



Small Group Dialogue Discussion Guide

Overview

The purpose of the small group dialogues is similar to that of the one-on-one conversations, but, instead of people talking in pairs, several people who have diverse views (probably 5-10 individuals) come together for a guided conversation. Most small group dialogues will last about an hour, but some can be a little shorter or a little longer. It is helpful if a facilitator or experienced discussion leader leads a small group dialogue, but it can also be self-led by one of the members of the group.

A small group can consist of a few friends, neighbors or colleagues who know each other and want to get together or it can be composed of a few representatives from two different groups that generally have different points of view. Examples of people who might come together from different groups are members of separate religious denominations (i.e. Baptists and Presbyterians) or perhaps campus clubs that likely disagree on many political issues (i.e. College Republicans and College Democrats). Groups can meet almost anywhere as long as it is a comfortable and convenient location.

How to Get Started

If you want to organize a small group dialogue that has representatives of a couple different groups, then there are several basic steps to follow:

1. Think of a group you are a part of (a club, religious organization, advocacy group, political organization or other civic group) and some of the people in your group who may be concerned by the lack of civility in the country. Talk informally to those people to ascertain their interest. If no one is interested or you are not a member of a group that would want to be part of a small group dialogue, look at other organizations you know of or have access to through friends and ask them to consider participating.
2. After you ascertain that some people are interested, identify a second organization that may be similar, but that likely has a somewhat different political perspective. If you know someone in that organization, contact him or her about the possibility of arranging a dialogue. If you don't know anyone personally, send an email or make a call to the group's chair or contact person explaining the idea of a small group dialogue on civility and asking to meet with a few members of their group.
3. Arrange a time and place to meet that is convenient to everyone involved. One group can host the discussion, or it can be in a completely neutral location.



4. Decide whether you will have an outside facilitator or if you or someone else in the group will lead the discussion.
5. Follow up with those who have agreed to participate a day or two before the dialogue and make sure everyone is clear about the purpose and informal nature of the discussion.
6. Have the facilitator or discussion leader follow the suggested conversation flow and make sure everyone who is present gets a chance to talk and is listened to by others present.

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Tips to Enhance the Dialogue

Here are some tips that are designed to help enhance the experience and conversation together. A key element, in addition to really listening to the other person, is not to go into the conversation with the goal of changing someone's opinion. The goal of the conversation is to gain a better understanding of the different viewpoints and life experiences the other person is sharing with you as a way to start reviving civility and respect one person at a time.

- Have the conversation in a safe and comfortable space.
- Make the conversation time-limited and agree to meet again if people want the conversation to continue.
- Use personal experiences to help share your viewpoint.
- Listen to understand, not to respond.
- Pay attention to the feelings that are behind the words.
- Ask questions for clarification or further learning.
- Acknowledge what you have heard by summarizing or repeating back some of what the other person said.
- Avoid nonverbal cues or comments that shows disinterest or discounts another's beliefs and experiences.

Flow of the Dialogue

The dialogue will focus on the same three questions that are at the heart of the one on one conversation. In addition, there is a brief time of introductions and getting to know each other at the beginning and a short time for closing comments at the end.

In each section of the dialogue, whoever is leading the discussion should pose an initial question and get brief responses from each person in the group. After each person has



commented briefly on the question, then the group can have an open discussion based on some of the follow up questions listed below.

Purpose and Introductions

Facilitator or discussion leader reads the following statement:

Thanks for coming. As you know, the purpose of this discussion is to bring together people of diverse views to talk about what we might do to counter the incivility and deep political divisions that are so common now in our country. This conversation is part of a nationwide Initiative to Revive Civility and discussions like this are taking place in many locations across the country.

Our discussion will focus on three questions that allow us to reflect on how we feel about what is happening in America and what can be done to increase civility and understanding. It is suggested that we follow a few brief ground rules in order to make our conversation as valuable as possible:

- *Listen carefully to each other and try to understand the other person's point of view*
- *Be as precise as possible in sharing your views*
- *Don't rebut, challenge or try to change anyone else's mind*
- *Show respect even when you disagree*
- *Share time equitably--let's have each person talk for the same amount of time*

Before we begin the discussion, we want to take a few minutes to learn a little about each of us. Please take no more than a minute to introduce yourself by sharing information such as:

- *Name, where you live and how long you have lived in this community.*
- *What are some of the main ways you are involved in the community (or campus)?*
- *What is a hobby, interest or passion that you really enjoy?*

Depending on how much time you have, you may want to give people a moment to follow up with questions for each other to clarify anything they heard about the person's backgrounds and interests.

Question #1: What are you most thankful for about living in America?

After the introductions, turn the discussion to question #1 and say something like:



We want to begin by sharing some of the positive things we feel about our country. America has many problems, but even so, we are blessed to live in a country where the overall quality of life is much higher than it is in most places.

It is helpful to begin by asking, what are the things you are most thankful for about living in the United States?

The discussion leader asks each person to comment briefly on this question. After everyone has commented, follow up questions, which can be used to expand on the discussion, include:

- What are you most proud of in our nation's history?
- What are some things you take for granted as an American that you wouldn't have in most other countries?
- Have your views of what you like about America changed through the years or remained the same?

Question #2: How do you feel about the deep divisions and incivility we see now in our country?

As you begin this section, say something like:

We currently have intense political division in our country and most people feel that incivility and lack of respect for our fellow citizens is occurring at an alarmingly high rate. What are your main thoughts and feelings about these divisions and the hostility we see between people who disagree with each other?

After everyone has commented, lead a short discussion among the group with questions like these:

- Why do you think the country is so bitterly divided at this time?
- What are some of the consequences of this type of incivility between different factions?
- How do you feel about our community--do we seem more or less divided than other parts of the country?
- One thing that accentuates divisions is stereotyping. Do you ever feel stereotyped or dismissed by others because of your political views?



Question #3: What can we do to revive civility and respect and to find more effective ways to work together?

When there is still at least 10-15 minutes remaining in the discussion, turn the conversation to the third question about what can be done about incivility and say something like:

In spite of many differences, there are many things a large majority of Americans agree on about what we want to see in the country. One thing most Americans say is that we would be better off if there was more civility and respect between people of different views. What thoughts do you have about what needs to be done to achieve that goal?

After you have heard briefly from everyone, lead a discussion with the group using questions like these:

- What are some of the main things in which most Americans agree?
- Are there things we can do to influence the media so that they play a more constructive role?
- Are there ways to get elected officials more involved in combating incivility?
- Who in our community needs to be involved in any ongoing efforts to revive civility and respect?

Closing Comments

When it is time to bring the small group dialogue to a close, say something like:

We are near the end of our time and I want to thank each of you for participating. As we conclude, I wonder if any of you have any comments or observations about this discussion. Is there anything in particular that you learned or was interesting to you?

After giving some time for brief comments, you can thank everyone again and conclude the meeting. You should make these points as you close:

- Issue an invitation to join the Initiative to Revive Civility by signing the [personal pledge for civility](#) at: www.revivecivility.org. (If you have printed copies of the pledge they can be distributed at this time.)
- If people are being asked to fill out any kind of evaluation, share the information about how to do that at this time.

Once the discussion concludes, share it with others in your community. In addition, we would [love to hear what you learned](#) from the conversation and what you plan to do



next. Be creative in sharing your conversation (take a photo, make a short video). Make sure you used the #ReviveCivility hashtag, so we can follow your journey. You can also email it to National Institute for Civil Discourse at basant@email.arizona.edu.