

Citizen Dialogue Guidelines and Resources

PURPOSE:

Dialogue as a form of public engagement invites citizens to help both define and resolve difficult community issues. Early and frequent engagement of the public on key issues and projects will not only assist with the implementation of policy, it will enhance public understanding of the public decisions made. The purpose of these guidelines is to help government entities to determine when and how to best initiate and use formal dialogues with citizen groups and other organizations. Recognizing the wide range of issues and situations in which such dialogues might occur, these are intentionally stated as guidelines and not as rigid requirements defining or limiting why or how such dialogues might occur.

CONVENING:

1. Prior to convening, determine whether it is the right time for dialogue. Is more information needed to ensure that dialogue would be meaningful? Are efforts at dialogue likely to promote progress in understanding or resolving issues, and if so, why? If not, why not? Is there a need for an immediate decision? Is the matter one that is more appropriate for administrative action than dialogue? What are the other means of obtaining citizen input and would they be as, or more, effective for achieving the identified purpose?
2. Prior to convening clearly define the purpose of the dialogue. Is it to help in defining and understanding issues and concerns? Is it to inform on a subject and obtain feedback? Is it to brainstorm and evaluate possible solutions? Or is it to seek a collaborative agreement? Or for another purpose? The purpose for the dialogue should be clearly communicated to the public at the time of convening and considered in structuring the process.
3. Prior to convening, determine if the dialogue is feasible. What resources will be needed for an effective dialogue and are they available? Is there a public interest in and acceptance of dialogue on the issue or issues involved? Is there adequate time to have an effective dialogue?
4. Prior to convening, review the structural options for dialogue and consider which options might best fit the purpose of the dialogue. This includes evaluation of the number of meetings, the use of large or small groups or both, and the type and sequence of different meeting structures. In choosing among dialogue options consider what would help ensure a high level of accessibility – will sign or other language interpreters be needed? Can materials be provided in large print or in Braille? If written comments will be requested, will assistance be provided for those who have difficulty writing?
5. Prior to convening determine what recruitment process can be used to help ensure adequate and diverse participation. Identify accessible spaces that might be available.

MANAGEMENT AND COORDINATION:

6. At the outset of the dialogue, invite feedback on the process and procedures to be used and offer choices to participants where practicable.

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7. Provide any training needed for participants to effectively engage in the process.
8. Prior to dialogue sessions give participants the information needed for meaningful participation and adequate time to review it.
9. Provide adequate and accessible notice of the time, place and expected focus of each dialogue session.
10. When seeking feedback, provide participants and the public with more than one way to comment.
11. If direct participation in dialogue sessions needs to be limited and representatives are used, work to ensure diverse viewpoints in the representatives directly involved in the process and also to ascertain the nature and source of their representative authority. This information on the nature and source of each participant's representative authority should be shared with all participants.
12. Raise questions related to the implementation of any decisions to be made and questions related to the identification and evaluation of anticipated outcomes from the beginning of the process.
13. Throughout the dialogue sessions, work to avoid adversarial debate and maintain open discussion. Do not use votes to silence or marginalize the voices of the minority of the group. Encourage the use of open-ended questions to promote understanding of the range of views and perspectives, and the information and experiences that inform those views.
14. If recording comments during dialogue sessions, use the words of the participants, and work to capture all views expressed.
15. Provide a summary of notes following meetings, and allow for feedback on and revisions of those summaries.
16. If participants require some level of confidentiality for parts of the discussion or for information shared, document why and for what portions of conversation or information shared, and clearly define the level of confidentiality to be provided. Note that meetings and records governed by sunshine laws will be open to the public and confidentiality rules generally will not apply to such meetings. You may want to consult the city attorney prior to beginning a dialogue as to the applicability of sunshine laws to your dialogue.
17. Consider having an impartial facilitator who is accountable to the participants manage the process.
18. Refine procedures as the process unfolds. The process should remain flexible enough to meet the evolving needs of the parties.
19. Consult with the parties as to the timing, scope and content of progress reports made to keep the public informed on the process.

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FOLLOWING-UP:

20. Following a convened dialogue, report back to participants how the input received during the dialogues affected any determinations made following the process, or if the process results in a collaborative agreement, explain to the public how input received during the process led to that agreement.

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These guidelines were prepared by The Communications Center, Inc.
Helping businesses, government entities, nonprofits and other organizations
improve communication and thinking skills.

www.buildingdialogue.com

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Websites

The National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation, www.thataway.org

This site has a wide range of resources including a matrix that summarizes the suitability of different dialogue processes for a range of purposes.

People and Participation.Net, <http://peopleandparticipation.net>

This site offers a wide range of resources that assess dialogue practices and offer case studies for review.

Public Agenda, <http://www.publicagenda.org/>

This site offers a number of tools for tackling complex issues.

Books

Arthur, Carlson, Moore. A Practical Guide to Consensus. (Policy Consensus Initiative, 1999.)

Association of Conflict Resolution. “Best Practices for Government Agencies”.

(<http://www.acrnet.org/acrlibrary/archivesum.php?view=category>).

Holman, Devane, and Cady. The Change Handbook. (Berrett-Koehler, 2007.)

International Association for Public Participation. “Practitioner Tools”.

(<http://iap2.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=5>).

Susskind and Cruikshank. Breaking Robert’s Rules. (Oxford University Press, 2006.)

Yankelovich. The Magic of Dialogue. (Touchstone, 1999.)