

## **Dialogue Techniques for Holding Community Conversations**

Trust is at the heart of every relationship. Dialogue builds trust. Conversely, the more trust there is between people, the better the dialogue. But, how do you build trust between people who have little more than geography in common in order to hold a good community conversation?

### *My Experience*

It was a cold winter day. There was talk of a snow storm that would close down the city. In spite of this warning, 40 people sat in a large, windowless room in a library basement talking about the cold reality of poverty. Outside the room, a reporter and camera crew waited for the group to break. They were eager to capture the story that was unfolding.

The conversation started slowly but just as the winter storm was escalating, so too was the dialogue. The event was so engaging that the Regional Chair returned to the meeting after only two hours away to deal with a state of emergency due to the storm. Even though the City was closing down to prepare for the storm, he and 39 others did not want to miss this opportunity. This was no ordinary conversation.

For more than two days, 40 people – 10 each from business, government, community agencies and people living in poverty – embarked on a journey routed in dialogue.

I had held hundreds, no thousands of meetings in my life. I was a trained facilitator, and experienced meeting chair. When planning this gathering, I thought, “Let’s just bring them together and let them talk.” We engaged Doug Bowie a former oil executive that was highly skilled in a dialogue technique called Future Search.

Before engaging in this intense dialogue, Doug started asking me questions, such as, “Why do you want to bring these people together? What will they talk about? Who will you bring together? Will the group be able to answer the questions you’re asking? What will they talk about that will keep their attention for two days?” After I rattled off my standard answers to his many questions, he continued, “What do you think will change after holding this conversation? What do you think will compel people to change?” I thought to myself, “Good questions,” but remained silent.

As we prepared for this conversation over the next several months, Doug taught me a lot. He taught me to be deliberate about the intended purpose of the conversation. We spent days just getting the question right, and several weeks were spent planning the invitation list. Doug would repeatedly ask, “Are these the people who, once they agree on a path forward, will have the ability to influence the system to change the way we need it to change?” We agonized over every detail.

When we shared with the community what we had planned, our idea received immediate attention from the media. They realized that this was more than just a bunch of people having a conversation – it was a unique mix of people embarking on a structured journey. They understood that, if this group agreed on a path forward, things would change.

As the storm raged outside during those next two days, we deconstructed the history of poverty in the community, analyzed the current reality, and then created a new vision and path forward for what was possible. Doug was attentive to the energy in the room, the success of every exercise and the details of every break. He was meticulous. “Wow!” I thought. “He is an oil company executive? He should be a wedding planner!”

The media were fascinated by the event. The local paper published stories daily, and the local television station aired live at every break and ran feature stories over three consecutive days on the six o’clock news. Recognizing the community’s interest in the topic and the group’s approach, the media continued featuring the dialogue for the next month, including a three-part documentary on poverty and 10 feature stories in the local paper.

This was no ordinary conversation. “There are conversations and there are *conversations*,” Doug would say.

### *Techniques for Effective Conversation*

What are the chances of a good conversation unfolding on its own? The odds are often in direct correlation to the number of people having the conversation. For example, two people talking with each other have a much better chance of having a good conversation than do 10, 40 or 100 people. This is easily demonstrated at dinner parties. My wife, Marlene, noticed that having four people over for dinner, as opposed to eight, makes a big difference in the type of conversation that takes place. When we have 30 or more people over, it becomes more of an event than a conversation.

The number of people in a conversation grows as community collaboration grows. It is common for community organizations to have in excess of 40 people at a community meeting. In fact, I have been part of conversations with several hundred people. For this reason, it is important to consider proven methods of holding community conversations.

Many techniques, including the Conversation Café, Future Search and Open Space, have generated a loyal following of users. There are people who have dedicated much of their professional life to holding effective conversations. They have developed their own styles and approaches and have become advocates of a particular technique.

I am no such “technique groupie.” I am less than orthodox about using any particular technique and often combine principles from various approaches. That said, I do have my favourites – 10 of which appear in this guide. For each technique, I include a story about how I used the technique, useful tips and resources to learn more. These stories are not

meant to be a step-by-step approach to holding conversations. Instead, they are meant to inspire you to explore the methodology as you consider holding conversations that work for you and your group.

We have also created a section on our Tamarack website, which provides engaging updates and highlights on dialogue. If the resources in this guide do not lead to where you want to go, visit the Tamarack Dialogue webpage for updated links and resources. The fastest path to the Tamarack Dialogue webpage is [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3\\_dialogue.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3_dialogue.html).

## **Conversation Café**

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

*~ Margaret Wheatley*

### *About the Conversation Café*

For people to collaborate in initiating significant community change, they must, first and foremost, talk to each other. Great change begins with simple conversations. A conversation café is an exchange of ideas, feelings and thoughts between people. It is not difficult to arrange or onerous to carry out. As the members in a community talk and share, they can reach a better understanding of each other's values and concerns. If they take the time to really listen, they can learn from each other's perspectives. Together, they can reach unexpected and inspired conclusions, which may lead to equally inspired social change.

The Conversation Café offers an opportunity to share our humanity through simple conversations so that we can understand one another better. It is a simple but wonderful tool for hosting fantastic and meaningful conversations.

### *My Experience*

It was nearly 8 p.m. A group of 75 leaders from across Canada were meeting to learn together with Tamarack about communities collaborating. This was our first day together and we spent the afternoon taking part in exercises that would help us build the learning community that we would all be part of for the rest of the week.

After listening to an inspirational speech given by Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute, the leaders entered a dimly lit room with nine tables, each surrounded by 10 chairs, covered in brown paper tablecloths similar to a family restaurant, and topped with a candle, flowers and coloured markers. Light folk music played in the background – Bob Dylan, if I remember correctly.

Participants randomly chose a table to sit at and started talking – some debriefed Sherri's motivational speech, some began by introducing themselves to each other, and others began by expressing their feelings, often by the words, "I am so tired!"

As participants settled into their groups, four waiters entered the room, including me, dressed as if we were part of a 1960's folk festival. We handed out Conversation Café menus to participants who were chuckling and smiling about our costumes. After some good-natured bantering, we took orders for beer, wine and soft drinks from the participants.

As drinks were served, Garry Loewen – the evening's conversation host – welcomed the group, cracked a few jokes and introduced the concept and instructions for the Conversation Café. Participants were directed to appoint a table leader who would ensure that everyone had the opportunity to speak, as well as use the markers and brown paper table covers to record the group's thoughts. Groups were instructed to talk for 30 minutes about the first question on their menu: What are my personal motivations and fears about being involved in collaborative work?

Within seconds the room was filled with conversation as people self-organized to appoint table leaders and move quickly into the conversation. The participants shared their stories, highlighting their fears and motivations to the extent that they felt comfortable. The conversation overpowered the music.

Thirty minutes quickly passed. After considerable effort, Garry focused the group's attention to the next set of instructions, which required participants, with the exception of the table leaders, to leave their original table and continue the conversation with a new group. Table leaders were instructed to use the notes they scribbled on the brown paper tablecloths to share the conversation that had just unfolded with the new participants. The conversation would continue from this point. Participants wasted no time – the room instantly filled with group introductions and intense conversation.

It was difficult to stop the conversation. Garry now faced the task of getting the group to repeat the exercise with the second question: What are my wicked questions about this work?

Nearly two hours had passed in the Conversation Café and, despite mental exhaustion from the day's learning, participants could not stop talking. Even after attempting to bring the Café to a close, participants remained in the room to continue their conversations. This is the power of a conversation café.

I am amazed at how this simple technique can bring people together. It is as if people are just waiting for an opportunity to share their story, their hopes and fears with one another.

After the event, participants commented on their interesting conversations and that the collection of conversations had become so intense and loud that they had difficulty hearing their own group.

Simple conversation between people who care – it does not get any better than that!

## *Tips for a Great Conversation*

- Focus on what matters
- Acknowledge one another as equals
- Speak with your heart and mind
- Beware of judgments
- Listen in order to understand – suspend certainty and let go of assumptions
- Slow down to allow time for thinking and reflection
- Listen for patterns, insights and deeper questions
- Share collective discoveries

## *Six Ideas for a Conversation Café*

I use conversation cafés more than any other technique. They are simple and fun, yet extremely effective. Here are a few tips from my experience:

### ***1. Give the Room a Fun Feel***

Take the time to decorate the room like a café, complete with appropriate music, mood lighting and some refreshments. This can go a long way in setting the right mood. I love when people enter the room together and are amazed by its ambiance. There is a sense of “Wow!” Every detail counts. The brown paper tablecloths and markers can be replaced by post-it notes and pens, but the brown paper creates a more inviting restaurant feeling. I have created conversation cafés with themes that mimic an outdoor Italian café or formal restaurant. I have even used actual restaurants to host conversations. Your only limitations are creativity and time.

### ***2. Choose the Questions and Create a Menu***

Consider asking two questions. I like to begin by asking participants a question that is slightly personal, such as their fears, reasons for being here or why they are personally committed to this work. The second question is often about the work and the change we are seeking to address, such as “Why does poverty exist?” and “How might we reduce poverty in this community?” Or, “Why do arts organizations matter to our community and what can we do to promote them?” Visit the Tamarack Dialogue webpage to download a conversation café menu template to use at your own event.

### ***3. Consider Wicked Questions***

Wicked questions do not have an obvious answer. They are used to expose the assumptions that shape our actions and choices. What's more, they articulate the embedded and often contradictory assumptions we hold about an issue, context or organization. Not to be confused as a trick question, wicked questions do not have obvious answers. Their value lies in their capacity to open up options and inquiry, as well as to surface fundamental issues that need to be addressed.

### ***4. Follow a Process***

Experience has taught me that a conversation café takes at least two hours to host, and even longer if you want to debrief at the end. Here is a simple formula for a two-hour conversation:

- Welcome – 5 minutes
- Question One: Round A – 25 minutes
- Question One: Round B – 25 minutes
- Introduce Question Two – 5 minutes
- Question Two: Round A – 20 minutes
- Question Two: Round B – 20 minutes
- Closing: Group debrief – 25 minutes

### ***5. Enjoy!***

Conversation cafés should not be overly formal or business-like. I have found that the spirit of conversation is broken if you try to control every aspect of the environment. If people stray from the topic, do not get too worried – participants will find their way back soon enough.

### ***6. Debrief the Event to Gather Information***

I seldom have the opportunity to use conversation as a community-forming tool as described in my conversation café experience. When I want to capture the ideas that people talk about in order to write a report, I have found that debriefing helps me gather information. At the end of a conversation café, I ask participants to gather with their first conversation table. For 15 minutes, I ask the group to debrief what they have heard by identifying three to five ideas to share with the larger group. They report each idea to me on sticky notes that I sort on a flip chart in columns, grouping similar ideas into themes. I share some of the themes with the larger group. After the event, I wander around the tables to see what other ideas were recorded on the brown

paper tablecloths. Often, I find a gem or two to add to the themes. This list of ideas can form the basis of a substantial report. Another way to debrief a conversation is to ask the whole group, “How was that?” It is amazing the kinds of thoughts people will share.

Conversation cafés are fun! They build trust between people, and they are a great forum for hosting ideas where people desire to see what they have in common and what it is they should be doing together. This conversation technique has a remarkable way of building a sense of “in common,” and it is a fantastic tool to use early in a collaborative process.

### *Learn More*

- Aids for Complexity: About Wicked Questions – [http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgeware/archive/think/main\\_aides5.html](http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgeware/archive/think/main_aides5.html)
- Brown, Juanita and David Isaacs et al. *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005.
- The World Café – <http://www.worldcafe.com>
  - Café to Go manual – <http://www.theworldcafe.com/cafetogo.pdf>
- The Conversation Café – <http://www.conversationcafe.org>
  - Host manual – [http://www.conversationcafe.org/hosts\\_downloads.html](http://www.conversationcafe.org/hosts_downloads.html)
- The Public Conversations Project – <http://www.publicconversations.org>
- Sample café menu – [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/CCI/CCI\\_downloads/Cafe\\_Menu.pdf](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/CCI/CCI_downloads/Cafe_Menu.pdf)
- Visit the Tamarack Dialogue webpage for more information about conversation cafés – [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3\\_dialogue.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3_dialogue.html)

## **Identify the System You Desire to Engage The Top 100 Partners Exercise**

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*“Who invited that schmuck?”  
A moment of weakness I felt after a session.*

*~ Paul Born*

### *About the Top 100 Partners Exercise*

Consider the top 100 people and organizations in your community that could help you realize the change you want to see. Imagine that they were working together to change the community. This would be a dream come true for many communities.

The easiest and least effective way for partnerships to emerge is to just let them happen. I am a huge believer in emergence but, given that partnerships take so much time to develop, I feel it is very important to know who you want your partners to be and to develop a strategy for building these relationships.

### *My Experience*

I spent two days developing an engagement process with a small group that would help their neighbourhood work better together. Their neighbourhood had deteriorated over the past two decades and was known to have large concentrations of low-income housing.

We started by talking about the challenges their community faced. Crime, exclusion, lack of hope and poverty were at the top of their list of challenges. After passing half the day focusing on challenges, I helped move the conversation to assets and asked, “What does your neighbourhood have going for it?” We talked about green spaces and a trail network, a community facility and an after school program. We also talked about the resilience of the local residents, a few caring business people, and about a local politician who was so fond of the neighbourhood that he and his wife would come to just about every event hosted there. We talked about several small restaurant owners that were very vocal and active, a school principal that had endless energy and creativity, and a group of young people that were active through the YMCA. Many stories were shared about acts of kindness and community pride. The challenges seemed less daunting after we began to recognize and understand the people and places that made up this neighbourhood.

The conversation turned to the process by which we might bring these people together for a series of conversations. We hoped to come to an agreement on what we could do together to restore the neighbourhood. The group’s informal leader asked, “So, who should we invite to such a meeting?” All eyes turned to me. My immediate thought was to say that we should invite the people we had just talked about – the people who we

identified as community assets. But, I knew from experience that by inviting these “usual suspects” – the people already engaged in the community – we would miss out on an important opportunity to engage the whole community and to identify who was really needed in order to effect change in the neighbourhood.

For the next several hours, I led this small group through an exercise that I have used with dozens of groups. We brainstormed 72 names of people we could engage and then developed a top 20 list for the meeting we would plan to hold. We decided that the other 52 names would be entered into a database and we would track their involvement over the next year. The group believed this was a useful exercise and that, without this disciplined method of identifying key stakeholders, we would have embarked on a process of luck rather than strategy.

### *Steps to Hold the 100 Partners Exercise*

Here is a five-step process that individuals or groups can use to be much more deliberate in building strategic partnerships. This process can help you determine the key people to engage in the system you desire to change.

#### **1. *Brainstorm your Partner List***

Consider the issue you hope to address in your community. On a large piece of paper, write the name of the collaborative you are involved in. Now create four quadrants on the page by dividing the page in half both vertically and horizontally creating four quadrants.

Visualize all of the people in your community who have similar interests, including existing partners. Brainstorm the organizations that make up the system you are hoping to affect by using the following four categories: business, voluntary, government and people affected by the issue. List these in the four quadrants of the page. List all of the organizations (top 100) that make up the system around the issue and place the names into each quadrant. The first 20 are often the easiest, but keep going for as long as you can. If possible, identify the leaders or key members of the organization rather than the name of the organization. Follow the instinct of the group. Do not debate over every individual suggested.

Here is an example: If your issue is poverty reduction, consider the people that work for the agencies that serve the poor, such as food banks, low-income neighbourhood centres and homeless shelters. Consider the employers that hire low-income workers, both private and public. Then, consider business associations that represent these employers; for example, the local Chamber of Commerce. Also, consider all levels of government that support or fund programs that help the poor. Lastly, identify any citizen organizations that have been developed by the poor for the poor, such as a single parent support group. Keep writing down names until you cannot think of any more.

## **2. Rank your List by Sector**

Sort through your list and identify the people your group knows best and rank the list accordingly. Organize this list into groups by sector. For government, consider dividing names into national, provincial or state and local groups. You may also want to sort by area of activity such as health, social services, service industry, etc.

## **3. Rank your List by People**

Rank lists by identifying the top three people or organizations in each list. I find it helpful to use specific criteria for ranking your top three, where a level one relationship is poor and a level five relationship is strong. This is the method I use:

- Individuals with whom anyone in your group has a close personal relationship receives five points. Those with lesser relationships receive a lower rating. How do you rate your relationships? If you can ask the person a reasonable favor and if, because of your relationship, they would likely say yes, this is a level five relationship.
- Next, I rank each person or organization for their ability to contribute to implementing the vision. Again, if they have a lot of influence or resources, this is a level five relationship.
- Lastly, rank each contact for “readiness to partner.” How closely does your idea line up with their thinking? Are they in the midst of a huge change with which your idea fits? If they seem to be thinking along a different path, their rating may be lower. This is not a scientific formula. Use your gut feeling to rank every person or organization.

## **4. Consider Who to Approach First**

Rank your prospect list by choosing the partners you want to approach first. This stage may require research. The more you know about a potential partner, the easier it is to customize “the ask” in a way that they can easily see the need and benefits of their participation.

In this step, I suggest looking for two things. The first is a set of names that will give you some quick partnerships, including the people you know well and are sure will join if asked. Second, look for contacts on your list with significant influence. An example of this is the mayor or a leading business person in your city. These are people who bring credibility to the issue and, once they are on your side, it is often much easier to bring on other key community influencers.

## 5. *Craft the “Ask”*

Brainstorm how you might make the approach, but proceed with caution. I have one simple rule: Never ask a partner to commit on your first visit. Use the first meeting as an opportunity to introduce your idea and try to leave with a commitment for a second meeting. At the end of the first meeting, ask the potential partner, “Is there other information I can send to you, or questions that I might answer when we get together again?”

This five-step process is not conclusive but, rather, it is a way to be deliberate about relationship building, and to identify the top 100 organizations and individuals that can contribute to the change you want to see in your community.

As noted earlier, entering into an effective dialogue with others requires us to be deliberate about how we act and think in such a conversation. When using dialogue to build our community, the question of “who” should be in the conversation is very important. By recreating the system we hope to affect, we have a much better opportunity to gain a corner on the obvious.

### *Ideas for the Top 100 Exercise*

- The question of who is a leader often comes up in this process. How do we know this person is a person of influence? I usually ask this question, “Is this a person that if they were to invite 10 of their colleagues to a meeting, seven would show up?” People of influence are the best type of leaders for collaborative process. Position or power do not define leadership for me.
- Do not try to perfect this process. This exercise is a method to brainstorm and sort the names of people and organizations that make up the community system around the issue you want to influence. Do not be overly concerned about which category you place someone in. Be more concerned about capturing the name.
- The key to the Top 100 Exercise is to help the group understand that you desire to be strategic about who they invite into a conversation. Everyone who enters into the conversation is a constituent who has the ability to help implement the group’s idea/vision.

## *Relationship Management*

I find it very useful to add all the names that are brainstormed into a database. As your collaboration begins to hold community conversations, ensure you capture the names of everyone who attends. Every event that you hold and every conversation you have about the change you want to see is an opportunity to build a relationship. Acquire email addresses and business cards. These will allow you to keep individuals informed and hopefully get them excited about the work you are doing. After one year, you could have a database full of contacts, complete with information about how they are important and interested in your work, as well as how they have been involved to date.

Gathering and tracking names is important to forming large scale collaborations. In fact, this might be the most important discipline that a collaborative organization can employ. Keeping a relational database creates a system that keeps relationships current and deliberate.

### *What is a relational database?*

We all have mailing lists that are organized by various software programs. A relational database can be just that – a listing of names and contact information. What makes it relational is that we have developed categories for each contact so they can be sorted by interest or level of importance to us.

### *Tips for Building a Relational Database*

- Every event held in your community is an important opportunity to build your database. Make sure that you find a way to get the names and email addresses of participants. Consider passing around a sign up sheet, or find a reason to send some compelling information after the meeting and ask for email addresses before participants leave. If your organization has a newsletter, encourage participants to subscribe.
- Remember, this is a discipline. In other words, building your relational database must be something you do every day and for every event. Even if you already have the contact information, you can acquire more information about a person. Consider setting a goal for your organization's relational database. For example, acquire one thousand names in a year, one event at a time.
- Consider using the database as a way to track engagement. I cannot think of a better way than a relational database to record how many people have been involved in the initiative to date, and their level of interest and contribution. Make sure this is part of your evaluation criteria.

- Consider buying a database that is built specifically for this purpose. The one we use at Tamarack is called ACT.
- Use the database! The best way to see the power of the database is to develop a short e-newsletter that provides an engaging update of your work on a regular basis. The Internet plays a role in allowing your collaborative work to grow. It allows for quick, meaningful updates on your work to large groups of people.

Relationships are at the core of every collaboration. They require nurturing and time to build. Being deliberate about who you invite to a conversation is very important. Like hosting a great dinner party, gathering the right people can make the event very special. Taking the time to have a strategic conversation about your top 100 partners can be the most effective time your group has ever spent.

### *Learn More*

- ACT! Contact and Customer Relationship Management Software – <http://www.act.com/>
- eBase Relationship Management for Non-Profits – <http://www.ebase.org/>
- Visit the Tamarack Dialogue webpage for more about the Top 100 Exercise and relational databases – [http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3\\_dialogue.html](http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3_dialogue.html)



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