



## Small Group Dialogue Discussion Guide

### Engaging Differences in our Communities

In today's world, we are highly connected by social media and technology, and yet, we feel more disconnected than ever. Our politics are polarized, our media is partisan. Too often, families are divided and friendships strained. Americans from across the country and political spectrum are alarmed by the bitter divisions in our country. Just when we think our politics can't get worse, we find a new bottom.

The [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#) (NICD) believes the American people will be our saving grace. We are less divided than we seem and hungry for respectful reconnection with each other and a constructive approach to politics. We want to rekindle Americans' conviction that engaging our differences constructively is essential to fulfilling the promise of our nation. Doing so will require Americans to begin listening and engaging with one another again.

NICD, a non-partisan institute based at the University of Arizona, is dedicated to addressing incivility and political dysfunction in American democracy by advancing transformational change. NICD has created this short discussion guide to support a conversation between two people who have different political perspectives and who are interested in respectfully engaging these differences.

This guide offers tips to:

- Learn to listen and build relationships--especially with people of different views;
- See each other as a people first and foremost before any of the political thinking enters the conversation;
- Talk about what steps we can take to build community and engage differences locally.

As Americans seeking to create a more perfect union, we have often come together around common values of freedom, liberty, fairness, equality, safety, family, faith and opportunity. We thank you for participating in this conversation - only through building connections of understanding with each other, and community to community efforts – can we constructively engage our differences.

### How to Get Started

A small group can consist of a few friends, neighbors or colleagues who know each other, or it can be composed of representatives from two different groups that generally have different points of view. Examples of people who might come together from different groups are members of separate religious denominations or campus clubs that may hold different political views. Groups can meet almost anywhere as long as it is a comfortable, safe space and

conveniently located [**If your conversation will take place during a time of social distancing, use an alternative option such as Skype, Zoom, etc. to hold your conversation virtually**]. Most small group dialogues will last about an hour. It is helpful if one of the members of the group volunteers to serve as a facilitator to keep the conversation on track.

1. Identify a group of people who are interested in participating, it may be a group you are a part of (a club, civic group, religious organization, etc.).
2. After the group confirms their participation, identify a second organization that likely has a somewhat different political perspective. If you know someone in that organization, contact them about the possibility of arranging a dialogue. If you don't know anyone personally, send an email or make a call to the group's contact person explaining the idea of a small group dialogue on engaging differences.
3. Arrange a time and place to meet that is convenient to everyone involved. One group can host the discussion, or it can be held in a neutral location, like a public library [**or virtually if your conversation will take place during a time of social distancing**].
4. Decide whether you will have an outside facilitator or if you or someone else in the group will lead the discussion.
5. A day or two before the dialogue follow up with those who have agreed to participate and make sure everyone is clear about the purpose and informal nature of the discussion.
6. Ask the facilitator to follow the suggested conversation flow and make sure everyone who is present has the chance to talk and share their views.

## **Discussion Guide**

### **Tips to Enhance the Dialogue**

The goal of the conversation is to gain a better understanding of the different viewpoints and life experiences the participants share with each other. Really listen to what each person has to say. The focus is on understanding what people are saying, not trying to change their opinions.

- Hold the conversation in a safe, neutral, and comfortable space [**or virtually if your conversation will take place during a time of social distancing**].
- Agree on an end time for the conversation. If people want the conversation to continue you can schedule another conversation.
- Use personal experiences to help share your viewpoint.

- Listen to understand someone’s perspective, not to respond to what they say.
- Pay attention to the feelings that are behind someone’s words.
- Ask questions for clarification or further learning.
- Acknowledge what you have heard by summarizing or repeating back some of what the other person said.
- Avoid nonverbal cues or comments that shows disinterest or discounts another’s beliefs and experiences.

### Overall Flow of the Dialogue

- Brief Introduction
- Discussion Question #1
- Discussion Question #2
- Discussion Question #3
- Closing comments

At the start of each segment the facilitator/discussion leader should pose an initial question and get brief responses from each person in the group. After each person has the chance to briefly comment on the question, the group can transition to an open discussion using some of the follow up questions below.

### Purpose and Introductions

Facilitator/discussion leader begins:

- *Thanks for coming. As you know, the purpose of this discussion is to bring together people of diverse views to talk about what we might do to engage our differences more constructively.*
- *Our discussion will focus on three questions that allow us to reflect on what we have in common, and what we gain when we work together. There are a few brief ground rules we’d like to introduce to make our conversation as productive as possible:*
  - *Listen carefully and try to understand the other person's point of view*
  - *Don't rebut, challenge or try to change anyone else's mind*
  - *Show respect even when you disagree*
  - *Share air time equally – keep comments brief and provide the opportunity for everyone to speak*
- *Before we begin the discussion, we want to take a few minutes to learn a little about each other. Please take no more than one minute to introduce yourself by sharing your:*

- *Name, where you live and how long you have lived in this community.*
- *What are some of the main ways you are involved in the community?*
- *What sense of purpose/mission/outlook guides you in your life?*

Depending on how much time you have, you may want to see if people want to take a moment to follow up with questions for each other to clarify anything they heard.

### **Question #1: What are you most thankful for about living in America?**

Facilitator/discussion leader:

- *Although we know our country has plenty of room for improvement, many will agree that we are blessed to live in a country where the overall quality of life is higher than it is in many other countries.*

*It is helpful to begin by asking, what are the things you are most thankful for about living in the United States?*

The discussion leader asks each person to comment briefly on this question. After everyone has shared, try asking some of these follow up questions to expand on the discussion:

- What are you most proud of in our nation's history?
- What are some things you take for granted as an American that you wouldn't have in most other countries?
- Have your views of what you appreciate about America changed through the years or remained the same?

### **Question #2: How do you feel about the deep divisions we see in our country?**

Facilitator/discussion leader:

- *We're dealing with intense political division in our country and many people believe that incivility and lack of respect for our fellow citizens is at a crisis level. Why do you think our country is so bitterly divided?*

After everyone has commented, lead a short discussion trying out these questions:

- What are some of the consequences of this division?
- How do you feel about our community - do we seem more or less divided than other parts of the country?

### Question #3: Why should we engage our differences and how can we find more constructive ways to work together?

Facilitator/discussion leader:

- *It can be difficult to talk about something we care deeply about with someone with a different point of view. Why is that? Despite our discomfort, why is it important to engage across our differences?*
- *What can we do to take a first step towards achieving these goals with someone who has a different perspective than we do?*

After everyone has commented, lead a short discussion trying out these questions:

- How, in your life, has engaging with someone who thinks differently than you, been helpful?
- What people or organizations do you think could be involved in ongoing efforts to build community and engage differences locally?

### Closing Comments

Facilitator/discussion leader:

- *We are near the end of our time and I want to thank each of you for participating. Does anyone have any comments or observations to share? In one sentence, what was most meaningful or valuable to you in this conversation?*
- *Is there a next step you'd like to take based on the conversation we just had?*

Once the discussion ends, please share it with others in your community:

- ✓ Be creative – can one volunteer snap a group selfie from their phone, tag it with #EngagingDifferences and post it on social media?
- ✓ Visit the [engagingdifferences.org](https://engagingdifferences.org) website – we can quickly use the video capture tool to create a short message about why **we** believe it is important to engage across our differences.
- ✓ Each of us can go home and pass along this message. Please share the [engagingdifferences.org](https://engagingdifferences.org) website with 5 other people.