

Conducting a Community Dialogue

The following process is a useful method for structuring community dialogue.

Preparing for the Dialogue

Select a site that can readily accommodate 20-35 persons. The room should be set up with participants seated in a circle. This encourages participation by all persons in attendance.

Notification should be clear and given in a timely manner so as to avoid confusion. Care should be taken that the time and place facilitate as broad attendance as possible. In some communities, several different venues and schedules will be required to engage stakeholders with differing schedules or lifestyles.

Beginning the Dialogue

Set the tone prior to opening the dialogue session by greeting participants when they arrive, arranging for clear signage and offering light refreshments. Helping people feel comfortable upon arrival and communicating to participants the importance of their presence can go a long way toward the more difficult work of building trust and commitment.

Open the meeting with an explanation of MAPP and why dialogue is important. The meeting should then be turned over to the facilitator(s). Skilled facilitation will play a particularly large role in helping to create an environment of trust, commitment and openness at the outset. It will also provide for timely introduction of dialogue skills and practice when required.

Checking-in is a very simple way of breaking tension and encouraging broad participation. This may be as simple as beginning the meeting with a question such as "Why is this meeting important to you?" or "What needs to happen here today in order for this meeting to be a success to you?" and allowing each person in the room to introduce themselves and briefly respond. The value is to honor the various voices that are present in the room, rather than allowing the meeting agenda to drive the outcome. Observing a similar protocol at the end of the meeting (check-out) helps to bring closure and ensure that all voices have an opportunity to be heard.

Content of the Dialogue

A trained facilitator will broadly frame the focus of the group and help important themes and issues to emerge. For instance, a dialogue around quality of life issues or the mapping of community assets may stimulate participants' ideas of community assets or quality of life. Through discussion, participants will be able to identify areas of agreement and disagreement. As new insights emerge, they should be captured and clarified.

Follow-up and Sustaining the Dialogue

Sustain the dialogue over time by using sign-in sheets to facilitate follow up, summaries of brainstorming or other types of sessions and possible outside information sources. For example, the Community Health Status Assessment may reveal some data that are surprising to the community, and having that data clearly available in a timely way will make the community dialogue more productive. In all likelihood, this responsibility will fall to a lead agency or community partner at the outset, but as the process continues, the participants will increasingly assume this role.

References:

Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities. *Healthy People in Healthy Communities: A Dialogue Guide*. Chicago, IL: 1999

Daniel Martin. *The Spirit of Dialogue. International Communities for the Renewal of the Earth*: 1999.