"
10. "What do you find most convincing about that point of view?"

Use humor, but never at anyone's expense. The Kansas Leadership Initiative puts it this way: "Humor can create lightness and energy. It can be generous and inclusive. It can lower the heat and create some relief from the emotional and physical fatigue of a long meeting. Humor can also be a weapon, a way of avoiding difficult work and a way of stealing focus." (2010)

- *When has the use of humor in a group setting been used to ease tension?*
- *Are you aware of a time when someone's humor caused hurt feelings or embarrassment in a group setting?*
- *What prompts you to use humor in a work environment?*

Wrap it up. Reserve time at the end of the meeting for participants to share final thoughts or recap. While this may not be possible at every meeting due to topics competing for time, it helps to keep that "parking lot" conversation in the room and can serve as valuable feedback for the leaders. For a very brief recap, ask each person to share a one-word or one-breath response to a final question.

Possible questions for the end-of-meeting "wrap-up":

- "How would you describe the way we worked together today?"
- "What is going on for you in this meeting?"
- "What is on your mind right now?"
- "What thoughts, reflections, or observations do you have about our work today?"
- "What are the key points of agreement and disagreement we reached today? "
- "What have you heard today that has made you think, or has touched you in some way?"
- "What one suggestion or request do you have for our next meeting?"

ESSENTIALS FOR PLANNING TEAMS

START HERE: CONVERSATION ESSENTIALS



ESSENTIALS FOR GROUP MEETINGS



ESSENTIALS FOR PLANNING TEAMS

1. BRINGING THE TEAM TOGETHER:

- Share vested interests
- Share strengths
- Use paired conversations to build community

2. WORKING THROUGH THE ISSUES:

- Check with colleagues between meetings
- Encourage shared ownership
- Practice full-vision leadership
- Help the group stay organized
- Revisit the need for facilitation
- Use well-designed group activities to take your group to the next level

For planning teams charged with organizational or community change efforts over time, getting off to a good start and following sound practices will set the tone for future work together. In addition to our recommendations for one-on-one conversations and group meetings, we suggest you add the practices described in this section to your repertoire. As you read this section keep the following two *overarching concepts* in mind. You will see these woven in different ways into the material.

- *As a public health leader, your style is likely “We are all busy; let’s just get the job done.” However, as a leader of a planning team, especially those that cross organizational lines, you probably do not have authority to control the team’s final decisions nor to implement the change ultimately recommended by the team. The ability of team members to arrive at agreements will, in large part, depend on the quality of their working relationships and trust in one another. The time you spend attending to relationships among group members will pay dividends when the team struggles with difficult issues and decisions.*
- *As the leader of a planning team, you are fostering collaboration, where participants are working together toward an outcome not achievable by any single person. In a collaboration, particularly one where participants cross organizational lines, bringing together the appropriate people in constructive ways with good information will help the group create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the community (Chrislip, 2002, p. 50).*

Bringing the Team Together

Share vested interests. When assembling your team to tackle a particular project, find out what members would like to gain from their participation. What's in it for them? What will keep them coming back to the table? It may be something like having an opportunity to network or looking for new ideas to help them do their job better. Some people may be hesitant to state their needs out of concern that it would appear selfish. We believe it is in the interest of the whole group to hear and understand what people need to get out of their participation—and, as possible, to help them get it. Doing so will help to solidify commitment to the process.

Share Strengths. Conversely, find out what each person can contribute to the effort—meeting space, web design, writing skills to capture meeting summaries, marketing expertise, etc. If you don't ask, your group members may not think to offer up their resources. And, don't ask only once; inquire about people's interests and possible contributions as needs arise.

Use paired conversations to build community. People tend to stick with teams which share a strong sense of belonging. Take time at the beginning to allow team members to get acquainted. Organize participants into pairs, and give them a question to address as a way to bond.

Working through the Issues

Check in with colleagues between meetings. We suggest that you inquire about members' experiences in the group to help build the connections that keep people engaged. Find out what ideas members have for making your meetings even better and give them feedback about their contributions in the meetings. Making a special effort to show appreciation for people's time, creativity and candor keeps the positive momentum going.

- *When was the last time the leader of a group checked in with you after a meeting to seek your feedback or reactions to what went on the last time you met?*
- *Can you think of a time when you wish you had reached out to someone in your group?*
- *What would you have asked that person and how do you think it might have changed his or her participation in the group going forward?*

Encourage shared ownership. Groups stay engaged when they see how their participation is contributing to the effort. Recognizing and celebrating even small accomplishments keep a team together when the going gets tough. Encourage creativity and safety for people to disagree. Working through disagreements by focusing on the interests behind people's positions, finding win-win solutions and making decisions by consensus rather than majority vote will promote shared ownership in the ultimate plan—and a stronger final product not limited by "group think." This takes time; done well, it is worth it!

Practice full-vision leadership. In accordance with your agreements around confidentiality, engage the group's members in sharing new ideas and strategies with stakeholders outside the planning team to build support for change efforts you may be considering. Group members should actively seek out the viewpoints and preferences of those who will be most affected by the change you seek. Include them in the articulation of the issue as well as in the development of the plan.

“Full-vision leadership” makes the distinction between community change where the “usual voices” dominate public discourse and change where the needs and perspectives of the “unusual voices” are integrated into both the definition and solution of the problem. The Kansas Leadership Center uses the example of emergency preparedness to illustrate the consequences of “misdiagnosing the situation and taking actions that are ineffective or inadvertently harmful” when planners fail to realize that they have blind spots [Think: Katrina]. “The problem is that we’re not aware of what we’re missing, since we can’t see what we can’t see.” Recognizing that the public has critical knowledge that we as “experts” don’t have runs counter to our own typical images of ourselves as leaders who know what’s best. Too often, civic engagement is limited to educating the public rather than seeking out and using the public’s knowledge to create change that produces the lasting results we want.

(Lasker, 2011)

Help the group stay organized. Staying organized shows respect for people’s time and will prevent repetitive work. Attention to meeting agendas, summaries, meeting space and refreshments, for example, may seem tedious, but is an investment helping to keep the group’s attention well-focused. Budget for these logistics and, if funds allow, consider hiring someone to reduce the burden on team members.

Revisit the need for facilitation. It is very difficult for leaders to facilitate a collaborative planning process while also being a content expert. Even if you start out leading the group without an external facilitator, we strongly suggest that you revisit your process to determine when or if an outside facilitator is needed—even temporarily—to move the group forward. Engaging an outside facilitator is not a sign of weakness in a leader; it is a sign of strength and self-awareness!

The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook offers five key principles and reflection questions to self-assess one’s approach as a facilitator. We maintain that these same principles and questions are relevant regardless of your role in the group. These principles ought to sound familiar by this point, yet they are worth repeating!


Compassion - “Am I being compassionate toward myself and the others in the room?”

Curiosity - “Am I staying open and curious? What is it I want to learn, know, or question?”

Transparency - “Am I sharing what I am really thinking? Am I modeling the transparent way we want to work together?”

Commitment - “Am I committed to being here and doing this work with those present? How am I showing that? Am I working with those present in ways that help them find their own answers rather than telling them what to do?”

Accountability - “Am I holding myself accountable for my contributions to this encounter? Am I doing anything that others could and should do for themselves? Am I working in ways that decrease dependency on me in the long run? Am I holding others fully accountable for their choices?” *(Schwarz, et al., 2005, p. 282)*

 **Use well-designed group activities to take your group to the next level.** If group members are interested in taking their understanding of racism to a deeper level, the Everyday Democracy documents listed in the sources section outline several commonly used exercises for this purpose (Abdullah & McCormack, 2008). These activities are geared for groups that have already established some level of trust among members and have chosen to explore the issues of racism further. Some groups might never get to this point. These activities work best when the group is racially and ethnically mixed. The instructions provide enough detail to guide your group through them if you have rehearsed with close colleagues or friends to “get the hang of it.” Even better, we recommend that you ask a trained facilitator to lead these exercises. These activities include:

- **“Move Forward, Move Back”** illustrates how long-term accumulation of advantages based on skin color or ethnic background can produce relative privilege for some groups and relative disadvantage for others.
- **“Community Report Card”** encourages members to discuss their own community by evaluating local performance around various topics such as health care, education and criminal justice, to name a few. In the conversation that follows, participants are asked to describe the successes and challenges in each area and to explain why they graded the community the way they did. In these conversations, racism can surface as one factor behind community performance.
- **“Approaches to Change”** facilitates a discussion among participants on a wide variety of ways to impact community change including focusing on leadership, laws, relationships, economics, self-reliance and more. Pre-set questions guide the conversation to help participants share their views on which approaches work and why. From there, participants brainstorm, narrow and select approaches they believe will work the best for their communities.

Everyday Democracy helps communities work together to solve problems and places a particular emphasis on the connection between complex public issues and structural racism. Visit <http://www.Everyday-Democracy.org/> to learn more about these activities.

CONCLUSION

This guide is intended to be used for reference on an ongoing basis. Even with an intellectual understanding of the material contained in this guide, it is another thing entirely to integrate this information into your regular practice as a leader. We know that leading or facilitating difficult or high-stakes conversations requires solid preparation and frequent reminders of what works best in a particular situation. We are all lifelong learners who seek to continually improve our practice and we wish you all the best in your endeavors!

We leave you with the following questions to ponder:

- *What did you find the most useful piece of advice in this guide?*
- *What sounded very familiar, but was not necessarily something you feel you have mastered?*
- *What do you plan to try the next time you gather a group for a difficult conversation?*
- *What do you want to learn more about now that you have read this guide?*

City**Mat**CH welcomes feedback about the content and implementation of this guide as well as suggestions for improvement. Please contact Rebecca Ramsey at rebecca.ramsey@unmc.edu or 402-552-9500 with your comments and queries.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Using this Guide

- *Have I integrated this practice into my everyday work?*
- *What do I do well that I could do even better?*
- *When it comes to difficult conversations, who could give me some honest feedback about how I interact with others?*
- *What opportunities are coming up where I might intentionally use one or more of the tools or techniques described in this guide?*

Start Here: Conversation Essentials

Before You Raise the Issue

- *What was the last “dicey” conversation you had that you approached with genuine curiosity?*
- *What happened? What progress did you make? Did it help you get the results you wanted?*
- *What worked especially well?*
- *What might you do differently next time?*
- *How have your own perceptions about race and racism changed over time? What experiences brought about those shifts?*
- *Have you had the opportunity to examine your own views about racism with someone who can listen critically and give you candid feedback?*
- *Is there a trusted colleague with whom you can talk about your planned conversation in advance?*

Extending the Invitation

- *Can you think of a difficult conversation that someone else initiated and where you felt coerced or pressured to participate?*
- *How did it go? How did you feel? What did you do?*
- *How could the other person have handled it so that you felt invited?*
- *What discoveries regarding racism, and institutionalized racism in particular, might you share as part of the invitation to the conversation?*

Opening the Conversation and Working through the Issues

- *Who do you know who can serve as an effective sounding board for you before you begin your conversation?*
- *Are you sitting behind your desk or together at a table?*
- *Are you maintaining respectful eye contact?*
- *Have you put away anything electronic that could interrupt the conversation?*
- *Could meeting in a neutral space or a quiet space get you off to a good start?*

- *What worked well in terms of time, space and non-verbal communication in your last difficult conversation? How can you replicate that?*
- *What experiences have you had or stories have you heard that illustrate how shared values and common beliefs do not necessarily play out in minority communities?*
- *When did you first become aware of policies and practices that impede access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race?*
- *What stories have others shared with you that illustrate how they have been affected by racism, and how can you frame those stories consistently with the approach proposed by the FrameWorks Institute?*
- *What story best describes how you feel or what your experience has been?*
- *Where might there be a “disconnect” between the other person’s intentions and the actual impact on you?*
- *What do you want to know about the other person’s experience of the same events?*
- *Are you aware of what pushes your buttons?*
- *Can you think of a time when you wish you had called for a brief “time-out” during a difficult conversation, but didn’t? How might that have changed the outcome?*
- *When have you been in a situation when your buttons could have gotten pushed big time, but you were able to retain composure? What helped you stay cool?*

Essentials for Group Meetings

Before You Bring the Group Together

- *Can you think of a meeting in which you faced something that triggered you but you were able to keep the meeting running smoothly?*
- *To what do you attribute your ability to maintain poise and not be pulled off track?*

Bringing the Group Together

- *What are the differences between really effective meeting spaces and meeting spaces that sap everyone’s energy? How might you relocate more meetings into spaces that give you and others energy?*
- *What meetings do you attend where you feel the greatest sense of belonging? What makes those gatherings stand out?*
- *What groups have you been part of where the people openly shared their doubts and reservations? Did the group work through its issues together in a way that ultimately led to commitment to the group’s final decisions? What could have been done differently?*
- *In what other ways might you foster a stronger sense of belonging in the groups you lead?*
- *What other working agreements would you like to add to this list?*
- *Which ones would have been the most helpful if they had been used in your last difficult group conversation?*

Working through the Issues

- *How likely is your group to be comfortable assimilating data on the spot?*
- *Are you able to provide data to your group before the meeting?*
- *Are there ways to present your data in a way that is sensitive to different learning styles, such as in a DVD, graphically or via small group facilitated conversations?*
- *When you are a member of a group, how do you prefer to receive data?*
- *What questions can you anticipate that your group will raise about the data? Can a data expert be a part of the group?*
- *When has the use of humor in a group setting been used to ease tension?*
- *Are you aware of a time when someone's humor caused hurt feelings or embarrassment in a group setting?*
- *What prompts you to use humor in a work environment?*

Essentials for Planning Teams

Working through the Issues

- *When was the last time the leader of a group checked in with you after a meeting to seek your feedback or reactions to what went on the last time you met?*
- *Can you think of a time when you wish you had reached out to someone in your group?*
- *What would you have asked that person and how do you think it might have changed his or her participation in the group going forward?*

Conclusion

- *What did you find the most useful piece of advice in this guide?*
- *What sounded very familiar, but was not necessarily something you feel you have mastered?*
- *What do you plan to try the next time you gather a group for a difficult conversation?*
- *What do you want to learn more about now that you have read this guide?*

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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- Freeman, Sterling, MDiV; Pastor; First Missionary Baptist Church; Smithfield, NC
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