

## Facilitating A Community Dialogue Basic Guidelines

### I. The Dialogues

A community dialogue or focus group is a guided conversation among neighbors, colleagues or friends, or simply people who are convened because they have something in common or opinions and ideas considered valuable to the process. The conversation is facilitated and structured around a series of pre-determined questions designed to elicit input about the hopes, concerns, ideas and recommendations of participants who usually have a stake in the outcome of the plan. Diverse ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest are generated in a relaxed environment that “*fosters the expression of different points of view, with no pressure for consensus*” (Focus Groups: Background and “How To” Guidelines, 1995).

#### Why is a community dialogue useful?

- A group dialogue tends to generate rich information, as participants’ insights tend to “prompt” the sharing of others’ personal experiences and perspectives in a way that can more easily or readily tease out the nuances of complex subjects.
- Provides information directly from individuals who are invested in the issue; from people who can provide insights about actual conditions and situations.
- Provides a representation of diverse opinions and ideas.

#### What are some limitations?

- Community dialogues could be susceptible to facilitator bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of findings.
- Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.
- They generate important information. However, such information often cannot be generalized to a whole population.

### II. The Dialogue Facilitation Team

#### The Facilitator

A facilitator is not a teacher. His/her role is to help or “facilitate”.

A facilitator is not a leader who directs the group to where he/she thinks it should go. Instead, the facilitator helps the group to reflect on their knowledge, opinions and experiences, and creates a safe and comfortable environment where they can share ideas and provide recommendations.

#### Roles and Responsibilities

- Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested
- Monitor time and use limited time effectively
- Use prompts and probes to stimulate discussion
- Use the questions effectively to ensure all topics are covered
- Politely and diplomatically enforce ground rules:
  - Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable

- Limit side conversations
- Encourage one person to speak at a time

### **Qualities of an Effective Facilitator**

- Have good listening and observation skills
- Can foster open and honest dialogue among diverse groups and individuals
- Can remain impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)
- Can encourage participation when someone is reluctant to speak up
- Can manage participants who dominate the conversation
- Are sensitive to gender and cultural issues
- Are sensitive to differences in power among and within groups

### **The Recorder / Note Taker**

#### **Roles and Responsibilities of Note Takers**

- Act as an observer, not as a participant
- Remain impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)
- Coordinate logistics. Bring:
  - Materials to record the input, including writing utensils (more than one, in case a pencil breaks or a pen runs out of ink) and paper
  - Chart paper pad, easel and markers of different colors for recording information.
  - Tape for affixing chart pages to the wall, as needed.
  - Recording equipment: a tape recorder, extension cord, extra tapes, and extra batteries
- Ensure that ground rules for the group are written clearly and neatly on a chart (it may be helpful to do this beforehand)
- Assist the facilitator in arranging the room (e.g., seating, chart stand and paper, placement of the ground rules, etc.)
- Record ideas, comments and observations from the group as they are expressed (refrain from editing or injecting your own perspective)
- **Record the discussion.** Ideally, dialogues will be recorded using both tape recording equipment and the hand-written notes of a note taker. Hand-written notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion. The note taker may also play a key role in keeping track of time.

#### **Effective Note Takers:**

- Have good listening and observation skills
- Have good writing skills
- Are able to take notes that are comprehensive and accurate.

### **III. Guiding Principles for Facilitating Community Dialogues**

***All participants are equal***

Each group member is considered equally important. Take into account the participants' literacy level and physical challenges, and work out ways in which everyone can participate fully.

### ***There is no one right answer***

This means that there can be many correct answers or results.

### ***A Safe and Comfortable Environment Is Essential***

- ✓ Make people feel at ease throughout the dialogue. Ice breakers can help create the right atmosphere and build group spirit. Make sure that people can talk to one another easily. Use a circle where possible.
- ✓ Try to encourage the active participation of each group member. Be careful not to find fault or make critical comments when you respond to people.
- ✓ Seek agreement from all members of the group about respecting confidentiality. Assure that, as facilitator, you will not attribute comments to any particular member and that member names will not be attached to any particular statement in the meeting notes.

### ***The Participants as Experts***

Individuals are invited to participate in community dialogues because they are viewed as possessing important knowledge or experiences. Let participants know that you are there to learn from them. Remember to thank participants for their time and contributions. Let them know that the information they shared is valuable.

### ***Listen Carefully to Participants***

Active listening allows you to probe effectively and at appropriate points during the dialogue. Active listening involves not only hearing what someone is saying, but also noticing body posture and facial gestures (i.e., any changes in nonverbal behavior) that might provide cues as to the appropriate or necessary ways to engage participants.

### ***Show Participants That You Are Listening***

Looking away, yawning or frequently checking your watch will most likely make participants feel that you are not paying attention. If participants suspect that you are not listening to them with great care, they may not elaborate or provide much detail with their answers.

### ***Importance of Neutrality***

While showing participants that you are actively listening and interested in what they are sharing, you will also want to remain as neutral or impartial as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about an issue. Use phrases such as "Thank you. That is helpful." Comments such as "I can't believe it!" or "You really think that?!" are not appropriate remarks for a facilitator to make, because they infer your opinion and impose judgment on the participant, which will shut down discussion.

You want to gather information that is as honest as possible. If participants sense that you have an opinion, they may want to change their responses so that they will seem more socially desirable, rather than reflect what they truly believe or feel about a topic.

### ***Silence Encourages Elaboration***

Allowing silence at times encourages elaboration by participants because it gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information. However, it is important to strike a balance between keeping the conversation moving (so that you use your time well) and allowing participants adequate time to share and process what has been shared.

### **Use Probes and Clarifying Questions**

Probes and clarifying questions are an important part of facilitating a dialogue. They help clarify what a participant has said and get more detailed information on topics of interest. Probes allow the participant to provide more than just a one-sentence answer to the questions you ask. Using probes for clarification helps you to gather good information while avoiding the assumption that you understand the meaning of a key word, phrase, or perspective of the participant.

Some good examples of probes used to help clarify what a respondent has said include:

“Please tell me (more) about that...”

“Could you explain what you mean by...”

“Can you tell me something else about...”

**Probing in Not Finishing Their Thoughts** - Again, you want to show that you are there to listen to what they have to say. Interrupting the respondent may influence how they answer and if they answer the questions you ask.

**Good Probing is Not Leading** - It is important to avoid asking questions that are leading, meaning that they reflect your opinions or assumptions about a topic.

An example of a leading question is “Don’t you think...” This presents to the respondent that you have an opinion, not that you are there to learn from them as an unbiased listener. This type of questioning may lead the respondent to answer questions according to what you expect to hear, rather than how they really feel. The respondent may also want you to look at them in a favorable way, matching your opinions rather than sharing what they truly believe or have experienced.

**Keep the Dialogue Moving** - It is also your job to politely move the conversation forward when what a respondent is sharing is less useful given your questions. Sometimes, it is possible to do this by listening for a segue, a statement that the respondent makes that is relevant to another question or set of questions. Other times, you may want to acknowledge that your time together is short and there are other topics to explore, and, for this reason, you need to move on.