

# Promoting Civil Discourse: Questioning Techniques for Community Dialogue

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## Overview

In the last 25 years, much of the mediation field has been dominated by logical, problem-solving approaches to dispute resolution. In processes such as that popularized in Fisher and Ury's *Getting to Yes*, parties in conflict identify common or conflicting needs and interests and then negotiate over various options to arrive at a solution that will meet those needs. This approach assumes that the issues are negotiable, solutions are available and that the goal is resolution.

But not all disputes lend themselves to traditional conflict resolution processes. In fact, many of the conflicts in our communities over values, politics and religion may never be resolved. Rather than being resolved, these conflicts may need to be managed through mutual understanding, reconciliation and shared meaning. This approach to conflict begins with an opportunity for meaningful dialogue.

Social constructionist theory posits that all truths or realities (including conflict) are created through social discourse. The stories we tell both create and reinforce our perceptions of reality. Parties in conflict tend to have conflicting stories which, when told and re-told, serve to polarize and perpetuate the dispute. Therefore, to resolve a conflict requires that the disputants develop (or "co-author") a new story about their relationship. In this approach, conflict is less a problem to be solved and more a series of meanings to be managed. In the communication, problem-solving and dispute resolution fields, the social constructionist influence is seen in a variety of trends that employ the use of storytelling and dialogue:

- Conversation Cafes
- Dialogue and Deliberation
- Public Conversations Project forums
- Collective Inquiry
- Victim/Offender Reconciliation

These trends have drawn attention to the importance of questions in promoting community dialogue. Following is a list of questioning techniques to help people groups conduct conversations on difficult issues.

## Questioning Techniques

### **Establish ground rules**

Dialogue happens when the parties (and the mediator or facilitator) enter into a conversation about each other's stories. As opposed to argument or debate, dialogue involves a sincere desire to understand the point of view of another person. Ground rules can help people focus on understanding rather than on persuading or blaming.

#### Examples:

- Ask questions from a desire to understand, rather than to make a point.
- Ask questions only about topics that the other party has introduced.
- Ask only for information that the questioner does not already know.

### **Help people tell their stories**

People in conflict are tempted to make other people the problem. By encouraging them to speak from their personal experience, dialogue facilitators can reduce the defensiveness normally experienced by people discussing a conflict.

#### Examples:

- *How has this conflict impacted you personally?*
- *Can you describe an experience that reflects what this issue means to you personally?*
- *What in your experience has brought you to the views you have on this issue?*

**Facilitate opportunities for the parties to ask questions about and reflect upon each other's stories.** When in conflict, parties tend to talk to each other without truly communicating. Look for opportunities to ask questions to foster deeper understanding of the various points of view.

#### Examples:

- *Jane, how do you see the situation differently now that you've heard John's story?*
- *John, what in Jane's story most surprised you?*
- *Jane, what would you like to ask John about his perspective of the conflict?*

**Externalize the conflict.** Develop questions that help identify the conflict as something outside of the individuals in conflict. This can help the parties in a conflict be more likely to work together against the conflict rather than against each other.

#### Examples:

- *How has this conflict impacted your community?*
- *What has been the biggest threat of this conflict to your neighborhood?*
- *What is your hope regarding what this group could do together to address this conflict?*

**Find exceptions to the conflict stories.** In some processes, such as narrative mediation, the neutral may ask questions to help deconstruct or create uncertainty in the conflict narratives. These types of questions are meant to identify exceptions to their stories, underlying assumptions, or misunderstandings.

Examples:

- *Has there been a time that you have had misgivings about your position on this issue?*
- *Have there been times that, despite these difficulties, you have been able to work together? How has this been possible?*
- *What do you feel people have misunderstood about your perspective?*

**Help the group draw meaning from the dialogue.** Structure dialogues allow the participants to end the discussion by expressing what the conversation meant for them.

Examples:

- What will you carry away from this conversation?
- What next steps do you see for these discussions?
- How has this dialogue impacted you?

Questions are a key factor in the success of any dialogue process. In order to be effective, dialogue questions should:

- Reflect the impartiality and neutrality of the facilitator
- Be non-judgmental
- Focus on people's experience and perceptions of the issue, rather than on solutions
- Be likely to surface new information for the participants
- Be framed in a way that promotes understanding rather than blaming or arguing

## Resources

Conversation Café

<http://www.conversationcafe.org/>

Conflict Research Consortium

Transformative Approaches to Conflict

<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/transform/>

Conflict Resolution Information Source

Narrative Mediation

<http://narrative-mediation.crimo.org/>

Let's Talk America

<http://www.letstalkamerica.org/aboutus.htm>

“Narrative Mediation: An Exercise in Question Asking”

by Angela Nagao and Norman Page

<http://www.mediate.com/articles/pageN3.cfm>

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

<http://www.thataway.org>

Public Conversations Project  
[www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org)

*Corder/Thompson & Associates is based in Austin, Texas. Judy Corder and Mary Thompson provide facilitation and dispute resolution services to a variety of public and private clients. They have designed and facilitated decision-making forums on topics that include strategic planning, partnering, team relationships, regional planning, organizational mergers, and public policy development. CTA also provides training programs in the areas of group facilitation, basic mediation, advanced mediation, and mediation ethics. For more information, visit [www.corderthompson.com](http://www.corderthompson.com).*