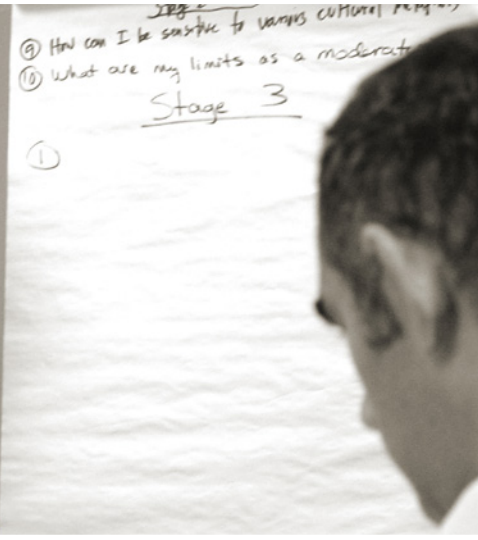
LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES



LEADING CONVERSATIONS IN SMALL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

FACILITATION GUIDE

ALA American Library Association

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

It's a question we at the American Library Association (ALA) have heard quite a bit throughout our Libraries Transforming Communities initiative: ***Why should I, a librarian—or library assistant or branch manager or media specialist—be able to facilitate a discussion?***

First off, let's demystify the "f" word for the time being. "Facilitate" can be a loaded word, one that may fill us with images of crowded rooms, microphones, and the fear of saying the wrong thing.

A facilitator is discussion leader—and discussions happen at the library all the time.

A book club meeting is a prime example: people gather to share ideas, socialize, and learn from one another. There can be heartfelt moments of connection and tense moments of disagreement; chatty, harmonious gatherings; and times when one person takes over the discussion. Sometimes, it can be hard to get people to talk at all.

How do you, as the discussion leader—the ***facilitator***—handle these situations?

This guide is designed to help you, as a library worker in a small or rural community, gain the skills you need to not only prepare for and lead discussions, but also to overcome common challenges that arise when people gather to speak in groups. We will cover the roles and responsibilities of a facilitator, how to ask the right questions, tips for keeping a conversation constructive, and best practices for defusing tension.

Of course, these skills have relevance far beyond book clubs. The material covered in this guide (and the companion course, available for free at ala.org/LTC) will help you in a range of situations: leading meetings with fellow staff or trustees, moderating a panel discussion, or helping residents work through a topic that divides them.

These skills are part of an umbrella term known as ***community engagement***: the process of working collaboratively with community members—library users, residents, faculty, students, and/or local organizations—to address issues for the betterment of the community.

Once you have explored this guide, you may wish to explore ALA's other community engagement resources—all available, free of charge, through the Libraries Transforming Communities initiative at ala.org/LTC.

We welcome your feedback and questions at publicprograms@ala.org.

MARY DAVIS FOURNIER
Director, Libraries Transforming Communities
ALA Public Programs Office

WHO DOES WHAT? FACILITATION ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

FACILITATOR'S ROLE

A facilitator helps a group of people understand their common objectives, share their opinions, and sometimes work toward action.

As a library worker, you might facilitate a staff conversation about a change in your library, bring together voters to talk through a concern in your community, or explore common ground and differences among readers in a book club meeting.

Your role as a facilitator is to help organize and guide the conversation by:

- Identifying the purpose, expected outcome, and topic
- Building the agenda
- Developing discussion questions
- Setting ground rules
- Actively listening to the conversation in order to summarize, reframe, and ask good questions
- Managing time and interpersonal dynamics of the participants
- Helping the group identify common ground, next steps, and/or plans for action

The facilitation skills and resources covered in this guide can be used in a variety of settings—from internal staff meetings to public programs with your patrons. The goal is to help you craft thoughtful, engaging meetings and conversations with active participation from all, and that you feel comfortable leading!

SUPPORTING ROLES

While the goal of this guide is to develop your facilitation skills, there are several important roles that support good meeting management. Depending upon the type of conversation you're planning (e.g., staff meeting, book discussion), you could ask others to fill these roles or you could take them on yourself, in addition to acting as facilitator.

TIMEKEEPER

It's important for any meeting or event to start and end on time, and a designated timekeeper can help to ensure everyone stays on track. The facilitator may serve in this role or may designate this responsibility to someone else.

The timekeeper will use the agenda or time frames offered by the facilitator to track the conversation's allotted time periods for topics or questions. They will notify the facilitator when it is time to move to the next part of the conversation.

Tips for notifying the facilitator that it is time to move on:

- Give a warning. Let everyone know that there are just a few minutes remaining for the topic
- Decide upon a non-verbal cue in advance—a raised hand, for instance, to signal time is up
- In larger meetings or events, a sign notifying the facilitator of the time remaining (e.g., 5-minute, 1-minute) may be helpful.

Tips for moving the conversation forward as a facilitator:

- Let the group know. Wait for the current participant to finish speaking, and then tell everyone it's time to move on and introduce the next topic or question. Give advance notice if you can.
- If people are having a hard time transitioning, explain why it is necessary to move to the next phase of the conversation. Explain how it connects to what they have been discussing. Invite them to take a moment to think about this before continuing.
- If someone continues to speak to the previous topic, thank them for their contribution and ask them how they connect the first topic to the second. Or, politely ask them to allow a few participants to respond to the next topic so they can think about this connection.

RECORDER

Having a designated recorder will help you capture input, insights, ideas, and decisions in a conversation. This person can be a colleague, volunteer, or board member.

Depending on the context of the conversation, you may wish for the recorder to take notes where the group can see them (e.g., on a white board, on a computer set up with a projector) or on a less public-facing document (e.g., notebook, tablet). Either way, good penmanship or typing skills are an asset!

Should you take your group's notes publicly or privately?

Here are a few circumstances in which you may prefer to take notes publicly, such as on a white board:

- The conversation is public, and transparency is important.
- The conversation will build upon the questions asked. Having the notes visible will help participants reflect and move toward common ground.
- The content is not personal, and therefore people will be more comfortable having their comments captured and viewed.

Here are a few circumstances in which you may prefer to take notes privately, such as on a laptop:

- The conversation is a closed conversation or internal meeting, so posting anything that might be viewed by people outside the meeting would be inappropriate.
- The conversation is focused on gathering information, not on finding common ground.
- The information gathered is for internal purposes only.

PRO TIP **Keep your conversation small and nimble—ideally, no more than 15 people. That way everyone can participate, and conversation can move along at a reasonable pace.**

Either way, you can use your notes to help participants feel heard. It can be helpful for people to see their comments noted publicly, but you can also ask a notetaker to read notes aloud from their notebook or laptop to ensure that they were captured correctly.

If you have more than one recorder available, you might ask one person to take notes on the content of people's comments, while the other observes interactions, body language, and any changes in energy the room (e.g., did a certain comment or topic cause people to tune out?).

A note: it is generally advisable to not take notes about people's personal experiences. Sometimes in a conversation, you may start with personal experiences before moving to exploring options for addressing the topic. Take notes after the personal stories have been shared or get participants' permission to capture their stories—but be clear how they will be used and why.

LOGISTICS COORDINATOR

Having someone to manage the logistics of the meeting or event is essential. This may be the facilitator or someone else.

Logistical considerations include time and location of the meeting, set-up, and materials. A logistical coordinator will work with the facilitator to determine what is needed for the event and make sure everything is set up in advance.

COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

You may have a need for someone to manage communications. Whether the facilitator or someone else, a few key communication tasks are necessary.

Communications includes messaging about the event in advance and spreading the word to attract participants. The communications coordinator may work with community partners on these efforts or use the library's traditional communications methods to reach out to patrons. Following the event, the coordinator may send follow-up emails to participants with notes or other information and may also post information about the event online.

SERVING IN MULTIPLE ROLES AS A FACILITATOR

While it can be tempting to take on multiple roles, we recommended that you delegate tasks whenever possible—especially if you are new to facilitating.

In some instances, participants can act as your timekeeper or recorder; don't be afraid to ask for volunteers at the beginning of the session you're facilitating! In other instances, try to identify staff, partner organizations or library volunteers who can help you in advance. It may be easy to hand off these tasks to a participant when the event is casual, such as a book club meeting, but may be harder in the case of a community conversation on a divisive topic.

Consider whether participants will be able to participate as well as serve in these roles. More involved topics may make it difficult for them to participate fully if they must also take notes or watch the time. The more formal the meeting or event, the more likely you will want to identify a recorder and timekeeper in advance.

BEFORE YOU START: PLANNING A CONVERSATION PROGRAM AND PREPARING TO FACILITATE

IDENTIFYING YOUR GOAL

In each conversation, there is a goal or purpose. What are you aiming to accomplish? Generally, conversations have a few common goals:

- **Exploration:** Provides an opportunity to learn more about a topic and/or gain understanding of others' experiences. This builds connections and shared understanding.
- **Decision-making:** Participants are responsible for making a decision together. The conversation will generate ideas, explore options, and ultimately end with a decision or next steps.
- **Collaborative action:** Participants make decisions and determine appropriate action.

In your regular library programming, you may find that a goal of exploration is most common—that's great! When we hold library programs, we're exploring ideas and sparking conversations—opening people's minds as well as providing an opportunity to experience conversational literacy.

Admittedly, decision-making and collaborative action goals come with a bit more work; as facilitator, you will help participants get to these decisions and next steps. With careful planning, you can establish an agenda and questions that will help guide participants.

CHOOSING A DISCUSSION TOPIC

You may have a clear topic that needs to be discussed. In board meetings, for instance, you'll likely have some set topics that were decided on at the last meeting. But when you're thinking about engaging with the community, you may have to choose a topic for a conversation. How do you do that?

- **Consider the context:** What kind of event are you hoping to have? In many instances, the topic may be clear from the start. For example, if you're hosting a panel discussion followed by a conversation, the conversation will build on the panel's topic. Your task is to craft the questions or prompts to get conversation going. When your conversation is tied to existing programming, the topic will build on that.

On the other hand, you may wish to hold stand-alone conversations on topics relevant to the community. In this case, you'll want to ask the community what is important to them and explore—either formally or informally—what your community needs. Community insight will be most helpful

to selecting a topic that reflects the community's priorities or aspirations. People are more likely to participate in a conversation of their own choosing.

There are several ways to learn about your community's interests and needs:

- **Talk to your library patrons.** Ask: What is important to them? What is happening in the community that they would like to discuss? What keeps them up at night? You can do this informally or formally, through one-on-one conversations or focus groups, but be sure to reach outside your most regular users. If you don't, you risk an affinity bias—an unconscious tendency to connect with people who are like you or those whom you are comfortable with.
- **Reach out to community organizations.** Which topics are they working on? What are they hearing most about? What issues do they see as needing discussion?
- **Explore data about your community.** Census data, for example, will give you a snapshot of your community's demographics, including race, income, education, and veteran status.

FRAMING YOUR TOPIC

Once you have chosen a topic, there is one more consideration to make before announcing it: how will you frame it?

Framing refers to how we interpret information. Individuals use our experiences, anecdotes, and even stereotypes to understand and respond to information. In framing a topic, you are considering how to make it accessible for all participants. This means removing any assumptions from the topic's wording to make it universally recognizable, rather than off-putting.

For instance, if you want to talk about privacy, you may wish to avoid incendiary phrases; for example, naming a program "Big Brother is Watching!" or "Mass Surveillance and the Police State" is likely to frame the issue as threatening. Playing up the underlying issues of safety, personal privacy, and access is more likely to elicit a nuanced (and noncombative) conversation. Alternatively, consider the program title "Protecting Your Privacy: Information Access and Safety in the Digital Age." This more inclusive framing also leaves the conversation open for multiple perspectives to feel welcome.

To get started, write several potential descriptions of your topic and run them by people who can offer varied perspectives. Do they understand what will be discussed? Do they feel welcome in that conversation? Do they feel that others with different views will feel welcome? Test this out with community partners and others to get a good cross-section of the community.

Framing is not always as tricky as it sounds. For many programs, the topic will be light or neutral, and you won't have to think much about framing. But for some of the tough topics, how something is worded is critical.

PRO TIP **New to facilitating? Start with schools. They are natural partners for libraries, and younger kids (think grades 1–5) can be a great starter group for beginning facilitators. For more, see "3 ways to build partnerships at your small library."**

FINDING PARTNERS

When it comes to recruitment, partnerships are incredibly helpful and sometimes even essential. Partnerships ensure that the right people are in the room and that the efforts to engage the community do not sit solely on the shoulders of any one entity.

Consider a conversation about Spanish-speaking services at the library. Organizations who are trusted by the Hispanic/Latinx community make great partners for thinking through the plans for the event, as well as helping to get participants to attend.

Partners can be organizations, institutions, and even individuals in the community. Partners could also become potential hosts of community conversations or even co-facilitators.

Tips for finding partners:

- **Think about your community leaders.** Which leaders or staff/board members of local institutions would make good partners for your event? Ask them for help or to make an introduction.
- **Think about your local organizations.** Are any other groups working on your topic or tangential topics? Schools are natural partners for talking about youth, education, and literacy. Churches may already be providing services to the unhoused or low-income communities and may be great partners for projects that service these populations. Service oriented groups, like the Boy or Girl Scouts, may help bring people together to discuss a topic they are working on for a badge/patch or service project.
- **Think about your patrons.** Who in your community works on the topic you wish to discuss? If you are discussing food access, invite your local farmers or ranchers to partner on the event. If you are discussing a health topic, invite a local hospital or clinic. These groups likely have their own networks they can help to bring in, as well.
- **Consider how open-minded your potential partners are about your meeting's outcome.** Some partners may care deeply about an issue but are not yet set on a solution. Others may already have formed strong opinions and be invested in a specific outcome. The latter can be problematic unless you balance them with others who have a different perspective.

LOGISTICS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION

In planning for your conversation, there are several logistical elements to consider.

BUDGET

Community conversations can be hosted with a limited budget. Staff time is required to cover planning and facilitation, though some of these costs can be alleviated with the help of volunteers or partners.

Other costs may include marketing, refreshments and materials. Much of this can be done at a low cost by using existing resources or by working with the community. Refreshments, for instance, could be managed by making the event a potluck.

TIMING

Community conversations should be planned for times that work well for the members of the community invited. If inviting working parents, for instance, holding the conversation outside of regular work hours is essential. Sometimes, you may wish to schedule multiple conversations throughout the day or week in order to allow people to attend at a time convenient for them.

Most conversations can be completed in ninety minutes to three hours. Two hours or less is preferred, as this is generally the maximum amount of time people can attend. Sometimes, the type of meeting you are planning will require more time—consider holding these events on a weekend or another time when participants are likely to have more time and flexibility.

At extended meetings, make sure you have a plan to keep people comfortable with food, drinks, and sufficient time for breaks. Promote the event as a retreat, and find somewhere special to host it.

LOCATION

Consider whether the conversation should be held at the library or elsewhere. This can be a matter of space, accessibility, or comfort. The library is often not the best location; you should go where people will be most comfortable, and partners may have space that is preferable for your needs. You will need to consider how many people you are hoping to attract and how much space you will need for them. The set-up of your event will impact this.

SET-UP

Most conversations are set up in a circle, "U" shape, or occasionally a square. It is important that participants be able to see one another, and these set-ups make it easier for everyone to be heard.

PRO TIP **If you divide a large group into smaller groups for the discussion, try bringing the whole group back together after and having one person from each group report back with a summary of what was shared. This gives attendees the opportunity to hear all perspectives, not just those shared in their group.**

When meeting with a small internal group, such as your board, sitting around a table boardroom style is appropriate. When meeting with a larger group of community members to discuss a book, you will want to seat them in a circle of chairs or a square of chairs and tables.

For larger community conversations of 30 people or less, we recommend setting up chairs in a circle. For groups larger than 30, we suggest small tables for groups of 6 or 8.

In addition to seating, you may need tables for refreshments or materials, easel(s) and paper, a screen and projector, markers, and tape.

PRO TIP **Ask your partners (or community members) what it takes to bring their participating members to a conversation. When possible, try to add discussion events to a partner's existing venue or event, rather than creating your own event.**

REFRESHMENTS

Are you allowed to serve food and drinks in your meeting space? If so, offering refreshments can help get people to attend your conversation.

If you plan to serve food, include that information in your communications about the event. If you hold a conversation during a mealtime, offer something substantial or let folks know to bring their own food. At other times, cookies and drinks should be enough to keep people satiated and draw them in. You may even wish to make the event a potluck and invite everyone to contribute a snack or dish.

ACCESSIBILITY

Ensure accessibility of space and materials. For more information, check out the following resources:

- www.ada.gov
- www.access-board.gov

GROUND RULES

Ground rules, sometimes called group agreements, are a list of terms that participants agree to follow—and the facilitator agrees to uphold—during a conversation.

For some, the idea of ground rules feels childish—why should adults need rules for how to talk with one another? However, we can all recall a time when we've seen a conversation gone awry. Ground rules help establish expectations for how people will talk with one another and offer a tool for helping to maintain an open line of communication.

There is no one set list of ground rules that facilitators should follow. Good ground rules can be adapted to the situation or group, and participants can help create or modify them.

When setting ground rules, it's important for you as the facilitator to:

- Make it clear that the group is here to discuss, not debate or argue.
- Outline what it means to talk respectfully: listening to one another, not making assumptions about others' statements, asking questions, etc.
- Clarify the goals in mind for the meeting/conversation. Are you making a decision? Exploring options? Learning more about one another?
- Describe your role as a facilitator. Will you participate in the conversation or just lead them through it?

TIME LIMITS

You may wish to include a time limit for comments in your ground rules, particularly when you anticipate participants may have a hard time keeping comments brief or as a measure to support you in addressing dominant participants. Adding a ground rule such as "comments will be kept brief—no more than a minute or two" will set an expectation for brevity.

A caution: do not get mired in the time limits. They should be used as a general timeframe, not a strict rule. It will be clear when someone is going on too long. If you feel the participants will take a specific time limit too seriously, use a more general ground rule such as "keep your comments brief so others may speak."

Personal stories can take a bit more time to share. If your conversation is centered around stories and experiences, time limits may not be appropriate.

INTRODUCING THE GROUND RULES

At the outset of a conversation, the facilitator should welcome participants and introduce themselves before outlining the ground rules.

Best practices for introducing ground rules to a group is to:

- Review the rules verbally.
- Provide the rules in writing. This can be done via a handout, posted on a wall, or projected on a screen.
- Introduce them as a set of guidelines to help set expectations for the conversation.
- Ask participants if they have any questions about the ground rules you just covered.

ADDING GROUND RULES FROM PARTICIPANTS

Depending on the group and the conversation, you may wish to ask participants for suggestions of additional ground rules. This gives participants the chance to suggest additional rules that they feel will ensure a respectful and productive conversation.

This will likely work best when facilitating a small group and/or a group that will meet multiple times. With larger groups or one-time events, using the ground rules you establish in advance is usually sufficient.

Once an additional ground rule is suggested, ask participants if they would be willing to agree to it. You should always ask participants if they agree to abide by the ground rules set forth at the start of the meeting. This will ensure that if any participant breaks the ground rules, you can refer back to them as a shared agreement.

Be sure to add any new ground rules or agreements to your list. If posted on the wall, write it in on the paper or add a second piece of paper for the additional rule(s). You can ask participants to add it to their ground rules handout, if you are using one.

EXAMPLES OF GROUND RULES

There are many different conversation models with many different ground rules. Below are several examples. Borrow from them or mix and match to find the rules that work for your group!

Conversation Cafe Agreements (conversationcafe.org)

- **Open-mindedness:** Listen to and respect all points of view.
- **Acceptance:** Suspend judgment as best you can.
- **Curiosity:** Seek to understand rather than persuade.
- **Discovery:** Question assumptions, look for new insights.
- **Sincerity:** Speak from your heart and personal experience.
- **Brevity:** Go for honesty and depth but don't go on and on.

Living Room Conversations Ground Rules (livingroomconversations.org)

- **Be Curious and Open to Learning.** Listen to and be open to hearing all points of view. Maintain an attitude of exploration and learning. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking.
- **Show Respect and Suspend Judgment.** Human beings tend to judge one another; do your best not to. Setting judgments aside will better enable you to learn from others and help them feel respected and appreciated.
- **Look for Common Ground and Appreciate Differences.** In this conversation, we look for what we agree on and simply appreciate that we will disagree on some beliefs and opinions.
- **Be Authentic and Welcome that from Others, Share What's Important to You.** Speak authentically from your personal and heartfelt experience. Be considerate to others who are doing the same.
- **Be Purposeful and to the Point.** Notice if what you are conveying is or is not "on purpose" to the question at hand. Notice if you are making the same point more than once.
- **Own and Guide the Conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation by noticing what's happening and actively support getting yourself and others back "on purpose" when needed.

National Issues Forums Ground Rules (nifi.org)

- The moderator(s) will guide the discussion but remain neutral.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one dominates.
- The discussion stays focused on the issue at hand.
- Maintain an atmosphere for discussion and analysis of our options. This is a discussion, not a debate.
- Listening is as important as talking.
- We will work together toward making a decision.

General Meeting Ground Rules

- Keep an open mind and be open to learning something new.
- Be respectful of others.
- Ask questions to gain understanding/clarity.
- Be on time.
- Give constructive feedback.
- Be open to receiving constructive feedback.

SETTING AN AGENDA

Creating an agenda helps you in your role as facilitator. It outlines what you hope to accomplish, what questions you will pose, outputs you hope to achieve, and the time you will allot to various topics or questions. It provides you with a roadmap for your conversation or meeting. If you plan to lead the conversation with a partner, you may also wish to note which one of you will lead each section.

PRO TIP

Provide drinks and snacks and make time for people to mingle before the conversation starts. If people don't know each other, make introductions.

When planning a meeting, such as a staff or board meeting, it's helpful to share the agenda with your participants ahead of time. When it comes to public conversations, the agenda may suit your needs more than it will aid the participants. Use it as your game plan for running the conversation. You may wish to use a detailed agenda for the facilitator, notetaker, etc., but distribute a simplified version to the attendees.

SAMPLE AGENDA

"Community Conversation: Welcoming Community"

Time	Topic	Leader	Output
6:00–6:10 p.m.	Welcome, review of topic and ground rules	Jane	Participants clear about the topic, agreements on the ground rules
6:10–6:20	Introductions: Tell us your name and one reason you decided to join tonight's conversation.	Joe	Participants introduce themselves
6:20–6:45	First round—prompt: Describe what a welcoming community would look like to you	Jane; Joe takes notes	Share and explore the meaning of being a welcoming community
6:45–7:10	Second round—prompt: How might we create a more welcoming community in our town?	Joe; Jane takes notes	Idea generation for creating a welcoming community
7:10–7:25	Reflections—prompt: What might we do as a result of today's conversation?	Jane; Joe takes notes	Identify potential actions, future conversations of interest
7:25–7:30	Closing—thank you!	Joe	Participants are provided with next steps and expectations of any follow-up that will be done

FACILITATING A CONVERSATION: THE BASICS

A person is not born a great facilitator; these are learnable skills that are strengthened through practice.

Solid communication skills are the foundation for good meetings and conversations. For you to be effective as a facilitator, you need to be able to communicate effectively with participants. By modeling good communication, you also show participants how to respectfully communicate with one another.

In the following sections, we explore tips and techniques for becoming an effective facilitator.

FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

ACTIVE LISTENING

The foundational practice for a facilitator is active listening—showing the person speaking that you hear and understand them through your body language and responses. It shows that you are engaged, receptive, respectful, and supportive of their contribution to the conversation, but does not necessarily mean you agree with them. Active listening is a skill everyone likes to think they have already, but it takes practice to truly listen actively.

Best Practices for Active Listening

- Give the speaker your undivided attention though eye contact. Tune out distractions.
- Maintain an open posture. Avoid crossing your arms and try to appear open and relaxed.
- Allow or ask for clarification on the speaker's thoughts and feelings.
- Paraphrase what the person has said to show you heard them and confirm that you understand. Reframing speaker statements also helps others to hear them clearly.
- Reflect on what you heard, including any feelings or themes that you recognized.
- Validate contributions, feelings, or concerns.
- Ask good questions.

PRO TIP **Do your homework. Know who's going to be in the room. If working with a partner, ask who they're inviting and what they bring to the table. Understand what the relationships are in the room and how that might help or inhibit the conversation.**

PARAPHRASING

Paraphrasing is the practice of stating, in your own words, what you have understood a person to have said. It shows you are interested in the other person and willing to try to understand them. Paraphrasing focuses on the *actual content* of what the person has said rather than the unexpressed feelings or ideas that the listener may have thought underlaid the speaker's words.

Best Practices for Paraphrasing

- An effective paraphrase is best made as a statement. You might start your paraphrase with the words "What I hear you saying is . . . " or "Let me make sure I understand you. You are saying . . . ."
- If you don't understand what the person said, simply say so, or paraphrase the part you do understand.

Example

> *Participant: "I worked hard for everything I have. I have been working since I was a teenager. We shouldn't be handing things out to people, we should be expecting them to work hard. But kids don't have a choice. We should help out the kids who need food, clothing, or whatnot."*

➜ **Poor Paraphrasing:** "You think that we shouldn't help people."

➜ **Good Paraphrasing:** "I hear you saying that you value hard work, but that we should also look out for children in need."

A paraphrase can be helpful when a participant finishes speaking. It confirms they have been understood and makes a good transition to a question or others' comments. An effective paraphrase will either be greeted with "yes" or "no" by the speaker. If the answer is "no," be sure to ask for clarification.

SUMMARIZING

Summarizing is a tool for improving shared understanding in a group by re-stating key information that has been shared.

At points in a conversation where a lot of information has been shared, it can be helpful to recap key ideas. Summarizing can also be helpful in keeping participants on the same page when the facilitator is looking to transition to a new question or sub-topic.

Summarizing is used in concert with paraphrasing to help clarify statements and keep the conversation moving. While paraphrasing works best after one participant speaks, summarizing is most helpful after several participants have contributed, as a way of capturing the most salient information.

Best Practices for Summarizing

- **Focus on key words you heard participants using.** You may wish to have a piece of paper and a pen with you to jot down these words or phrases.
- **Use your group notes.** If you are working with a recorder who is taking notes publicly in the room, refer back to them if helpful.
- **Emphasize commonalities first, then note any areas of difference.** This will help participants remember their shared thoughts, not just the areas where they are far apart, and it could help depersonalize differences between participants
- **Ask the group to confirm that you accurately summarized the conversation.** This is particularly helpful for the recorder to help them capture additional clarifications or expansions.

Examples

- **Poor Summarizing:** "Jane says she thinks X, but Trevor over there said he thinks Y."
- **Good Summarizing:** "We have been discussing this topic for some time. To recap, here are some of the key points I heard . . . Is there anything I missed?"

REFRAMING

Reframing is a facilitation skill that focuses on defusing loaded or angry statements. When people make statements that are hostile or potentially polarizing, it is helpful to restate the comment in calm, neutral language so the information within the statement can be heard by others. This helps others hear the important information being shared without getting mired in the emotions behind the original language. It validates the concern of the participant without placing value in the specific words they use.

Best Practices for Reframing

- Listen for the key value or concern behind the sentiment. Look for what the matter is at its core.
- Remove the charged or loaded words from your reframe.
- Keep the reframe brief and to the point. The aim is to acknowledge the concern and remove the venom of the original words used.
- Reframing is not always appropriate. Racist or other derogatory remarks should not be validated. There may be reasonable concerns behind the statements, but this language should be addressed directly.

Examples

- **Original statement:** "They are such liars!"

  Reframed statement: "It sounds like trust is an issue."

- **Original statement:** "This group is getting nowhere."

  Reframed statement: "I hear that you are concerned about our progress."

- **Original statement:** "I think by discussing this book, you are trying to indoctrinate our kids to be f*****s."

  Response: "Thank you for your opinion, but that language will not be tolerated in this discussion. We are using this book to explore cultural perspectives so we can better understand some of our neighbors."

QUESTIONS

Questions stimulate thinking and rethinking. In a conversation, statements are challenges that provoke a counter challenge or assert or defend an idea. Questions, on the other hand, create a pause in the action for reflection or for transitioning to the next topic.

As a facilitator, posing questions can be a powerful tool. It can help you eliminate much of the superfluous posturing and banter that can occur in conversations and keep it on track.

The core requirement of a good question is that it is open-ended. This means that the question cannot be answered simply with a "yes," "no" or one-word response. Open-ended questions require thoughtful responses and can broaden the conversation.

- **Open-ended question:** How might we impact our business community if we begin offering 3D printing services?

Closed-ended questions, on the other hand, can be useful when seeking agreement or clarity, such as when you want to close the current part of the conversation and move on to the next topic.

- **Closed-ended question:** Is a 3D printing service likely something our business community would utilize?

CRAFTING QUESTIONS

Like choosing a discussion topic, the process of crafting questions should include consideration of framing. Just as you want everyone to feel welcome by the topic, you also want people to feel comfortable responding to your questions. This means, again, removing any underlying assumptions they may have.

A couple well-crafted questions can help guide your conversation and make your job as the leader a lot easier.

- "What does a welcoming community look like?"
- "How might we ensure the well-being of all children in our community?"
- "What is your vision for the future of our library?"

Test your questions in advance to see how people respond. Ask folks you know who hold different views to look at the question and tell you if they would feel welcome and able to answer it. If they feel it is slanted to a certain view, revise! You can ask partners in the community to take a look as well.

STARTING A CONVERSATION: CREATING AN OPENING QUESTION

A good opening question will kick off discussion by asking participants to share their initial thoughts or experiences on the topic at hand. This provides an opportunity for sharing with one another, which can help build rapport before digging deeper or getting into decision-making. The topic and goals of your meeting will help determine what this opening question should be.

To evaluate your opening question, ask yourself:

- Is it welcoming of all perspectives? A good starting question does not appear biased or slanted toward a specific outcome.
- Can it be built upon or examined further? A good question will ask for experiences or perspectives on the topic in a more general way so follow-up questions can dig deeper.
- Is it easy enough to answer? Participants should feel able to respond to it without needing data or expertise.

PRO TIP **Sometimes starting a book group with a question like "How did you like the book?" can be isolating for participants whose opinions are in the minority. If the first few people say they disliked the book, those who liked it might feel embarrassed and be unwilling to share. Consider starting by asking a question about a specific character, scene, or moment so people can get warmed up before stating their overall opinions.**

Examples

- "Tell us about a time that you experienced . . . "
- "What were your initial reactions to . . . ?"
- "What are your hopes for the library in the coming year?"

CONTINUING A CONVERSATION: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

As you get further into a conversation, good follow-up questions can help a facilitator move the discussion forward. These can be used to generate next steps, find points of agreement, or look at a topic from another perspective. Some of these questions can be prepared in advance, but they often emerge naturally in the conversation.

Best practices for preparing follow-up questions

- Look at your goals for the conversation. Once you ask that first opening question, where does the conversation naturally go? Where will you want it to come out at the end? Your questions should help you to get there.
- If starting with a general question, the follow-up should be more specific. Ask "what," "how," "where," and/or "when."
- If the conversation is more for enjoyment and connection rather than decision-making and goal-setting, think about what you want to explore with participants. Book clubs often examine several aspects of the book as well as the participants' overall impressions, for instance.

Examples of follow-up questions

- "How might we make these ideas a reality?"
- "Which of these actions are realistic with the resources we have available?"
- "What has the conversation so far raised for you?"

KEEPING A MEETING ON TRACK

As a facilitator, you're charged with keeping the meeting or conversation on track. Having an agenda or a plan for your time is helpful. But there are additional techniques you can use in the moment to help you keep the conversation moving.

As mentioned earlier, facilitators can use questions to lead the process and spark thinking. A question can also keep the meeting on track by indicating a need to stick to the agenda.

Below are some examples of questions you can use throughout a conversation to keep things on track.

PRO TIP **If you have a chance, discuss the topic with a few folks before the meeting so you can begin thinking about follow-up questions. This is a good way to kick-start a stalled conversation or to engage active participation from one who hasn't spoken up (e.g., "Rick, you shared with me the other day that you thought the ___ idea would work, can you share your ideas with the group?"**

- **To start a conversation when people are chatting:** "Shall we begin?"
- **To stop side conversations:** "The group at Table 2 seem to have some ideas—do we want to bring them to the floor for group discussion?"
- **When participants are deviating from the agenda:** "What did you hope to walk away with by the end of the meeting?"
- **When discussion turns to an item not on the agenda:** "Shall we add that topic to the agenda for next time?"
- **To keep things on track and determine what might need to be discussed later:** "Do we need to decide this in order to decide that?"
- **To bring topics or the meeting to closure:** "Is there anything else before we move on?"; "What are our next steps?"

PROMPTS FOR DEEPER CONVERSATION

As you work your way through your list of prepared questions, there may come a point where you will want to help participants dig a little deeper into the conversation. This may look like examining options for addressing an issue, deciding how they would like to respond, or reflecting on what they have heard from one another in the conversation so far.

Here are some examples of questions you might use to help your participants get deeper into the conversation:

- "What have you learned in discussing this topic today?"
- "How might we address the concerns raised in the conversation so far?"
- "What possible actions might we take?"
- "How has our conversation today changed your thinking about this topic?"

MANAGING GROUP DYNAMICS

DEALING WITH CHALLENGING PARTICIPANTS

On occasion, participants may act in ways that create tension and conflict with others. Ultimately, this behavior is unhelpful to everyone involved. A common danger, when this occurs, is for you and others to judge these behaviors by attaching labels or referring to the person in terms of their behavior.

It is important to remember that people behave the way we do for many reasons. Problematic behaviors occur when we are struggling to cope with stress, change, fear, or insecurities.

Problematic behavior does not make an individual a "bad" person, but rather makes them someone who might need help and understanding. People also need an opportunity to understand the effect their behavior has on others and ultimately on their own lives.

As you review the common problems listed on the following pages, keep in mind that no one can change anyone except themselves. But there are some ways that you, as a facilitator, can address these behaviors to keep the conversation on track.

HOSTILITY

> *During a book club discussion about* Catcher in the Rye, *Becky states that she didn't like the book because the character of Holden was too whiny and entitled. As Becky starts to describe why she felt this way, Joe angrily interrupts her stating that she clearly didn't read the book because if she did she would understand that it's a great coming of age story about the dilemma of being between adolescence and adulthood.*

Some people may direct their anger toward others. This may be done cynically, sarcastically, or argumentatively in response to statements made by others. In some instances, they may try to undermine the conversation. At times, this can be a defensive behavior, a way to gain a sense of control, or the result of someone feeling obligated to participate.

How to address hostility:

- Identify the behavior (e.g., "That comment sounded sarcastic to me.")
- Use empathy (e.g., "It sounds as though you feel angry about that," or "It seems as though you have some strong feelings about that topic.")
- Be honest about your role (e.g., "I feel responsible for making sure everyone is heard, but I also have to keep the meeting on track.")
- Divert the conversation (e.g., "I'd like to talk with you about this later.")

You do not have to allow people to be disruptive. Set clear expectations for meeting behavior with your ground rules at the start, and be consistent. If someone is disruptive, refer back to the ground rules as an agreement everyone made for how they would engage one another.

If the hostile person refuses to cooperate, take a break if needed and speak with the person privately. Explain to him/her that you want them to have an opportunity to participate but that their behavior is disruptive. Give examples and ask for their cooperation.

If they simply refuse or continue to be hostile to others despite your efforts, you may need to ask that person to leave or end the conversation. This decision will depend on the type of meeting, time remaining, and your comfort level with confronting the hostile person. You may wish to refer to library policies on hate speech when appropriate.

DOMINATION

> *In a community conversation about funding public education, Bruce starts the conversation by talking about his idea to have businesses sponsor school activities. The facilitator thanks him for sharing and invites others to share. After Alma begins to speak about her concerns for burdening low-income families, Bruce jumps in again and speaks over her, stating that with his idea there wouldn't be a burden on these families. He continues to speak over others, referring back to his idea and its value above all other ideas.*

Individuals who constantly talk or interject when someone else is speaking may begin to dominate the conversation. Often this person feels what they have to say is more important than what anyone else could possibly contribute. The person may not be aware of the amount of time they have spoken during a meeting. It's possible that they act this way because they do not feel valued, do not know how to express themselves, or are looking for attention.

Tools for preventing domination:

- **Use a talking object.** By setting the rule that whoever has the talking object is allowed to speak, you set the expectation that people will not speak out of turn. Refer back to that rule when someone violates it.
- **Be explicit in your ground rules.** Instead of stating "no one will dominate," be more specific in your language, such as, "once you have spoken twice, wait for four others to contribute before weighing in again."

How to address domination:

- When there is a pause, thank the person and invite someone else to speak.
- Interrupt if the person carries on. Be gentle, but firm. (e.g., "Bruce, I'm sorry to interrupt, but you have shared quite a lot with us tonight while others have not had a chance to speak. Would you be willing to allow a few others to share first?")
- Review time limits and/or ground rules with the whole group.
- After the meeting, ask the person if there is anything you can do to support them. Let them know that you appreciate their participation, but want to make sure others are able to contribute equally. Ask them if there is any way you can help them with sharing space with others.

EXPERTS

> *In a conversation about addressing community impacts from climate change, Angela states that all the community needs to do is stop eating meat in order to stop climate change. She quotes studies about the amount of water used to raise cattle and process meat, and shares figures on the impact that will have. Others in the group include a local rancher, who looks rather uncomfortable and has stopped contributing to the conversation.*

Some participants may be experts on a topic. Others may just act as if they are experts about everything.

These contributions can feel challenging because they can shut down other participants who don't feel as knowledgeable. Sometimes this behavior can come about because someone is not feeling valued by the group, or they may have a personal agenda.

How to address an expert:

- **Share your observation** (e.g., "It seems you have a lot of information on this particular topic. Perhaps we could find another time to discuss this further.")
- **Invite the contribution in another format** (e.g., "It sounds like you have several ideas about this. Would you be willing to write up a brief summary for us?")

- **Refocus the conversation** (e.g., "It sounds like you have a good historical perspective on this, but right now we need to focus on the topic at hand.")
- **Invite others to contribute** (e.g., "It is clear you have a strong idea of what you think we should do. I'd like to see what others think should be done.")

FIXERS

> *In a community conversation following a panel discussion about drug abuse and the opioid epidemic, the facilitator asks people to start by sharing how the subject has impacted them and their families. Shelly starts by stating that the community needs to set up a rehabilitation center to give people a place to go for treatment nearby. While some seem receptive to this idea, many have not had a chance to respond to the question about their experiences. People start to respond directly to Shelly about her idea instead.*

You may observe participants who just want to fix the problems—whether the problem is the topic being discussed or the problems other participants share from their own experience. These individuals may feel they are being helpful but can frustrate others who just want to be heard, and they can be disruptive when a collaborative solution is needed.

How to address a fixer:

- **Acknowledge them and redirect** (e.g., "It seems that you really want to help solve this issue. I'm sure others may have some ideas as well.")
- **Re-state the purpose of the meeting** (e.g., "Today's conversation is about hearing people's experiences. Let's give people the space they need to share.")
- **Point to the agenda** (e.g., "I understand you have some ideas for resolving this, but we're still working through identifying the issues.")

How you address the fixer may depend upon the type of conversation you are having (whether you are seeking ideas or just sharing experiences) and the point in the conversation you find the group in. Use the ideas for addressing the fixer above in the appropriate context of your conversation.

RESERVED

> *In a board meeting, one of the members of the board has not spoken at all. You are more than halfway through the agenda when you realize this. They don't appear to have anything to say or to be trying to break into the conversation.*

Some individuals may appear to be uncomfortable participating or may be content just to listen. Depending on the purpose of the conversation, this may or may not be troublesome.

When you need the group to work together, having someone who does not participate can be frustrating. It may be that this person does not feel they have something to contribute, or they may be introverted and uncomfortable speaking without thinking first.

PRO TIP **Respond to hate speech each and every time you hear it. Not sure what to say? Try: "Excuse me. That word might make others in the room feel uncomfortable. We welcome everyone here, so please don't make those kinds of comments here."**

How you can address reserved people:

- Invite contributions: "Is there anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak who would like to?"
- Speak to reserved people individually during a break to ask how you can support their participation.
- Consider reserved individuals in your planning. Offer options for participation aside from speaking in front of a large group. This may include breaking into one-on-one conversations for a time, allowing people to respond to prompts on paper, giving them the option to draw ideas, or collecting thoughts that can be shared with the group anonymously. These are all valid ways to contribute to a conversation and make the shy or introverted individuals feel welcomed and able to participate.

MANAGING MICROAGGRESSIONS AND HATE SPEECH

In community conversations you may observe microaggressions or hate speech directed toward some participants. As a facilitator, you are responsible for responding to comments or actions that may shut down others, particularly hate speech. Name it and ask the person to recognize what they have said and the impact on others.

FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS ON DIVISIVE TOPICS

At times, you will find yourself facilitating a divisive conversation. It's natural for members of our community to have different views, and when topics feel personal or threatening, conflict can arise.

Your job as facilitator is to name those conflicts and remind participants of the ground rules and agreements. Acknowledge that people will have different ideas for how to address an issue and that, through conversation, we can start to understand each other's perspectives and values and work toward a mutually beneficial approach.

Encourage participants to name disagreements and look for areas of commonality. This will assist the participants in starting to look past sound bites and name-calling and to examine options for how the community can work together.

TOOLS FOR CONVERSATION, CONSENSUS-BUILDING, AND DECISION-MAKING

As you grow in your facilitation practice, you may look for additional tools and techniques for improving conversations and helping participants reach decisions or actions. The following tips are more intermediate-level tools that can help.

THE PARKING LOT

➜ **Supplies:** Easel and paper, tape, markers

A parking lot is a list kept on an easel, large paper, or the projected notes that the group uses to save valuable tangents for later conversation or consideration. It is most useful for keeping the conversation from getting halted by tangents, questions that may be answered later, or other topics not fit for discussion in that moment.

Use the parking lot for:

- Keeping the meeting on track and in focus
- Being diplomatic and polite
- Giving a public place for new insights
- Noting points not relevant to the topic or agenda, but too valuable to lose
- Issues to consider later or at a future meeting
- Innovative ideas

When introducing the parking lot, explain to the group at the start of the conversation that this will be used to capture questions, ideas, or other contributions that you will not want to forget but may need to put aside until later. Allow folks to add to it if they wish. You may also suggest additions during the conversation when they arise.

DOT EXERCISE

➜ **Supplies:** Easel and paper, tape, markers, stickers

The dot exercise is helpful for making decisions. It allows participants to vote for their preferred actions by using dots or other small stickers to identify the top options. Once the group has identified possible actions to take or options for addressing the topic, these are posted on a wall and participants are invited to get up and choose which actions they want to support by placing a sticker next to them.

Tips for using the dot exercise:

- Decide in advance or discuss in the group whether you will be deciding on one action or several.
- Provide everyone with a set number of dots each—one per person if one option is being chosen, several if not. Generally, three dots are sufficient.
- This can be a useful exercise for narrowing down options as well. If the group has identified a lot of possibilities, use this exercise to narrow down to the ones with the most support. Take away any that do not receive votes or select the top five or so.
- Consider using this exercise to vote for a book selection or topic for a future event.
- You can also use this exercise as an opener for a conversation. Ask a simple question with pre-populated answers around the room and have people respond by adding the dots. It helps people get moving and can serve as an icebreaker.

GALLERY WALK

➜ **Supplies:** Easel and paper, tape, markers

When a conversation has been going on for over an hour and you as facilitator wish to transition to discussing common ground, workable solutions, or takeaways, it can be helpful to take a brief break and encourage participants to do gallery walk.

The gallery walk asks participants to walk around the room and review the meeting's recordings, which are posted on the walls. As the facilitator, ask participants to review the recordings and think about the next step for the conversation. You may wish to share with them the next question you would like to pose so they can consider it while reviewing the recordings.

Note that the gallery walk only works when the recordings can be posted in large print on large sheets of paper around the room. It does not work well when notes are taken on a computer. Gallery Walks can be coupled with a refreshment break.

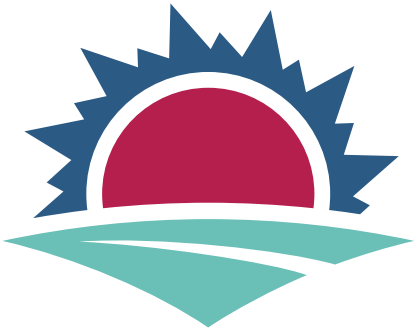
RECONVENING BREAKOUT GROUPS

When facilitating a large group, you may choose to break participants into smaller groups for their conversations. Once the main questions or topics have been discussed, you will want to reconvene the whole group for your closing. This can be done multiple ways.

- Ask people to share their reflections on their conversation.
- Have each group share one idea or takeaway from their conversation.
- Use easel paper for the groups to take notes. Have them post them and do a gallery walk.

What you choose to do may depend upon your goals and how you'd like to wrap up. The next section can offer additional guidance.

WRAPPING UP AND LOOKING FORWARD



CLOSING THE CONVERSATION

You've made it to the end. How do you close your conversation? This depends on your original goal.

- **Exploration:** If your conversation is exploratory in nature, end with a period of reflection. Ask participants to share something they learned, something that surprised them or that they might explore deeper after the meeting, or what common themes they heard in the conversation.
- **Decision-making:** When a conversation needs to end in a decision, the closing should surface this decision. Ask participants to reflect on the conversation and use one of the tools described in the previous section to help come to a decision.
- **Collaborative action:** As in a decision-making conversation, the closing of this conversation should surface a decision and identify actions and the people responsible. Make time at the end to identify who will be responsible for which actions so the conversation closes with clear next steps and responsible parties.

Once the above closing actions have been achieved, don't forget to thank your participants for their participation and let them know about any other next steps or additional conversations.

SO YOU'VE LED A CONVERSATION. NOW WHAT?

Congratulations! You've led your first conversation. What should you do now?

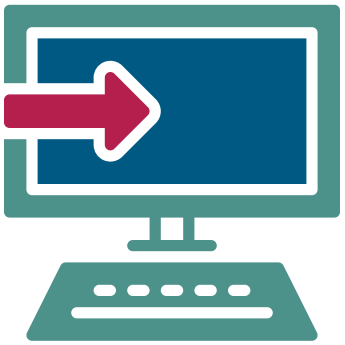
- **Reflect on the experience.** We learn best by practicing, so take a few minutes after your event to consider how it went, how you may improve your facilitation skills, and any adjustments you might want to make to the structure or questions for future conversations. This will set you up for success in the future.

- **Consider your next steps.** If the group is continuing to meet, what will the next conversation need to cover? If they are looking to take action, follow up with notes and any next steps they identified (and who will lead them). If this was a one-time event, is it something you would like to offer at the library again? What might the topic be for next time?

- **Thank people for their time.** If you facilitated a recurring meeting, send a follow-up email of thanks and any information they need.

- **Plan for the next conversation.** What do people want to talk about next? What is going on in the community that needs to be addressed? Start the process again and plan your next opportunity to facilitate.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FURTHER SKILLS-BUILDING



American Library Association's Libraries Transforming Communities Initiative

www.ala.org/LTC

Since 2014, ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative has reimagined the role libraries play in supporting communities. The LTC website contains free resources and webinars from several conversation models, including the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, Conversation Café, Everyday Democracy, and more.

NCDD Resource Center, Beginners Guide

www.ncdd.org/rc/beginners-guide/

The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation's resource center includes more than 3,100 resources from the field of dialogue and deliberation. The best starting point for new facilitators is the Beginners Guide, which features the very best resources for those getting started.

NCDD Resource Center, Engagement Streams Framework

www.ncdd.org/streams

The Engagement Steams Framework helps you navigate the range of dialogue and deliberation approaches available so you can select the right one for your situation. This reference includes a chart of approaches with information on the time needed, number of participants, expected outcomes, and more.

World Café, Art of Powerful Questions

www.theworldcafe.com/tools-store/store/

This comprehensive guide written by Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs explores the three dimensions of a powerful question—construction, scope, and assumptions—and offers sample questions for focusing collective attention, finding deeper insight, and creating forward movement.

NCDD Resource Center, Manuals & Guides

www.ncdd.org/rc/?category_name=manuals-guides&tag=highly-recommended

NCDD has collected some of the best how-to manuals and guidebooks for various topics. Not sure where to start in planning for a conversation? Peruse these materials to explore your options.

LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: FACILITATION SKILLS FOR SMALL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

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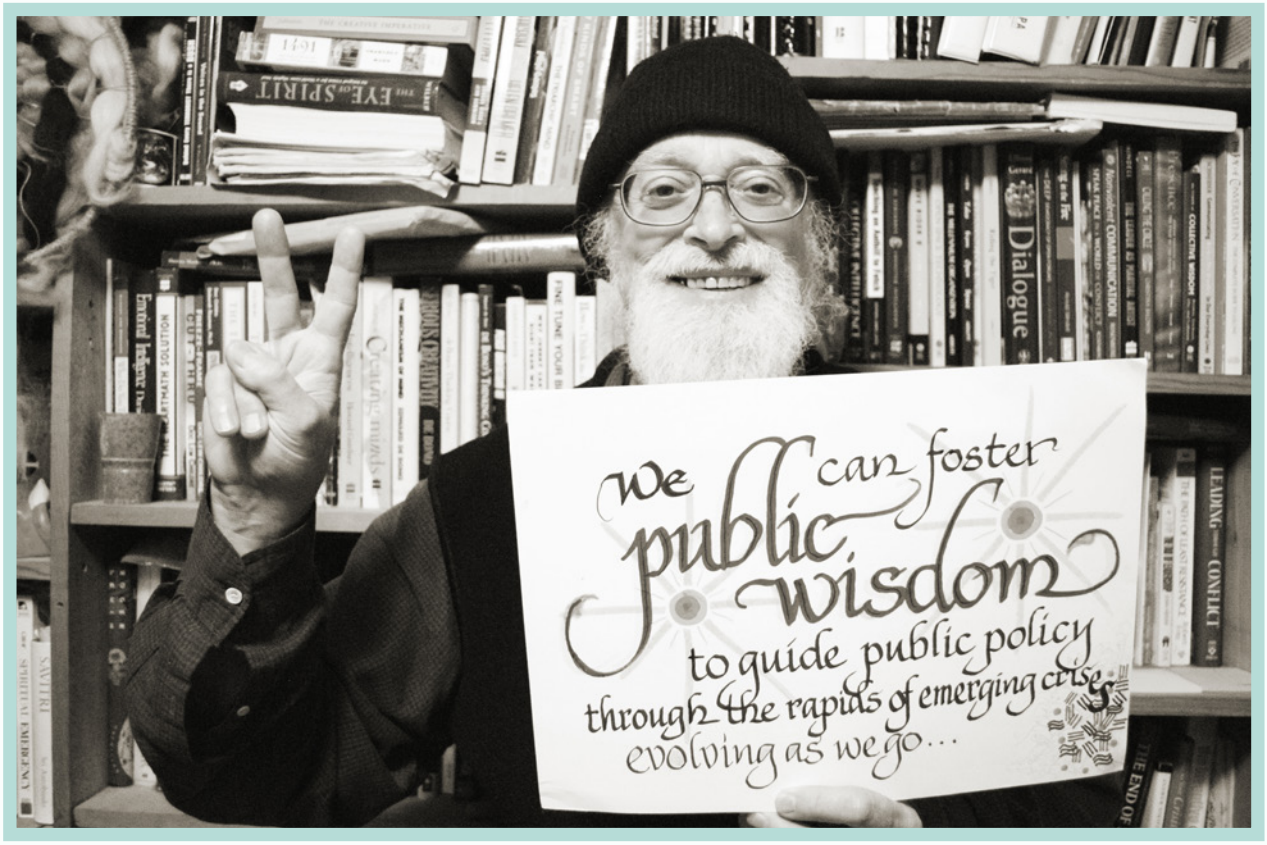

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