

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION TOOLKIT



A Resource designed by Edmonton's Capital Region Interfaith Housing initiative (CRIHI)

Created March 2016

About This Toolkit

Unhealthy conversations regularly cause a breakdown of both community and relationship. But when a conversation goes really well, it enables a release of tension, a healing of rifts, a stronger flow of community life, and it fuels collaboration. So often it is not just that a topic is difficult that it causes controversy, but because of how we choose to talk about it. CRIHI assembled this toolkit to help neighbourhoods and faith communities learn how to have healthy conversations around tough or complex topics.

About the Interfaith Housing Initiative

Our organization was formed in response to a City of Edmonton and Province of Alberta commitment: the Ten-year-plan to End Homelessness. Faith leaders from across the city came together to say, "Addressing homelessness is important to our communities too! How can we help?"

Since that time, our organization has been mobilizing neighbours and faith communities to engage meaningfully in the complex task before all of us.

"There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

*Ask "what's possible?" not "what's wrong?"
Keep asking!*

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

*Talk to people you know.
Talk to people you don't know.
Talk to people you never talk to.*

Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know. Real listening always brings people closer together. Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

*Rely on human goodness.
Stay together."*

- Margaret Wheatley



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Gaining the Corner on the Obvious

One mark of a good listener is to be able to reflect back clearly what has been expressed so that the other party knows it has been heard. So it is in community conversations. Anyone leading a conversation should make it their goal to gain the Corner on the Obvious”; to reflect back to the group the clearer patterns and insights that have come forward from the discussion. This shows that the leader truly has been listening, and that builds trust!

From the book, *Community Conversations*, by Paul Born

Basics for getting it right!

Neutrality The person leading the conversation (the facilitator) must play a neutral role. The facilitator can ask questions of clarification to help a group delve more deeply, but *must not* weigh in with opinions for the duration of the conversation.

Diversity For the wisest result, a healthy cross-section of voices should be invited to the table. Be sure to acknowledge all participants as equals who have an important voice that must be heard.

Safety Create a safe space by establishing clear rules, and by choosing an appropriate conversation model that enables every participant to both hear and be heard.

Patience Resist the tendency to rush or to control things. Plan enough time to allow for ‘slowness’ where good thinking and reflection can take place. If it becomes too busy, feel free to call for a silent pause in discussion to give space for people to reflect on what they think is important.

Listening Emphasize that everyone has something to contribute, so we must all be able to both hear and be heard.

Next steps Listening creates expectation for action. A measurable set of next steps must become clarified and implemented as follow-up to the conversation.

What would you like to see happen?

- * Relationship building
- * Engaging members
- * sharing information
- * Talking through something difficult
- * Setting a direction
- * Working out a plan

Figure out your goals and objectives, and then plan your conversation to help you get there!

Take aim for a GREAT conversation!

Set your target on your ideal outcome

Discover your ideal outcomes by finishing the following four sentences:

- 1) Coming into this conversation, we see the following needs and challenges...
- 2) Inside this conversation we want people to engage with each other in these ways...
- 3) At the end of this conversation, we want these things to be clear...
- 4) Following this conversation, we want these things to happen...

Building towards a real conversation

- ◆ Your answers to questions one and two will help you determine the style of conversation you should use.
- ◆ Your answers to questions one and three will help you determine your focus question(s) and the information to provide.
- ◆ Your answers to question four will help you determine how you will chart your next steps and your plan for follow-up action.

Now to craft our focus question(s)

The best way to get people talking is to ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with 'yes' or 'no' or a single right answer.

- 1) Brainstorm many possible questions aimed at generating what you want to be clear. Try to make your questions specific for better results. Choose one or more as your focus question(s).
- 2) Arrange the order of questions around the four movements (p.4). Use sticky notes so that you can move things around.
- 3) Rehearse! Walk through the questions, imagining the participants and the range of answers they may have to each one.
- 4) Revise your plan to make it simpler.

Planning the Conversation

Step One: Choose a style of conversation

Consider the goals you set, especially around the question that fits with what you want to see happen, and then consider one of the following options as a possible fit:

1. Talking Circle—enables a collective flow of community wisdom.
2. Conversation Café—promotes healthy interaction around shared questions.
3. Quaker Straw Vote—helps get the issues out on a contentious topic.
4. Consensus Workshop—gathers the collective wisdom of the group and enables a joint commitment to a general direction.
5. Roman Carousel—for building a body of knowledge on several topics.

Detailed conversation descriptions on pages 6-9 of this resource.

In four movements

Whatever style you choose, be sure to include the following movements:

Informing—Provide appropriate and clear information that will enable a good discussion.

Reflecting—Make time for individuals to respond ‘from their gut’ to the information presented.

Interpreting—The group must process together why this is important and what it means.

Deciding—the group should agree on next steps and lay out the plan to get there.

Step Two: Arrange your logistics

- ◇ Book the time and place
- ◇ Tables and chairs
- ◇ Technology
- ◇ Refreshments
- ◇ Access to restrooms.
- ◇ Clarify the Plan (Agenda etc.)
- ◇ Background Information (ideally provided in advance)
- ◇ Posting rules and guidelines
- ◇ Supplies (pen, paper, handouts, flipcharts, white board etc.)

Consider booking a space with a prospective partner organization like a school, a local faith community, a local community league, a housing complex or even a local business.

These four elements reflect the structure of human thought as found in the science of Phenomenology.



Step Three: Get the word out!

Try to promote your event from as many directions as possible, as your budget allows. Which of these would be most effective in your case?

- ◇ Door to door mailings
- ◇ Website and social media
- ◇ Personal invitations
- ◇ Local newspaper
- ◇ Electronic event invites (by email or by apps like Eventbrite, Facebook or Meetup)

Ready... Set... Relax!

These four ingredients help people settle in for a relaxed and fruitful gathering

The Agenda

A straightforward agenda helps build trust and soothe anxiety. Be sure to give people a clear and simple overview of the agenda at the start of the meeting and ensure you finish on time.

Sample Agenda

12:00	Welcome and Introduce the Agenda
12:05	Icebreaker
12:15	Brief Presentation
12:25	Respond in working groups
1:00	Coffee break
1:15	Working Group Reports
1:40	Determine next steps
2:00	Adjournment:

Icebreakers!

Help people start talking to dispel nervousness and tension. The right questions can also help people start to think with greater openness and creativity.

1. Get people talking about something dear to them: "Come up with a word starting with the first letter of your name that describes what you are proud of in your neighbourhood."
2. Word pictures are both wonderful and powerful: "Come up with a metaphor to describe what it's like living on your street."
3. Help open people's imaginations by asking something like this: "Share something about your past that would surprise others in the group."

The Opening Presentation

As you plan this piece, remember:

- ◆ **Focused, simple and clear is better.** Try to boil down the main points and stay away from too much detail.
- ◆ **Provide what is needed** to enable an informed conversation
- ◆ **A word picture or story** that highlights the central topic is helpful to engage people's interest and investment.
- ◆ **Don't get preachy!** Focus on presenting the information and stay away from interpreting the data or prescribing the response. Let those things come out in the conversation.
- ◆ **No shaming!** Be sure not to devalue or shame anyone's opinions so that everyone feels safe to engage fully and honestly.

Post Some Clear Rules!

1. **Everyone has wisdom**
2. **We need everyone's wisdom for the wisest result.**
3. **There are no wrong answers**
4. **The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.**
5. **Everyone will hear others and be heard.**

The Talking Circle

A staple in Canadian Indigenous leadership circles, the talking circle shows up in many cultures around the world. Restorative Justice groups also feature this style as a natural way for people to listen to each other and to nurture a collective flow of community wisdom, action and healing.



Participants typically sit in a circle on chairs or on the ground with no table or other obstructions. People take turns speaking with no interruption. Ordinarily, the conversation goes around the circle twice, but more is certainly permitted if there is time and interest.

Here's what this might look like...

Sample Agenda

Introduce Welcome and Agenda

Brief presentation on key information needed to discuss the topic at hand, followed by brief questions of clarification.

The rules: One person speaks at a time with no interruption. Take as much time as you like, but respect everyone's time. When it is your turn, please add your insights. Do not comment on anyone else's ideas (neither criticism or praise). If you do not wish to speak, we can pass you by. Questions and ideas will be quietly recorded to aid us later on.

Round one: *Name your fears and/or excitement when it comes to having new neighbours or new affordable housing developments in our community.*

Highlight questions raised. Typically, the host will direct specific questions to the party who may be able to give an answer. (Not every question needs to be answered, but should be noted)

Round two: *Please share what you have heard us say. If you are able, share any ideas you have for how we can respond to what we have learned together.*

Next steps: Group identifies specific actions (if any) that seem to flow out of the conversation, and finds people willing to perform them.

Or try this!

Recruit a group of six or more volunteers to sit in the centre and have a conversation, while the rest observe from the sidelines. After a full round is complete, have outer and inner circles trade places. This allows people who are less confident in speaking to have time to consider what they want to say.

Talking Circle Strengths:

Enables good and respectful listening, even in very contentious situations.

Prepare in advance:

1. Adequate seating
2. Questions posted visibly and in their language(s)
3. Designate a host.
4. One or two volunteers to privately record questions and insights from the conversation.
5. A plan for helping the group determine next steps and follow-up. (pages 10-11)

The Conversation Café

Simple and easy to plan, the Conversation Café is also one of the more natural ways for people to talk together deeply, with opportunity to listen and respond in a free-flowing way to each other's fears, ideas and questions.

People sit at tables where they are presented with a menu. That menu might feature a question for them to consider together. Each group has space to record their observations; either by designating one person to stay at that table and take notes, or by scrawling their observations (key words, phrases, images and symbols that reflect ideas emerging in their conversations) on paper tablecloths. After a time, members move from that table to another to reflect on the same question with a new group of people. Ordinarily, a second 'course' is presented with another menu question for people to consider.

Conversation Café Strengths:

A relaxed setting enables easy and comfortable free-flowing conversation.

Prepare in advance:

1. Ensure you have a space with adequate seating and refreshments.
2. Prepare a menu with the questions you would like discussed, and post rules (p.5)
3. Arrange for a facilitator to host at each table to record questions and insights. Alternatively, you could provide paper tablecloths and markers for individual note-taking.
4. Have a whiteboard or flipchart handy in order to collect insights from each table during the debrief portion of the event
5. Plan next steps (pages 10-11)



On the Menu

An Appetizer:

Our icebreaker question

First course:

How do you feel about affordable housing projects in your neighbourhood?

Second course:

What are our responsibilities as neighbours?

Dessert:

What we learned together

It moves like this:

Welcome – five minutes

Question one: Round A – twenty-five minutes

Question one: Round B – twenty-five minutes

Introduce Question Two – five minutes

Question two: Round A – twenty minutes

Question two: Round B – twenty minutes

Closing: Group debrief – twenty minutes

Total time: two hours

From *Community Conversations* by Paul Born

The Quaker Straw Vote

This style aids in identifying where people stand and their degree of conviction. It then provides opportunity for them to speak to each other's concerns.

Each person receives four voting cards with coloured paper representing different positions: Green – yes!; Blue – yes, but...; Red – No, but I won't stand in the way; Black – No! I'll be six-feet under before I let that go! The chair or facilitator will then host a conversation asking the person why they voted as they did, and asking another person to share what they would say to that person to help resolve their concerns. From time to time, the vote is recast in order to track the flow of thought in the room.



Straw Vote Strengths:

Helps get the issues out! Enables people of diverse opinions to engage with each other's ideas in a thoughtful and respectful way.

Prepare in advance:

1. The focus question for the group. (yes/no)
2. The coloured cards, and what each colour represents.
3. Appoint a chair/facilitator
4. Post clear rules (p.5)
5. Plan for next steps

The Consensus Workshop

Gathers the wisdom of participants, and builds for a consensus on what the group's collective action should be.

Time: 1.5 hrs. (Requires a facilitator trained in this method)

It moves like this:

Sample Focus question: *What would a healthy neighbourhood response to a new affordable housing project look like?*

1. Individual response time – 5 minutes to record gut reaction on a sheet of paper.
2. Table listens to each individual and then chooses several main responses for sharing with the larger group.
3. Responses are submitted on cards in batches to the facilitator and clustered together in a visible way as the group thinks best.
4. As main themes and points begin to come clear, the group helps frame key summaries of each area.
5. Next steps are charted. Facilitator provides a follow-up report to the participants.



Consensus is...

Commitment that arises from clarity, understanding and support for one another's ideas. It is NOT 100% agreement.

From ICA Associates

CW Strengths:

Enables everyone to contribute in a meaningful way, and to come on board for joint action together.

Prepare in advance:

1. Basic information
2. Focus question
3. Supplies: cards (5x8"), markers, sticky wall or empty wall space with sticky tack, pens and paper
4. Post clear rules (p.5)
5. Plan for next steps

The Roman Carousel

A number of different topics are assigned to different tables for group discussion. Each table group then considers that topic and formulates some thoughts and ideas. At the appointed time, each table sends the secretary and facilitator to visit with other tables as ambassadors to field the group's thoughts and records responses. Rotation continues until they return to their own table. Each table group then formulates a report of their findings.



Roman Carousel Strengths:

A body of knowledge can be built on a number of topics within a relatively brief timeframe. Each topic is given space for deep thought, and everyone has the opportunity to learn and contribute their own ideas to the final result.

Prepare in advance:

1. Ensure you have a space with adequate seating and refreshments.
2. Three to five topics for the group to discuss and accompanying focus question for each.
3. Appoint a secretary to take notes recording the group's insights and ideas. Provide either pen and paper or markers and flipchart paper.
4. Provide a facilitator for each table to serve as that group's ambassador. Should be a person comfortable in public speaking.
5. Plan for next steps (p.10-11)

It moves like this:

Situation: A community is considering building a new facility.

- I. A brief presentation is given outlining the history and identified needs that have prompted this conversation. (10 minutes)
- II. Four different table groups then consider the proposed project from different angles: (40 mins)
 - A. Finances. Explore possible sources of funding for the building and ongoing maintenance of the facility.
 - B. Programming needs. Include programming and revenue-generating enterprises.
 - C. Space design. Identify the elements of a space that is welcoming to a diverse community.
 - D. The big picture for what this facility might look like and how it would fit within the fabric of the neighbourhood.
- III. Snack break (15 minutes)
- IV. The ambassador and secretary from each table field their group's thoughts to the next table. Rotation to continue every ten minutes until the whole circle is complete. (40 mins)
- V. Each table formulates their findings and recommendations. (15 minutes)

Total time: (2 hrs)

Time to wrap things up!

Ensure your conversation was productive by including these elements:

ONE: Help them summarize what they heard from each other.

Ask the group to shout out 2 or 3 quick answers from different people around the following questions: (Be sure to have someone write their answers down!)

From *DiverseCity*

1. What were some of the words and phrases that someone else used that caught your attention? (Quick! What else! Something else! Just call it out!)
2. What were some larger patterns or themes you heard? What specific ideas stand out?
3. What was one of the deeper insights you personally got out of this discussion? (Somebody else?) Clarify learnings by reflecting ideas: “So you’re saying... Did I hear you correctly?”

TWO: Determine follow-up actions/tasks and next steps.

Listening creates expectation for action. Now we ask: What do we need to do (or do differently)?

1. It is sometimes appropriate for those planning the conversation to suggest some next steps such as: a report for information; follow-up conversations or designating working groups in response to what the group has learned.
2. Assist the group in generating some concrete tasks to perform in response to their learnings. Some possible tools might include:
 - ⇒ Each table group could generate three to five main tasks to record and share with the larger group; written out on cards, a flipchart sheet or spoken verbally and recorded at the front of the room.
 - ⇒ Individually participants could contribute ideas on sticky notes or verbally, which would then be grouped with other similar ideas by the leader.

THREE: Help the group allocate energies to specific actions.

Frequently, a group will identify many possible responses and actions to take. If the group does not have the capacity to pursue all of them, priorities must be set clarifying what we agree to do together? Then we ask: “Who will do what and when?”

1. To decide what tasks to pursue, cluster similar ideas together and then have the group vote on them. Two tools: Dot Voting, or Multi-Voting. *explained on the next page.*
2. If work is to be done, the group should decide who will do it. Have people sign up to work on specific tasks or areas that fit with their interest and training. If no one steps forward at this time for a task, it could be dropped, hired out, or someone recruited to help put it together.

Let the group decide!

A reminder for whoever is facilitating the conversation: Your job is to host this conversation in as neutral a way as possible. You should not weigh in with opinions for the duration of the conversation. That includes voting on actions or the direction!

Your job is to oversee the process so the group can have a good conversation. Let the group decide where to go and how to get there, or you will endanger the group's faith in the whole process.

Dot-voting

- 1) Have the group share ideas for what should be our actions around this.
- 2) Then stream the ideas as they line up together to remove duplication. Group ideas by numbers or letters if need be.
- 3) Give people a small number of coloured dot stickers and ask people to vote on where energy should be focused. If you like, different colours could be provided for first, second and third choice. (option: have people put their initials on their stickers)



Build group consensus by asking...

- 1) Which one's hard? Which one do we have to win on?
- 2) What assumptions did you make when you placed your vote?
- 3) How would you summarize what the whole group's priorities are?

Multi-voting

- 1) Stream action ideas to reduce duplication. Assign numbers or letters to show those that fit together.
- 2) Clearly number all remaining ideas (or use letters)
- 3) Decide how many votes each person will have. A good rule of thumb is to allow each person a number of votes equal to one-third of the total items on the list. I.e. If there are fifteen items on the list, each person has five votes.
- 4) Have each person write their preferred numbers (or letters) on a piece of paper.
- 5) Collect the pieces of paper and tally the votes for each item.
- 6) Eliminate the items with the fewest votes. If there is no obvious separation between items, simply eliminate any that fall in the lower third of the ranking.
- 7) Repeat this step until there is an obvious favorite or until there are a few clear favourites at the top of the list.
- 8) Stop the vote and have the group discuss the results so as to build consensus on the clear way forward.

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Additional Resources

Community Conversations, second edition, by Paul Born, 2012

The Workshop Book, by R. Brian Stanfield & ICA

The Art of Focused Conversation, General Editor: R. Brian Stanfield

Websites

Affordablehousingedmonton.ca

Icacan.org - Website for ICA Canada

www.edmontonsocialplanning.ca

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Religious and spiritual communities working to end homelessness in Edmonton and area