Conducting Your Community Dialogue

2002

The American Assembly
Columbia University

www.unitingamerica.org
Table of Contents

Letter of Invitation ........................................... 4
The Big Picture: Background and Purpose .............. 5
Getting Started: Five Easy Steps ........................... 6
  Identify an Issue for Discussion .......................... 6
  Establish a Vision of Success .............................. 7
  Define “Your Community” ................................ 7
  Decide How and Where to Meet ......................... 8
  Create Discussion Questions ............................. 9
Conducting an Effective Dialogue: Framework for Progress 10
  Phase 1: Welcome ........................................... 10
  Phase 2: Define the Problem Within “Your Community” 11
  Phase 3: Discuss Possible Solutions ..................... 11
  Phase 4: Build Consensus on Recommendations .......... 12
  Phase 5: Commit to Next Steps .......................... 13
    Wrap-up and Adjourn ................................... 14
Evaluate the Dialogue and Provide Feedback ............. 14
The Role of Each Community Dialogue Leader ........... 15
  Characteristics of a Good Dialogue Leader .............. 16
Sample Questions ........................................... 18
**Letter of Invitation**

I am writing to invite you to hold a dialogue in your community as part of The American Assembly’s National Dialogue, the culmination of our Uniting America series. We believe that these conversations in thousands of communities throughout our country can help reverse some of the most divisive forces in our society.

This manual is designed to help you organize and carry out a community dialogue about one of the issues in the accompanying report, Building a More United America. We expect these dialogues to address each community’s priority issue, explore a variety of solutions, and lead to the implementation of the recommended actions.

After holding your dialogue, we hope that you will share with us and the other participating organizations your results, lessons learned, and best practices. We will post these on our web site, www.unitingamerica.org, increasing the impact of the National Dialogue in several ways: others will be able to build on your success, you will equip us to present your findings to the appropriate local, state, and national policymakers, and, if you let us know of your Community Dialogue plans in advance, we can publicize your meeting on the web site. We ask that you fill out the National Dialogue Information Sheet located at the back of this manual, or its electronic version on the Uniting America web site.

We eagerly look forward to hearing of your accomplishments.

Thank you and good luck!

Very sincerely,
Daniel A. Sharp
President and Chief Executive Officer
The American Assembly

---

**The Big Picture**

**Help Make History: Join Our National Dialogue**

We invite you, together with other committed citizens and organizations from around the nation, to join us in Uniting America’s National Dialogue. Our goal is to strengthen and mobilize communities, and help build a more united America.


**Purpose of the National Dialogue**

The National Dialogue is designed to create a forum for you to meet with other community members to:

- Identify the issue from the Uniting America report that is most in need of attention in your community;
- Invite and hear points of view from involved parties and stakeholders;
- Find areas of common ground on which to build strategies for addressing the issue;
- Decide on actions to achieve positive change; and

**What Makes a Successful Dialogue?**

A successful dialogue involves bringing together a group of people with diverse (and often opposing) points of view for thoughtful discussion about the issue at hand. What makes The American Assembly’s dialogue process unique is its emphasis on...
building consensus. Participants are guided toward the largest possible circle of common ground on the major aspects of the dialogue, i.e., goals, solutions, next steps, etc.

**Getting Started**

**Five Easy Steps**

In this section we suggest five easy steps for starting your community dialogue:

- Identify issue(s) for discussion;
- Establish a vision of success;
- Define “your community;”
- Decide how and where to hold the meeting(s); and
- Create discussion questions.

1. **Identify Issue(s) for Discussion—What's Happening in “Your Community?”**

The report that accompanies this manual is a starting point for planning your dialogue. We suggest that you first read the report and then reflect on those situations within your community that are affected by the Uniting America series’ issues (i.e., equality of economic opportunity, religion in public life, strengthening families, racial and ethnic equality, and collaboration among the business, government and nonprofit sectors). Which of these issues are most pressing in your community? Focus on the facts, analyses, and recommendations in our report that are most relevant to that issue. In addition to the five Uniting America series topics just mentioned, you may also want to consider one or more of its overarching themes (media, education, values, technology, and leadership) as both a cause of, and cure for, these problems.

Although you may of course select as many issues from our report as you wish to discuss, we believe that in order to be effective, each meeting should ideally deal with only one issue at a time. Even one several-hour session is often not enough time to reach a meaningful consensus on recommendations and next steps for one issue.

When identifying your issue for discussion, don’t be constrained by the headings in the Uniting America report. For example, choosing religion in public life as a topic is probably too broad. A much narrower aspect of the topic may be easier to handle and more accurately represent your community’s dilemma e.g., how we teach about religion in public schools.

2. **Establish a Vision of Success**

Begin to think about a vision for the future as it relates to your issue. Where do you want to go? What aspects of this issue need to change and/or are standing in the way of progress? How do you visualize the end result? This exercise will help you prepare a framework for the dialogue’s purpose and set benchmarks and standards for success. It will also assist you in knowing whom to invite to the dialogue and what type of meeting to have.

3. **Define “Your Community”**

There are many ways to define a community for this dialogue. It could be your town, a school (including students, faculty, and administration), or a local chapter of a national organization. Or, it could be simply a group of people with similar interests. For the purpose of your dialogue, we recommend diversifying your community by inviting people and/or organizations with whom you might not always agree but who share your concerns about the issue in question. It is especially important to include people who are involved with the problem and its solution or are affected by
it and whose voices need to be heard if constructive change is to occur. All relevant stakeholders should be part of the solution; if they’re not, they could easily stand in the way of progress. Having different voices represented is essential for moving forward. Careful thought should be given to include racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological diversity as well as a cross-section of business, local government, academia, and nonprofit representatives.

Partnering with other organizations may be the easiest way to accomplish the needed diversity. This sort of collaboration can also provide useful information and additional resources. Look for groups that are already working on the issue you have chosen to address, either directly or indirectly. Examples could include local religious groups, neighborhood coalitions, youth organizations, and service clubs, among many others.

4. Decide How and Where to Meet
Consider which of the following might better encourage a dialogue and a consensus for action on the issue you have chosen:

- A regularly scheduled meeting of a local chapter;
- One or two special small group meetings;
- A series of meetings, either on the same topic or a separate topic each time;
- Large, public, town hall-type meetings with panelists and questions from the audience;
- A single, all-day conference; or
- A five-part series with one session allotted for each Unit 9 in America series topic.

Determining the location of a community dialogue may be an important part of its success in attracting the relevant participants and putting them at ease. The facility should be easily accessible and comfortable. Suggestions include your local library, schools, community centers, or places of worship.

5. Create Discussion Questions
A well-formulated set of discussion questions is essential to achieving useful results. Initial questions should seek to define and understand the problem. Once the group has a clear understanding of the problem, the conversation should turn to suggesting recommendations for policy and action. For example, what should organization X do about Y? Or, what should the city council do about Z? What am I willing to do to help accomplish these goals? A sample approach might include the following questions:

- How does this issue affect our community?
- How does the analysis in the Building a More United America report, Building a More United America, relate to our community’s experiences?
- How would the recommendations in Building a More United America impact our community?
- What other policy options are available for us to consider? (This is the brainstorming phase, when ideas should be collected before analyzing and evaluating each suggestion.)
- Can we agree on a consensus statement about which of these options we should take up?
- What are our next steps? What role will each of us play? Is there any person or group of people not present but who should be part of our proposed solutions?
Phase 1: Welcome

Introductions
Self-introductions are always a good idea because they help to create a sense of community within the assembled group. Time permitting, participants should state how their experience is relevant and describe their vision for the future as it relates to your issue (this may uncover topics for later discussion). Generally, participants should take no longer than one minute to introduce themselves.

Purpose and Process
Next give an overview of the session. Explain what will happen during the dialogue and make sure everyone is clear about why they are there. It is essential that participants understand the mission of the dialogue: to address the issue at hand and reach consensus on policy recommendations and actions necessary to move forward. Let them know that there will be time for feedback and evaluation at the end. Finally, describe the role of the dialogue leader(s) and set ground rules that assure respect for each participant's point of view, as well as a fair and balanced discussion. You may want to recognize that disagreement is often essential to reflect the views of the larger community. Also, setting a time limit for the meeting will help participants prioritize their comments and help you move the discussion through the phases in a timely fashion.

Phase 2: Define the Problem in “Your Community”

During this phase, dialogue leaders ask questions about the nature of the problem in the community (sample questions are on page 18 of this manual). The central focus of the discussion can be broad, such as racism, or specific, such as racial profiling. As previously mentioned though, dialogues are usually more useful when they focus on a specific issue.

The discussion leader should help the group understand how the problem presents itself in the community. Discussion leaders should ask participants to express their unique understandings of the issue, being as specific as possible. Sharing personal experiences and points of view is valuable because it improves the group's understanding of the issue and lays the foundation for moving toward agreed upon and effective solutions.

Once the problem is defined, the group should explore the reasons why it exists.

What are the underlying conditions that contribute to the situation?
What stands in the way of creating positive change?
Has anything been done in the past to attempt to remedy the problem? If so, why have those attempts either failed or not succeeded fully?

By the end of this phase, the group should have a working knowledge of the problem and understand the associated points of view.

Phase 3: Discuss Possible Solutions

Once the problem has been defined, participants should brainstorm potential ways to improve the situation. Brainstorming works best when the group puts all possible solutions on the table
before critiquing any of them. This encourages creativity and fosters a sense of security in those who might be afraid to express their ideas for fear of criticism.

During this phase, you may want to refer back to the Uniting America report for ideas. If the relevant recommendations in the report are not well suited to your community or if the group would like to pursue a different direction, participants should be encouraged to offer alternative solutions.

**Phase 4: Build Consensus on One or More Recommendations**

Once the group is satisfied that all possible remedies have been given, discussion should turn to the feasibility and effectiveness of the recommendations. If the issue you are addressing is broad, then multiple recommendations—each targeting specific aspects of the problem—might work best. If the issue is narrow, a few recommendations ranked in order of preference might be most effective.

**Consensus**

Consensus, by which we mean a majority or “the sense of the group,” is built through extensive deliberation that draws on each participant’s experience and views. The group should explore the pros and cons of each recommendation, as well as any tradeoffs that might be associated with them. Generally, it is not a good idea to vote on each recommendation to measure support. Rather, it is better to try to find a wide area of consensus, even if not unanimous. Voting is easier but limits the creative discussion of seeking common ground. Try to incorporate all participants’ views into the recommendation so that it is as agreeable as possible to the largest number of participants and yet is specific enough to be acted upon.

**Phase 5: Commit to Next Steps**

Before adjourning, it is highly recommended that you devise an action plan. You might begin by summarizing the consensus recommendations that emerged from the dialogue. Then you can identify next steps to be taken by individuals and/or the group to implement those suggestions. That is, who’s going to do what to support the recommendation(s) and achieve the desired outcome in your community? What will those present commit to do in their civic life? Will the group meet again? What are the next steps and what is the timeframe?

**Wrap-up and Adjourn**

There are many ways to close a discussion. You might provide time for participants to reflect on the most important thing they gained from the discussion, giving them a chance to think about what worked and what did not. This gives the group a sense of accomplishment and a point of reference for sharing more information and experiences. For example, you could ask for evaluations of the dialogue or about further thoughts generated during the discussion—ideas that were either side notes or that weren’t discussed because of time constraints and that may become topics for future dialogues. In every case, thank everyone for participating. We also suggest that you collect participants’ contact information so that you can create a mailing list.
Evaluate the Dialogue and Provide Feedback

Share and Learn

We urge you to share your successes (and challenges) with other communities and with The American Assembly. In this way, we can learn from each other as we work to create positive change community by community.

Please go to www.unitingamerica.org and/or fill out the National Dialogue Information Sheet at the back of this booklet to share the following:

- The issue(s) chosen for discussion;
- Names of co-sponsoring organizations and/or characteristics of participating groups;
- Discussion questions;
- Format used;
- Key policies and conclusions of your dialogue;
- Agreed to action plan;
- Lessons learned and best and worst practices for organizing and executing a community dialogue; and
- Any other information that may be helpful to others holding dialogues.

The same form can be filled out in advance of your community dialogue if you want us to publicize it on our website.

The Role of Each Community Dialogue Leader

Facilitators for Dialogue

Dialogue leaders do not need to be experts on the issue(s) being discussed; you should however be among the best-prepared persons present during the discussion. Dialogue leaders keep the group focused on each phase until it is completed. Your job is to encourage participation, help the group identify and build on points of consensus, and recommend solutions. We suggest that you:

- Think ahead of time about possible directions the conversation might take; and
- Prepare discussion questions to help the group stay focused on a discussion that will lead to recommendations and actions, not merely dwell on the problems. Use the sample questions beginning on page 17 of this manual as a starting point and add follow-up questions of your own as needed.

A good dialogue leader ensures that participants continue to discuss each question posed to them until some resolution is achieved or until the group decides that no further progress is possible. Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity. If a majority of the group agrees, then often it’s time to move forward, as long as any minority view has been adequately heard and considered. As the discussion leader, you guide the dialogue and should be impartial, not favoring one person or point of view. Personal opinion can be offered, but only when you have made it clear to the group that you are acting in your role as a participant, not as a discussion leader.

We recommend that the dialogue leader draw on the facts and analysis contained in Building a More United America as appropriate, to inform the discussion and develop recommendations and an action plan to achieve them.
**Characteristics of a Good Dialogue Leader**

- **Sets a relaxed and open tone at the start.** The dialogue leader should welcome everyone, create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, and ask people to briefly introduce themselves, especially noting their background as it relates to the issues to be discussed.

- **Stresses the importance of confidentiality.** Dialogue leaders should create an environment in which participants are comfortable sharing their real feelings and views by requiring confidentiality. One of your ground rules could be that participants agree that nothing said during the dialogue will be attributed later to any of the participants once they leave the session.

- **Maintains a balance of participation.** By monitoring how well participants communicate with each other (who has spoken, who hasn’t), you can prevent the dialogue from being dominated by one viewpoint or a small number of participants. All participants should have an equal opportunity to share their thoughts.

- **Follows and focuses the conversation flow.** It is often helpful to pursue in greater detail topics raised during the introduction phase that are directly relevant. You may also decide to let discussion range freely beyond the designated questions but will want to guide the conversation back to achieve useful results in the time allocated. To help keep the group focused on one topic at a time, occasionally restate the question or issue under discussion.

- **Builds consensus.** You may find it helpful to encourage the group to interact immediately once a participant has expressed a key suggestion that you think might eventually produce consensus. You might ask whether or not the group agrees with a specific recommendation made by a participant and focus the discussion on that point until it is resolved before moving on. Or you may need to say that no agreement is possible on an issue and move the group to another point so that the discussion does not become repetitive or discouraging.

- **Does not fear silence.** It is all right if people are quiet for a while. The group may just be thinking and will often find its own way toward useful discussion.

- **Accepts and summarizes expressed opinions.** Dialogue leaders should mention that there are no right or wrong responses. Rather, the search is for solutions on which most can agree. One way to show acceptance and respect is occasionally to restate what is heard and to convey the feeling with which it was shared. This should encourage more responses from participants.

- **Anticipates conflict and sticks to the ground rules.** When conflict arises, or if some participants seem uncomfortable, you may want to explain that conflict and disagreement over ideas is not only expected but also often helpful and creative. You may find it helpful to establish ground rules of mutual respect and mention that the purpose is a cooperative search for solutions.

---

2 Provide bilingual translation, if necessary. You may want to provide materials that are translated into the participant’s first language, or recruit bilingual discussion leaders.
Sample Discussion Questions

Starting Points for Discussion

Below we suggest sample discussion questions to help you in planning your community dialogue. They correspond with the issues and questions asked in the body of our report, Building a More United America. Because many questions in the report are either theoretical or aimed at national policy, we prepared the following examples to illustrate how you can convert these more broad questions to suit your specific local situations. We then offer more general discussion questions that relate to each major topic in the report, i.e., the economy, religion in public life, etc.

Specific Questions:
The discussion of immigration policy and globalization in the body of the report could lead to a question like this...

- Describe how immigrants are treated in our community. How should we deal with local businesses and other employers to protect their rights?

- We know that local church X is interested in running a faith-based drug treatment center and could likely qualify for a grant from the government to do so. Although some vocal people in our community have expressed opposition to this initiative, substance abuse is an issue in our community. Can we negotiate a way for church X to operate the drug treatment center so that the majority of stakeholders are satisfied? Would this be good for the community?

This approach could be applied to all of the questions found in Building a More United America so that they are relevant to your dialogue. When designing your discussion questions, we encourage you to be as specific as possible about how the issue affects your community.

General Questions:

Economic Opportunity and Growth

- What events, policies, and/or trends have specifically affected the economy in our community? How would you describe the resulting situation? Have these impacted some groups more than others? Have they increased or decreased economic opportunity and for whom?

- On which aspect(s) of this issue do you want to focus our discussion and recommendations for improving the situation?

- What policies or practices by local government, businesses, or other organizations could help improve the situation?

- Are there impacts on youth that are different from those on older citizens of our community? How can we involve youth in economic discussions and decisions?

- What actions and policy changes can we recommend that will help improve the equality of opportunity while also improving economic growth in our community?

- In our community are there groups of people who are at a disadvantage because of circumstances beyond their control such as opportunities limited by racial or ethnic identity, or socio-economic status? To what extent should society, via government, seek to redress disadvantage? What circumstances outside a person’s control should we collectively find appropriate to remedy?

Religion in Public Life

- What role does religion play in the public life of our community? For example, are we satisfied with how religion is treated in
Racial and Ethnic Equality
- What is our vision of racial and ethnic equality in our community?
- In what areas, if any, have we achieved this vision? In what areas have we failed?
- What is preventing us from realizing this vision?
- What aspect of race relations in our community most concerns you? Describe the situation.
- What can we suggest to improve this situation?
- What other aspects of racial and ethnic equality in our community are most important and feasible for us to address?
- What specific steps need to be taken for this situation to improve and who should take them?
- Would it be helpful to involve youth in this discussion and encourage their participation in the solution? How can we involve them most helpfully?
- What else can we recommend to improve the situation?

Collaboration Among Government, Business and nonprofits
- To what extent, and in what ways do business, government and nonprofits work together on our community issues and problems?
- How can collaboration among the three sectors more effectively engage and address community issues?
- Can you cite some specific examples of times when we’ve seen all three sectors come together in our community for a common cause?

Strengthening American Families
- What roles do government, business, civil society, and nonprofit organizations play in family life in our community? And how do they affect family life in our community?
- Which aspect of family life in our community is most in need of our attention?
- What suggestions can we make that might improve the situation? For example, is the proposal in Building a More United America for a 60-hour workweek divided between a couple a helpful or feasible idea? If so, how could we help get it implemented? Would improved and affordable services (i.e., child care, health care, job training, etc.) help? If so, who can help us achieve this goal and how?
- Are there other suggestions that could help strengthen family life in our community?
- Who should be involved in this conversation that is not represented here today?
- Which organizations should play a role in improving the quality of life for our families?

Which aspect of religion in public life in our community is most important for us to discuss?

Which role, if any, should religion play in business and corporate governance, nonprofit organizations, academia, citizen action, and science and technology?

What recommendations should we make to clarify the way religion is involved in the public life of our community? Should our public schools teach about religion? If so, in what ways?

Which aspect of religion in public life in our community is most important for us to discuss?

Which role, if any, should religion play in business and corporate governance, nonprofit organizations, academia, citizen action, and science and technology?

What recommendations should we make to clarify the way religion is involved in the public life of our community? Should our public schools teach about religion? If so, in what ways?
On what other issues can multi-sectoral cooperation achieve important progress in our community? In what way?

Can we identify specific leaders (people from each sector) in our community who can spearhead or facilitate these projects and help bring the sectors together?

What can we suggest that will encourage the sectors to collaborate more often and/or more effectively in our community?

Community Dialogue Information Sheet

The American Assembly’s National Dialogue: Building A More United America

This form requests information that will serve two purposes. First, it enables you to tell us about your participation, this is a good way to publicize your event since we will post that information allowing others to learn from your experience. We plan to gather all such incoming reports and federal policymakers, as appropriate.

Please check one: □ Pre-dialogue publicity □ Post-dialogue report

Contact Details:

First Name: Last Name: Title:
Organization: Email Address:
Town/City: State: Zip Code: Phone Number:
Additional Information:

Information about Your Community Dialogue:

Date of your event: Town/City: State:
Number of participants: Are additional participants welcome? □ Y □ N
Primary issue:
Secondary issues, if any:
Participants (organizations, groups, etc. and characteristics):
Format:
Major discussion questions:

Please detach this form and fax to: 212.870.3555, attn.: Kristin Sullivan, or

On what other issues can multi-sectoral cooperation achieve important progress in our community? In what way?

Can we identify specific leaders (people from each sector) in our community who can spearhead or facilitate these projects and help bring the sectors together?

What can we suggest that will encourage the sectors to collaborate more often and/or more effectively in our community?