



HARWOOD

The Institute for Public Innovation

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION WORKBOOK

Presented in collaboration with American Library Association



www.theharwoodinstitute.org

©2013

ABOUT HARWOOD

ABOUT THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonprofit that teaches and coaches people and organizations to solve pressing problems and to change how their community works together. Based on more than 25 years of innovating with communities, The Harwood Institute has developed a proven practice used in thousands of communities nationally and worldwide.

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS SERVE TWO IMPORTANT PURPOSES:

- They are a turned outward way to authentically engage members of the community.
- They generate Public Knowledge that can then be used to inform decision-making of all kinds.

ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY TO UNDERSTAND:

- People's aspirations for the community;
- People's concerns;
- How people think and talk about a given issue in relation to the community;
- The changes needed to reach our aspirations for the community; and
- What people believe we can do, and who they'd trust to take action.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION THEMES HELP INFORM HOW YOU:

- **Engage the community** – inviting new people opens the door to new relationships
- **Find new partners** – sharing Public Knowledge creates coalition opportunities
- **Develop strategies** – working on the issue AND building capacity to work together
- **Mobilize resources** – creating natural pathways for people to contribute

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

THE VALUE OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

Public Knowledge:

- Roots your work and decisions in what matters to people.
- Identifies key issues and their connections in language that people use.
- Uncovers a sense of common purpose.
- Enables you to set realistic goals.
- Public knowledge informs your choices so your work is more relevant and has greater impact.
- In most communities, few leaders or organizations HAVE Public Knowledge.
- Too often we substitute expert knowledge for Public Knowledge.

Public Knowledge	Expert Knowledge
Comes from engaging with people around their aspirations, their concerns, how they see their community.	Comes from professional analysis and reporting of statistics, trend data, poll data, market and audience studies.
In plain language that everyone can understand.	Often in language that only professionals understand.



NOTES

PLANNING THE CONVERSATION

The ideal size for these hour long conversations is between 8 and 15 people. To get that many, invite at least 20 people as some will be unable to make it. If fewer than 8 show up, that's fine. Go ahead. It'll be worth your time. If more than 20 show up consider breaking into two groups.

DECIDE WHOM TO INVITE

These conversations are a powerful way to get to know different parts of the community or learn from voices not usually heard. Think about what you want to learn. Do you want to get a general understanding of how people see the community. If yes, then invite a broad group of people to come and talk. This is a great starting point. Maybe you want to get a better sense of how a specific group of people or people from a certain part of town think and talk about their community? Then you will want to be a more targeted in inviting people. Any of these options is fine. No matter what you choose, remember since these are conversations, not rigorous academic research, you do not need a random or demographically representative sample.

After you've identified who you want to engage, think about the individuals or groups who could help you reach those people. Ask yourself:

- Who knows the part of the community or the people we want to talk to?
 - Staff, volunteers, board members
 - Partners and their staff
- Who already brings people together? Think about asking for help from:
 - Local businesses: barber shops, beauty parlors, diners
 - Religious leaders, congregations, choirs, prayer groups
 - Book clubs, gardening groups, parenting groups, neighborhood associations
 - Groups like YMCA, Rotary, the PTA, unions

TIPS FOR GETTING PEOPLE TO COME

- Invite people personally and encourage your staff and partners to do the same
- Contact people on your email lists or via social media
- Ask people to suggest others to invite (friends, neighbors, and peers)
- Set clear expectations in the invitation (see next page)
- Follow up by email or phone to determine how many people are coming
- Where possible try to invite people at least 2 weeks before the event

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

As you invite people to the conversations it is important to set clear, realistic expectations. These are different from the conversations most groups hold, so it is helpful to explain what these conversations ARE, and what they ARE NOT.

First, what these conversations ARE:

- 90 minute to 2 hour conversations that help us better understand the community and how we can restore our belief that we can get things done, together.
- Focused on learning. We pledge to follow up with you after the conversation to share what we've learned and how we will use that information.

Secondly, what these conversations ARE NOT:

- A Town Hall, academic research or a focus group - they are conversations.
- Sponsored by a political party, a business development effort.
- About trying to sell a particular solution or approach.
- A gripe session.

SUGGESTED COMMUNITY CONVERSATION INVITATION TEMPLATE

We are hosting a Community Conversation at _____ (location) from ____ (start time to end time) on _____ (date). (IF YOU HAVE A PARTNER HELPING YOU – BE SURE TO MENTION THEM HERE)

This conversation is one of several that we'll be having with people across the community. Each one is a chance for us to better understand people's aspirations for their community, the concerns they have and what they believe might make a difference in strengthening the community. We'll take what we learn from these conversations and use it to help make our work in the community more effective.

We can't promise the conversation will lead to a new program, or policy. We pledge to get back to you with what we learned and let you know how we'll use what we heard.

Hopefully you'll be able to join us. If so, please RSVP to ____ (person) ____ at ____ (contact info) ____ so we can be sure to have enough refreshments on hand.

Thank you.

PS. For more information don't hesitate to contact ____ (person) ____ at ____ (contact info) ____.

WHERE TO HOLD COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Site location can have a big impact on the success of your community conversation. The setting can affect who attends each community conversation, the quality of the conversation, and the group’s ability to get its work done. Ensure that the invited participants will be comfortable in the chosen location.

LOOK FOR A PLACE THAT:

- Folks are familiar with and use frequently.
- Is considered to be part of the community – that is usually not a government or “official” place, nor is it often a school.
- Has a second or third room available if you need to divide up a large group.
- Is available in the evenings and/or on weekends.
- Offers a comfortable environment.
- Is not too noisy or full of distractions.
- Is easily accessible to all participants: plenty of parking, centrally located, safe, near public transportation, accessible to those with disabilities.
- Is affordable given project resources.

GOOD AND LESS IDEAL PLACES TO LOOK FOR SITES

Here are some examples of both good and less desirable places for the community conversations. This is not an exhaustive list — think about other potential good sites for the community conversations in your area.

Good	Less Desirable
Public libraries	City hall
Community centres	Government buildings
Places of worship	Schools
Community organizations (YMCA, etc)	Fancy hotels
Recreation Centers	Office buildings (especially after hours)

TRAITS OF CONVERSATION LEADERS

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF A CONVERSATION LEADER

The main responsibility of a Conversation Leader is to create an environment that enables you to learn about the community and people's aspirations. It's more than just running a meeting. Good Conversation Leaders are curious listeners, focused on creating a conversation where people can discover and learn from one another and to explore their own ideas.

An effective Conversation Leader:

- **Remains neutral about the topic** under discussion — is **not seen as having his or her own agenda** or siding with one group.
- **Explores ideas with people — displays a genuine sense of curiosity.**
- Listens to people and builds trust.
- **Pushes people to consider different perspectives** — helping folks to understand why others think in different ways.
- Helps people reconcile conflicting remarks in a non-confrontational manner.
- Has experience leading or facilitating group discussions.
- **Stays focused on the goal of the conversation** - this is about *learning* not promotion.
- Prepares for each conversation by reading the guide and going over notes from previous conversations.

NOTE: Conversation Leaders do not need to be expert on these issues. They are there to guide, not participate in, the conversations.

TIPS FOR LEADING CONVERSATIONS

To get the most out of the conversation you want to go beyond people's surface reactions. Here are several rules of thumb to use when leading these conversations:

Take nothing at face value: Notice the words and phrases people use. Probe by asking, "What do you mean?" and "What are you getting at?"

Listen for where people get stuck: Watch for places where people need more facts or where a perception blocks prevents them from saying more about a concern.

Engage people early on: Make sure everyone says something early on. Ask people what they think about what others are saying.

Ask people to square their contradictions: Illuminate what folks are struggling with. Ask, "I know this can be a really tough issue, but how do the two things you said fit together?"

Keep juxtaposing views and concerns: Pointing out contrasts will help people articulate what they really believe and give you a deeper understanding of what they think.

Help keep the conversation focused: Help people stay focused. Remind participants what they are discussing. Don't let things get too far afield.

Piece together what people are saying: Folks won't make one all-inclusive statement about what they think. Say, "This is what I'm hearing. Do I have it right?"

Keep in mind the "unspoken" rules: Different conversations and spaces have their own sets of "rules." Check the level of trust people have and what it means for how you should interact.

Watch out for your own preconceived views: Everyone has biases that can filter our questions and interpretations. Be alert to them.

TIPS FOR LEADING CONVERSATIONS

TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE

IF	THEN
<p>A few people dominate the conversation</p>	<p>Engage each person from the start. Make sure everyone says something early on. Ask, “Are there any new voices on this issue?” or “Does anyone else want to jump in here?” Be direct and say, “We seem to be hearing from the same people. Let’s give others a chance to talk.” Call on people by name to answer.</p>
<p>The group gets off on a tangent or a person rambles on and on</p>	<p>Ask, “How does what you’re talking about relate to our challenge?” or “What does that lead you to think about (the question at hand)?” Ask them to restate or sum up what they said in a few words. If you can’t get a person to focus, interrupt him/her when they take a breath and move to another person or question. Then bring him/her back into the conversation later.</p>
<p>Someone seems to have a personal grudge about an issue and keeps talking about it</p>	<p>Remind the person where the group is trying to focus. Ask him/her to respond to the question at hand. Acknowledge the person and move on. Say, “I can understand where you are coming from, but we need to move on.” If the person continues to be disruptive, interrupt them. Say, “We heard you, but we’re just not talking about that right now.”</p>
<p>People argue</p>	<p>Don’t let it bother you too much — it’s okay as long as it is not mean-spirited. Find out what’s behind the argument — ask why people disagree, get to the bottom of it. Break the tension with a joke or something funny. Stop to review the ground rules. Take a break.</p>
<p>People never disagree or are “too polite”</p>	<p>Play Devil’s advocate. Bring up or introduce different or competing ideas and see how people respond. Tell the group you’ve noticed that they don’t disagree much and ask if everyone is really in as much agreement as it seems.</p>

CONVERSATION GROUND RULES

HAVE A “KITCHEN TABLE” CONVERSATION

Everyone participates; no one dominates.

THERE ARE NO “RIGHT ANSWERS”

Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs - you do not need to be an expert.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Listen carefully and try hard to understand the views of those who disagree with you.

HELP KEEP THE DISCUSSION ON TRACK

Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.

IT IS OKAY TO DISAGREE, BUT DON'T BE DISAGREEABLE

Respond to others how you want to be responded to.

HAVE FUN!

SETTING UP THE CONVERSATION

1. INTRODUCTIONS

- Introduce yourself.
- Thank any groups or individuals involved in setting up the conversation.
- Thank the participants for coming.

2. SET EXPECTATIONS

- Over the next few months, we will be holding conversations like this one with people across town to talk about their aspirations, their concerns, and how we can move forward.
- Tonight's conversation is a chance for us to better understand how you see things in our community.
- We can't promise to create a new program based on this conversation. We will promise to get back to you with what we learn tonight and how we'll use it.
- These conversations usually last between 90 min. and 2 hours though sometimes folks want to talk more.

3. REVIEW THE GROUND RULES

- Review the Ground Rules. Ask do those rules work for everyone?

4. EXPLAIN YOUR ROLE AS CONVERSATION LEADER

- Tonight, my role is to ask questions that help us have a good conversation. I won't participate or offer my views – this is a conversation about what you think.
- To be sure I get what you're saying, I may ask follow up questions, or play "Devil's advocate."
- To make sure we hear from everyone, I may ask you to hold off on comments at times.

5. IDENTIFY THE NOTE TAKER

- We have someone (point them out) taking notes tonight. The notes won't include anyone's name or be made public, they're to make sure we catch what you're saying.

6. GET STARTED

- Before we get started – please tell us your first name, where you live, and what you like to do in your free time.

QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a community do you want?

- Why is that important?
- How is that different from the way things are now?

2. Given what we just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?

Decide which issue is most important for the group and use it for the discussion.

If you are going to test a specific issue introduce it here.

How about _____, how does that fit with what we're talking about? What concerns do you have about that?

3. What concerns do you have about this issue? Why?

- Does it seem like things are getting better? Worse? What makes you say that?
- How do you think the issue/concern came about?

4. How do the issues we're talking about affect you personally?

- What personal experiences have you had?
- How about people around you – family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, others – what do you see them experiencing?
- Are some people affected more than others? Who? In what ways? Why?

5. When you think about these things, how do you feel about what's going on?

- Why do you feel this way?
- How do you think other people (in different parts of town) feel about this?

QUESTIONS

6. What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?

7. When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

- What do you think these things might accomplish?
- How about in terms of individuals: What are the kinds of things that people like us could do to make a difference?
- What's important for us to keep in mind when we think about moving ahead?

8. Thinking back over the conversation what groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?

- Why them and not others?

9. If we came back together in 6 months or a year, what might you see which would tell you that the things we talked about tonight were starting to happen?

- Why would that suggest things were changing? What would it mean to see that?

10. Now that we've talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?

- What do you feel you'd like to know more about that would help you make better sense of what's going on and what should be done?
- What kind of follow-up would you like out of this discussion?

THE ROLE OF NOTE TAKER

THE MAIN RESPONSIBILITY OF A NOTE TAKER

The main responsibility of a Note Taker is to capture key insights, ideas, themes, turning points and quotes from the community conversation. Note Takers work with Conversation Leaders to identify themes within conversations and across several conversations.

NOTE: Don't try to write down everything you hear (it's not a transcript). Nor should you just summarize a few points. The goal is to capture details, key quotes, turning points and patterns that can be used to create themes.

An effective Note Taker:

- Is curious about how people think about the world.
- Is observant - noting what people say, how they say it (the emotion, tension or doubt) and even what people aren't saying (what's being ignored).
- Captures the essence of the conversation without inserting their own voice, words or judgment.
- Is good with details (like the specific words that people are using) AND able help translate that into larger themes.
- Stays focused on the goal of the conversation - "what are we learning?"

After the conversation:

Immediately after the conversation talk with the Conversation Leader to compare notes. Ask:

- "What did you make of the conversation?"
- "What ideas, actions or comments really seemed to resonate with the group?"
- "What did you notice in terms of the group's energy and emotion?"
- "What quotes stood out for you? What do we need to write down while it's fresh?"

KEY STEP: Be sure to organize your notes. After the conversation, **the Note Taker should organize their notes into 6 categories: Aspirations, Main concerns, Specific issue concerns, Actions, Who people trust, Questions.** These categories will be critical for identifying themes and implications later in the process.

TIPS FOR NOTE TAKING

WHAT TO LOOK AND LISTEN FOR

During conversations, look and listen for these key concepts to help you better understand what participants are saying. **The goal is to not just hear what participants are saying, but to understand why they are saying that** (as well as what they might not be saying).

- Starting points:** What are participants' initial thoughts and perspectives? How do their starting points differ with where they end the discussion?
- Language:** What words do participants use? How is their language distinctive?
- Body language:** Are participants engaged or do they hang back?
- Emotions:** What feelings do participants bring to the table? How strongly do they feel these emotions? What emotions prevail in the conversation?
- Common ground:** Where do folks agree? How strong are these areas of agreement?
- Tension:** Where do participants disagree? What is at issue for them?
- Ambivalence:** On what issues are participants torn and why?
- Obstacles:** What emotional, factual, or perceptual barriers are preventing participants from moving forward? How intractable are these barriers?
- Connections:** What issues do participants seem to link together?
- Hidden story:** What are participants not saying? What is going on beneath the surface that drives what people are saying?
- Turning points:** Where were you able to break through in the conversation? What questions or issues triggered that?

NOTE TAKING TOOL

Use this note taking tool during conversations to capture the key points voiced. Do this carefully. It's critical to understanding and getting the most out of the conversation.

Afterward, take the time to talk with the Conversation Leader to compare insights - this will strengthen your notes.

Aspirations
Main Concerns
Specific issue concerns
Actions
Who people trust
Questions

- 1. What kind of a community do you want?**
(listen for aspirations)

- 2. Given what we just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?**

- 3. What concerns do you have about this issue? Why?**

- 4. How do the issues we're talking about affect you personally?**
(look for connections people make between ideas)

- 5. When you think about these things, how do you feel about what's going on?**
(listen for emotions and intensity and for places where people voice a sense of hope)

NOTE TAKING TOOL

Aspirations
Main Concerns
Specific issue concerns
Actions
Who people trust
Questions

6. What do you think is keeping us from making the progress we want?
(listen for barriers in the community, or in the nature of relationships)

7. When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?
(listen for what gives people hope, who they think could/should act)

8. Thinking back over the conversation what groups or individuals would you trust to take action on these things?

9. If we came back together in 6 months or a year, what might you see which would tell you that the things we talked about tonight were starting to happen?
(listen for what gives people confidence, where they see a place for individuals to act)

10. Now that we've talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?

ORGANIZING YOUR NOTES

Review and combine your notes from the different conversations. Organize them into 6 categories. It's okay if these are fairly long, or overlap. You want to keep things broad here so you can see patterns. You'll be narrowing and clarifying as you go. Have notes in a form that will be easy for people to access and use (e.g. electronic file they can print and bring with them)

Aspirations (for the community, their children)

Main Concerns (top of mind concerns about the larger community)

Specific issue concerns (those concerns related to the issue you're exploring)

Actions that would make a difference

Whom do people trust to act

Questions people have

“MAD LIB”

One of the best ways to make sense of what you’re learning and stay focused on the essence of your community conversations is to try and tell a story about what you’re hearing in language that people use everyday. A clear story combined with personal examples from Community Conversations is a powerful combination of Public Knowledge you’ll use regularly.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION MAD LIB

People want _____ (aspirations) _____, but they’re concerned that _____ (main concerns) _____. As people talk more about those concerns they talk specifically about _____ (specific issue(s)) _____. They believe we need to focus on _____ (actions) _____ and if _____ (groups) _____ played a part in those actions that folks would be more likely trust the effort and step forward.

GETTING STARTED WITH CONVERSATIONS

GETTING STARTED WITH YOUR FIRST COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

The most important step you can take here, is to get out into the community and get started. Use your first conversation as a way to build up momentum and get your feet wet.

For the 1st Conversation

- Where can we get started?
- Where could we hold a conversation and simply get a feel for what these are like, and get moving?

Potential Locations for the 1st Conversation	Person responsible for identifying location	Finalize location by (date)

Groups/ individuals to help recruit for our first conversation	Person responsible for recruitment	Finalize recruitment plan by (date)

Conversation Leader	Note Taker(s)	Person responsible for coordinating	Finalize leader and note taker by (date)

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION WORK SHEET

Use this worksheet to pull the key details behind hosting conversations into a single place.

The conversation will be with:
(for more on this see page 5)

The conversation will be held:
(for more on this see page 7)

Time

Place

The conversation leader is:
(for more see page 8)

The note taker is:

Tips

- Arrive one hour early. Leave time to set up the room before people arrive.
- Put up signs to direct people from the main entrance to the meeting room.
- Have a sign-in sheet for participants. Have people fill this out before the conversation.
- The room should be well-lit; not too bright. Make sure the room is a comfortable temperature.
- Make sure the room has tables. Tables signal we're doing work; and it's easier to take notes.
- Provide blank name tents for people to write their name. Encourage folks to use first names.
- Put refreshments in a location easily accessed without interrupting the discussion.
- Find the rest rooms so you can tell people where they are before the discussion begins.

Supplies to bring with you to the site

- Extra pens/pencils
- Name tags and table tents
- Sign-in sheets
- Paper to make signs
- Charts and easels (if needed)
- Refreshments
- Copies of the ground rules

FOLLOW-UP COMMUNICATIONS

SUGGESTED TEMPLATE FOR FOLLOW-UP COMMUNICATION

Thank you for coming to the Community Conversation on ___(date) ___.

We appreciate you sharing your time and insights. As promised, we wanted to share with you what we heard and learned and how we're thinking about using that moving forward.

From the conversation it seems like people want ___ (aspirations for the community) ___ but right now ___ (concerns)___ make that difficult. It was also clear that people believe there are steps we can take – things like ___ (actions) ____. Does that fit with how you saw the conversation?

Moving forward we are going to pull together what we're hearing and learning from different conversations and we will ___ (how you are going to use what you've heard) ___.

Thank you again for taking time to come to the conversation. We'd love to stay in touch as we move forward.

If you have any questions about the conversation or our work, don't hesitate to call ___ (person) ___ at ___ (phone) ___.

Sincerely,