



# LEADING POLARIZING CONVERSATIONS

FACILITATION GUIDE

ALA American Library Association

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## Why Libraries Should Convene Community Conversations on Polarizing Issues

In today's increasingly polarized society, libraries play a vital role as hubs of connection, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. As one of the few remaining “third spaces”—public places where individuals can gather outside their homes or workplaces—libraries are uniquely positioned to foster meaningful discussions on important issues. By hosting community conversations, libraries create intentional spaces that encourage listening, learning, and a deeper sense of respect among neighbors.

Community conversations are welcoming dialogues that explore local, regional, or national issues and prioritize understanding over winning debates. Their primary goal is to cultivate empathy and strengthen civic capacity. They are not intended to immediately resolve conflict. When libraries facilitate these dialogues, they help bridge community divides.

This guide provides practical tools for facilitating discussions on divisive issues, focusing on promoting understanding and empathy. In reviewing this guide, you will be able to:

- Plan for and design meaningful conversations
- Utilize best practices for facilitation
- Deploy strategies for navigating tough dialogues
- Implement follow-up actions

Additional resources are included to support further exploration of this essential work.

# Hosting a contentious conversation at my library seems scary!

## *Why should I do it?*

As knowledge hubs, libraries provide access to a wealth of information and resources that can enrich and ground discussions.

By cultivating a culture of curiosity expressed through dialogue, libraries inspire a lifelong commitment to civic engagement and collective problem-solving. In doing so, they create a lasting impact that strengthens our communities' social fabric and resilience.

By hosting community conversations, libraries serve as powerful examples for other institutions, showing how thoughtful dialogue and accessible participation can bridge personal differences and strengthen social bonds.

By responding to their communities' evolving concerns and priorities, libraries position themselves as proactive and indispensable resources. This adaptability allows libraries to act as both a mirror and a sounding board for their communities, reflecting local needs while empowering individuals to take action.

As communities experience shifts in population, development, resources, and political views, their need to build connections across differences becomes increasingly important. Libraries strengthen the social fabric that binds communities together by providing the tools and skills community members need to navigate these complexities.

The accessibility of libraries ensures all community members can participate in discussions regardless of background or socioeconomic status.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to foster dialogue within the communities they serve. Because libraries are guided by the core values of access, equity, public good, intellectual freedom, and privacy, they provide spaces where members of communities build meaningful connections and participate in difficult conversations.

In today's polarized sociopolitical climate, many people struggle with the ability or willingness to engage meaningfully with those who hold differing views. This often stems from attrition of essential conversational skills such as listening, curiosity, and empathy; or from an us-versus-them mindset that entrenches social divides. Libraries can begin to address this by offering spaces where people can practice communication skills with the guidance of facilitators.

# CHAPTER 2

## Planning and Preparation for Difficult Community Conversations

Bringing your community together to discuss polarizing issues requires careful planning and preparation to foster respectful, productive dialogue. By defining your topic and purpose, identifying potential partners, framing the issue, and dedicating time to recruitment and logistics, you will chart a course for success.

### CONSIDER YOUR COMMUNITY FIRST

#### Who needs to be part of this conversation?

Think about the stakeholders, such as community members, decision-makers, and partners, who bring relevant perspectives to the table. Who might have a stake or interest in the topic you choose?

When engaging the community in conversations about polarizing issues, the best way to choose a topic is to ask your potential participants directly. What is important to them? What is happening in the community that they would like to discuss? Seeking input directly from community members ensures relevant, timely, and meaningful conversations while reflecting their needs and priorities. You may use tools such as surveys, informal discussions, or feedback channels to identify common concerns.

### CHOOSING THE TOPIC

The first step in organizing a community conversation is identifying a topic relevant to your community and aligning it with your library's goals. Start by considering the following questions.

#### Is there a specific type of polarization you wish to address?

Consider what type(s) of division you want to address. Polarization may occur across several divides:

- **Political:** Divisions along partisan or ideological lines, exacerbated by digital echo chambers and contentious public discourse
- **Cultural:** Conflicts stemming from differing cultural norms, values, or traditions
- **Generational:** Gaps in understanding and values between age groups, often due to differing life experiences and social influences
- **Socioeconomic:** Tensions between income or class groups rooted in access to resources and opportunities
- **Identity-Based:** Divides related to race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, often magnified by historical or systemic inequities
- **Geographic:** Differences in attitudes and priorities between urban, suburban, and rural communities

## What issues are impacting your community?

Consider local, regional, or national topics that are relevant and timely and also foster respectful dialogue. If you are new to hosting community conversations, consider choosing something pertinent to the community and something you, as a facilitator, feel comfortable leading. Some contentious topics may feel beyond your skills, particularly if you are new to facilitation. If a conversation topic is relevant to your community but you don't feel ready to lead, consider seeking the assistance of an experienced facilitator to support you.

## What are your goals for the conversation?

The topic you choose should align with your goal, whether it's to raise awareness, build empathy, or address a specific challenge. The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation's (NCDD) Engagement Streams Framework outlines the primary goals for community conversations and can be a helpful resource for clarifying your goals.

## IDENTIFYING PARTNERS AND PARTICIPANTS

Partners bring diverse perspectives, expertise, and lived experiences that can inform framing, support goal-setting, participant engagement, and enhance the dialogue. Thoughtful identification ensures that all relevant voices, including underrepresented and affected groups, are included in the process. Partners can increase community buy-in, foster credibility, and provide access to the audience you are trying to reach through the conversation.

**Partners:** Individuals and institutions in the community who can help to design, convene, and host the conversation

**Participants:** Individuals with varied experiences and perspectives who are invited to attend the conversation

### Methods for Identifying Partners:

- **Community mapping:** Use tools like stakeholder maps or matrices to visualize key individuals and groups connected to the issue. Identify those directly impacted, those with influence, and those who can support the conversation's goals. Note that not every stakeholder needs to be involved in every step of the process; involvement can range from "core contributors" (those who are deeply engaged in planning and facilitating and who have a stake in the conversation's outcomes) to "informed observers" (people who you inform about the conversation but who may not be directly involved).
- **Community feedback tools:** Gather input through online platforms, surveys, or facilitated workshops to determine who should participate and what roles they may play. Ask community members who they trust to represent their views and concerns.
- **Reviewing networks:** Analyze existing community networks or library patron demographics to identify gaps in representation.

For polarizing topics, prioritize inviting individuals or groups with differing perspectives to foster balanced dialogue. Building strong partnerships can also help with recruitment and co-hosting responsibilities. Establish agreements with local organizations to outline shared goals, roles, and responsibilities for the event.

## DEFINING CONVERSATION PURPOSE AND GOALS

Clear purpose and goals are essential for any meaningful conversation, especially when addressing polarizing topics. They help inform the design of the dialogue and ensure it remains focused and productive while respecting all participants' perspectives.

Ask community members and partners to weigh in on purpose and goals to understand what resonates most with them, what issues they want to discuss, and what they hope to gain from participating. Involving participants early in the planning process ensures their ideas, priorities, and values are reflected, increasing their trust and engagement. This is particularly critical in polarizing conversations, where broad welcoming can set the tone for respectful dialogue.

### Determining Your Purpose

Ask yourself: What are you trying to accomplish by having this conversation? What do you hope participants will take away? Thinking through the purpose of your conversation will help you set clear goals, define the agenda, and determine the most effective format for the dialogue.

Most community conversations align with one or more of the following purposes, which reflect NCDD's Engagement Streams Framework and outline different approaches to dialogue:

1. **Exploration:** Providing opportunities for participants to learn from or about one another or to explore a topic of interest
2. **Conflict Transformation:** Emphasizing listening, fostering empathy, and improving understanding between individuals and groups, particularly when addressing divisive or identity-based issues
3. **Collaborative Action:** Generating ideas and identifying possible next steps to address an issue collectively
4. **Decision Making:** Working toward an informed choice or action in response to a current or anticipated challenge

While some conversations focus on learning and exploration, others prioritize relationship-building, solution generation, or informed decision-making. Recognizing the purpose of your conversation ensures it is structured in a way that best serves the needs of participants and the broader community.

### Goal Setting for Community Conversations on Polarizing Topics

When defining goals for conversations on potentially contentious topics, emphasize fostering shared understanding rather than driving consensus. Goals should encourage participants to build empathy, identify common ground, and generate actionable ideas. The more polarized the topic, the more time is needed to break down communication barriers and create space for meaningful exchange, reflection, and potential collaboration.

#### Your Goals Should:

- **Be specific and measurable.** For polarizing topics, set clear goals such as identifying areas of common ground, understanding differing perspectives, or creating a plan for continued dialogue. For example, engage 20 participants from different community groups, or facilitate a discussion that generates three takeaways or actionable ideas for moving forward as a community.

- **Align with the library’s mission.** Ensure the goals support your library’s broader mission. For example, connecting the goals of the conversation to the library’s role as a trusted community convener can help drive recruitment and outreach efforts, as well as conversation design.
- **Promote dialogue over debate.** Focus on understanding different perspectives rather than convincing participants to adopt a specific viewpoint. For polarizing conversations, explicitly emphasize respect, active listening, and shared humanity to build an environment conducive to meaningful discussion. For example, in a conversation about immigration, participants share personal experiences and community impacts instead of debating policy positions. This shifts the focus from persuasion to understanding and empathy.

By thoughtfully defining your goals and purpose, you can design an agenda, prepare facilitators, and create a space where participants feel heard and valued. This clarity will also help measure the success of your conversation and guide follow-up actions.

## FRAMING THE TOPIC

Framing a topic sets the stage for a welcoming and productive conversation. This approach helps to create an environment where participants feel welcomed and encouraged to engage openly, regardless of their viewpoints. It sets a foundation for dialogue that prioritizes fostering understanding, minimizing defensiveness, and promoting collaboration even on contentious topics.

Words matter—the language you choose articulates the topic and purpose of your community conversation. This framing language will be used in your efforts to recruit participants and outline the purpose of the conversation at its start.

### Effective Framing

- **Avoid bias and assumptions:** Describe the topic in a way that welcomes diverse viewpoints and does not leave anyone out. Remove any assumptions embedded in the wording to make the topic universally recognizable and accessible to all participants.
- **Use welcoming, impartial language:** Avoid jargon or terms that may alienate participants. Use impartial language to welcome diverse perspectives.
- **Focus on shared values:** Identify and emphasize common ground in your conversation description to encourage collaboration and highlight shared concerns. Framing the topic around shared interests can reduce defensiveness and help participants feel more connected to the topic and one another, and therefore increase their willingness to participate.

### Key Considerations

- **Provide context and background:** Offer participants a brief overview of why the topic is being discussed and its relevance to the community. This helps ensure everyone starts with a shared understanding and can focus on the conversation rather than debating facts.
- **Clearly state the goal/purpose:** Outline the purpose of the discussion and what you hope participants will experience. For example, “This community conversation will explore perspectives on public safety and identify shared concerns and values. By the end of this discussion, participants should have a better understanding of the complexity of this issue and their fellow community members’ perspectives.”

Examples of Framing Language:

*Join the library for “Weathering the Storms,” a community conversation about preparing for weather-related events. Like many others in our area, our community is not immune to flooding from intense rainstorms. How can we better prepare for future flooding? In this conversation, we will identify the community’s concerns and explore options for addressing these concerns as a group. We plan to take a few actionable steps from the conversation to inform the library and other town departments of planning efforts.*

*Our town contains many religious communities with different traditions and beliefs. Join us at the library for “Honoring Traditions,” an exploratory conversation to learn more about the various traditions in our community. Participants will share their traditions and practices, hear from others, and explore some overarching questions: What do these traditions have in common? In what ways are they different? How can we encourage greater understanding and respect among the religious groups in our community?*

Once you’ve established and articulated the purpose and goals for your community conversation, you will be able to design a thoughtful process to guide this conversation. We’ll discuss this in the next chapter.

## PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Unfortunately, the “if you build it, they will come” idea doesn’t always pan out—you’ll need to actively work to invite and engage the people you want to participate. In particular, when it comes to potentially polarizing conversations, it is crucial to make an effort to avoid conversations that feel like echo chambers, where only one side or perspective is present.

Participation is vital to creating a balanced and welcoming dialogue, ensuring that diverse voices are represented. Recruitment becomes even more essential for polarizing conversations to foster balanced, respectful dialogue and avoid unintentionally favoring one perspective. Aim to reflect the diversity of your community, including underrepresented voices. Contact local advocacy groups, schools, or faith-based organizations to ensure broad representation.

The first step is to look at your topic and intended purpose. In the early stages of the planning process, you consulted some key players to determine your conversation’s topic, purpose, and goals. Now, you must expand your reach to bring in new faces and get their thoughts as you invite people to the conversation. Ask questions such as:

- Who might be interested in this topic?
- Who needs to be part of the conversation to achieve its purpose?

For example:

- In an exploratory conversation like a book club discussion, consider how the book’s genre or subject matter may touch on sensitive or polarizing topics. If the book explores themes like social justice or political issues, recruiting individuals with varied viewpoints and lived experiences helps ensure a richer, more accessible dialogue.

- For a community conversation about improving library services for Spanish-speaking patrons, prioritize engaging library staff and Spanish-speaking community members. Include stakeholders such as local advocacy groups or organizations working with immigrant populations. Including individuals who may not directly benefit but might play a role in shaping services (e.g., policymakers or funders) can also enhance the conversation.

## The Role of Partnerships

Partnerships can be invaluable in recruitment, particularly for conversations on polarizing or sensitive topics. Trusted community organizations and leaders can help you:

- Offer insights into cultural or contextual considerations to ensure the framing and invitation resonate with their communities.
- Build trust and credibility with target audiences.
- Promote the event through their networks.

For example, if you're hosting a community conversation on voting access, partnering with nonpartisan voter groups, faith-based organizations, and civic coalitions can help ensure a balanced discussion. These partners can recruit diverse participants, provide credibility, and co-facilitate to foster mutual understanding. Partnerships strengthen recruitment and help frame the dialogue in a way that encourages respect and reduces division.

## Reaching Your Intended Audience

Think creatively about how to reach your intended participants. While flyers in the library can help engage frequent patrons, you should explore additional strategies to attract a broader, diverse audience. Successful outreach for polarizing conversations requires extra care. Digital marketing, social media, and public promotion can unintentionally attract negative attention if it is not framed thoughtfully. Consider how your event is presented to avoid inflammatory wording or terms that could be misinterpreted. Certain advocacy groups actively monitor for keywords tied to controversial issues and may mobilize against programs they perceive as political, even when that is not the intent.

## Considerations for Polarizing Conversations

For discussions on polarizing topics, think about how to create a balanced and welcoming group of participants. Ask yourself:

- Are all relevant perspectives represented in the recruitment strategies identified?
- Have I invited individuals or groups who may hold differing viewpoints?

When recruiting participants for polarizing topics:

- Use impartial language in outreach materials to avoid unintentional bias.
- Be proactive in seeking divergent viewpoints and traditionally underrepresented voices to ensure a range of opinions. Strengthen community partnerships to help achieve this goal.
- Emphasize how the discussion aims to foster understanding and shared solutions.

To mitigate risks while ensuring diverse and meaningful participation, consider the following outreach strategies:

- **Digital channels:** Use communication tools like email, social media, and community listservs to spread the word. Carefully craft online messaging to reflect the purpose of the discussion, emphasizing belonging and shared learning rather than debate or opposition.
- **Word-of-mouth:** Encourage library staff, volunteers, and partners to invite community members personally. Ask those invitees to personally encourage another person who might not participate otherwise to attend. A trusted recommendation can be one of the most effective recruitment methods for sensitive conversations.
- **Event invitations:** Tailor invitations to highlight the event’s purpose and reassure participants that all perspectives are welcome in a structured and respectful setting.
- **Community spaces:** Identify where your target audience spends time—local businesses, places of worship, schools, or community centers—and share information through these trusted sources.
- **Local media:** Leverage local newspapers, radio stations, or community newsletters to promote the event. When engaging the media, be intentional with messaging to prevent misrepresentation. Consider directly briefing journalists on the event’s intent if the conversation involves a contentious issue.
- **Leverage partnerships:** Collaborate with trusted organizations to reach specific communities. Engage groups well-connected to those most affected by the issue to build trust and encourage participation in a way that minimizes misinterpretation.
- **Get creative:** Use unconventional but effective outreach methods to ensure your message reaches all corners of the community. For example, include an announcement in utility bills or partner with schools to distribute event information in student take-home folders. Consider offline methods for particularly sensitive topics to avoid unwanted viral attention.

Outreach for these conversations may take multiple attempts to connect with the intended audience. It’s natural for attendance to vary, and even one new participant represents progress. Each session is a learning opportunity to refine outreach strategies and build trust over time.

## LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

By organizing logistics before and during the meeting, libraries can create a supportive environment that enables meaningful dialogue. This includes ensuring physical and psychological comfort, providing accessible materials, and preparing facilitators to manage challenges.

### Before the Meeting

#### LOCATION

Choose a venue that is convenient, welcoming, and ADA-compliant. Ensure the space reflects the community’s needs and allows all participants to feel comfortable. Consider how the location may shape participants’ sense of openness and belonging for polarizing topics. The setting should foster open dialogue without unintentionally signaling bias toward a particular perspective.

- Where should the meeting or conversation be held? At the library or elsewhere in the community? Consider how the location may shape the tone of the discussion. For example, a conversation about

faith in the community may feel more welcoming in a public space rather than a place of worship, which could unintentionally suggest a specific religious viewpoint.

- Does the location offer adequate space for the anticipated participants and the set-up you desire? For conversations on divisive topics, consider whether the space allows for comfortable seating arrangements that encourage constructive dialogue. A circular or small-group setup may foster engagement and reduce adversarial dynamics.
- How many people do you anticipate? If you have higher attendance than expected, can you utilize additional rooms or resources to accommodate overflow? Or will you manage attendance by requiring registration? For polarizing topics, RSVPs or pre-registration can help manage participation and balance perspectives in the room. If you aim for diverse perspectives, you can even ask a question about this in your registration form. Having a plan for overflow, such as a live-stream option or additional facilitators, can also prevent tensions from escalating due to unexpected crowding.
- Are you allowed to serve food or drinks in the venue? Refreshments create a welcoming atmosphere and encourage participation. In tense discussions, shared refreshments can foster a sense of hospitality and ease social barriers. Be mindful of dietary restrictions and cultural considerations to ensure everyone feels considered if serving food.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Beyond meeting legal requirements, true accessibility ensures that all participants can engage fully. Especially in conversations on divisive topics, creating a welcoming and accommodating environment is essential. Consider how the space supports ease of movement, clear communication, and participant comfort. Thoughtful accessibility planning can help reduce physical and social barriers, ensuring that all voices can contribute meaningfully and that discussions remain constructive and respectful. Proactively ask participants about their specific accessibility needs during registration or outreach to provide the space and resources that meet their requirements. Providing information about the accommodations already in place may help participants feel welcome and encouraged to ask for any other support needed.

- Ensure the space has fully accessible entrances, restrooms, and seating arrangements. When participants can fully access a space with dignity and ease, it sets a welcoming tone, which is particularly important for conversations on polarizing topics.
- Prepare for visual and auditory needs including large-print materials, assistive listening devices, or live captioning. Providing real-time captioning or assistive listening devices can prevent misunderstandings and encourage full participation from all attendees.
- Consider cultural and language accessibility, such as offering translated materials or interpreters when needed. If the conversation involves diverse perspectives or communities with different language backgrounds, language accessibility is critical and can help prevent miscommunication and ensure all voices are heard.

For more information regarding accessibility, refer to resources such as the Libraries Transforming Communities Accessible Conversations Guide (more information at [ala.org/ltc](http://ala.org/ltc)), [www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov) and [www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov).

## ROOM SETUP

Thoughtful seating arrangements can help foster constructive dialogue, particularly when discussing divisive topics. How a room is set up influences power dynamics, participation, and the overall tone of the

conversation. For polarizing discussions, prioritize layouts that promote a sense of openness, equality, and engagement among participants to reduce tension and encourage active listening.

- **Chairs in a circle:** Encourages open dialogue and equal participation, fostering a sense of shared space and reducing power imbalances. For polarizing topics, this setup can help participants see each other as individuals rather than opposing sides, promoting mutual understanding.
- **Small groups:** Useful for brainstorming or polarizing topics that require more personal, in-depth discussion. To maintain civility in small groups, facilitators should establish clear discussion agreements, provide structured prompts, and rotate participants periodically to prevent echo chambers and encourage diverse perspectives.
- **Boardroom style:** Best suited for structured deliberation where a designated group makes decisions after gathering input. However, this setup may reinforce hierarchy and limit open participation in community conversations.

#### PRE-CONVERSATION RESOURCES

Share background materials, such as articles or videos, to help participants understand the topic and feel prepared. Providing these resources allows participants to engage more fully in the conversation as they come equipped with context and a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

When selecting resources, prioritize accessibility, credibility, relevance, and a balance of perspectives. Aim for materials that provide necessary background without framing the issue in a way that presumes a specific stance. For polarizing topics, avoid misinformation while ensuring that diverse, fact-based viewpoints are represented. Consulting subject matter experts or community partners can help identify trustworthy sources.

## During the Meeting

#### MATERIALS

Provide necessary supplies to host the most effective community conversations. Consider providing an easel and paper, markers, tape, screen, projector, and/or microphones (if you expect a larger turnout). Pre-made name tags can help participants feel welcomed and included. Being able to use people's first names helps build connections. Have a few blank name tags available for last-minute arrivals to ensure everyone feels equally recognized and part of the conversation.

#### REFRESHMENTS

Consider offering light snacks and beverages such as water or coffee to create a welcoming atmosphere. If the conversation is held during mealtime, provide something substantial or notify participants to bring their own food. Consider dietary restrictions to accommodate diverse participants. Avoid common allergens or include a mechanism for making dietary restrictions known in advance.

#### VISIBLE SIGNAGE AND RESOURCES

Display clear signage about the event's purpose and provide resources like handouts or talking points to keep the conversation focused.

## BREAKS

Schedule breaks to help participants stay engaged and manage the emotional demands of polarizing discussions.

## SAFETY AND DISRUPTION PREPAREDNESS

While most community conversations proceed without issue, it's important to prepare for potential disruptions—whether emotional, verbal, or physical. Developing a safety plan ensures facilitators, staff, and participants know how to respond if a situation arises. This plan should outline how your team will respond to safety concerns, protests, or emergencies. Consider including:

- **Evacuation routes and lockdown protocols**
- **Internal communication strategies** for discreetly alerting support staff
- **Roles and responsibilities** for facilitators and volunteers
- **Training** so all team members are familiar with the plan

In addition to the safety plan, you'll want to:

- **Address disruptions proactively:** Have a strategy for managing verbal disruptions or participants acting in bad faith. Identify who is responsible for intervening, and practice setting respectful but firm boundaries if ground rules are broken.
- **Coordinate with security or local authorities:** For high-risk events or topics, consider notifying building security or coordinating with local officials in advance. Preparation should center safety, not policing.
- **Communicate expectations clearly:** Let participants know upfront what conduct is expected and how issues will be handled. This builds trust and reduces uncertainty.
- **Debrief and support:** After the event, hold space for facilitators and staff to debrief and reflect. If an incident occurred, review what happened, assess what worked or didn't, and update your plan as needed.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Thoughtful planning and preparation lay the groundwork for successful community conversations. Libraries can create spaces where meaningful dialogue thrives by carefully choosing relevant topics, setting clear goals, framing the topic that welcome diverse perspectives, identifying and involving stakeholders, and managing logistics. When addressing polarizing issues, extra care in framing, stakeholder engagement, and facilitation is essential to ensure these conversations remain respectful, welcoming, and productive.

# CHAPTER 3

## Conversation Design for Tough Issues

Polarization can quickly derail a well-intended dialogue if the environment isn't structured to support safety, trust, and equitable participation. This chapter outlines how to design community conversations that directly engage polarizing issues while promoting understanding, safety, and the conditions for deeper civic connection.

### DESIGNING WITH POLARIZATION IN MIND

Polarizing issues require conversation formats that actively reduce defensiveness and de-escalate conflict. Whether the issue relates to politics, identity, or values, the design of your conversation should reflect an awareness of the emotional vulnerabilities and social risks participants may carry into the room.

#### Clarify the Purpose First

As outlined in Chapter 2, the first step in organizing a conversation on a polarizing issue is to define its purpose and goals. This also contributes to the design and facilitation of the dialogue. The structure, tone, and pacing of the conversation reflect the desired outcome, whether that is building empathy, surfacing shared values, or creating a space for tension to be expressed more safely.

When designing for highly polarized issues, prioritize building understanding before generating action. Participants may arrive holding assumptions, emotional charge, or skepticism about others' intentions. Jumping too quickly into action planning can bypass the crucial work of humanizing one another and may unintentionally escalate tension. In many cases, especially when relationships are fractured, the most impactful outcome is creating a space for reflection, empathy, and shared learning. Action can emerge organically once a sense of connection and psychological safety is established.

For instance:

- In a politically tense moment, you may aim to humanize perspectives rather than debate facts.
- If group trust is low, your purpose might focus on storytelling and connection over action planning.

#### Choose Formats That Foster Safety and Dialogue

For polarizing issues, use formats that:

- Emphasize listening over debating.
- Prioritize personal experience and storytelling.
- Include smaller group or paired conversations where vulnerability feels safer.
- Allow time for individual reflection before sharing with the group.

Avoid formats that encourage quick responses based on popular opinions or sound bites, put people on the spot, or create competitive dynamics (such as “us vs. them”).

## SETTING AN AGENDA

A well-structured agenda outlines what you hope to accomplish, the questions you will pose, and the time you will allocate to each issue, question, or activity. It serves as a roadmap to keep the discussion focused, respectful, and productive.

An effective agenda typically includes the following elements:

- **Issues to be discussed:** List key points or questions to guide the conversation.
- **Outcomes to establish:** Specify the goals or takeaways for each topic or question.
- **Time allocations:** Indicate how long each section or activity is expected to take.
- **Facilitator roles:** If you’re leading with a partner or team, identify who will guide each part of the conversation.

### Agenda Transparency for Public Conversations

While agendas for staff or board meetings are often shared with participants beforehand to foster transparency, public conversations require a slightly different approach. In these settings, the agenda is primarily a tool for the facilitator. Use it as your game plan to manage the conversation flow, and consider sharing a simplified version with participants when necessary. Providing a brief outline of the session’s purpose and structure can help set expectations. This may include information about the questions or topics for the conversation, but it does not provide explicit times for these segments, allowing the facilitator(s) flexibility.

For polarizing conversations, sharing specific parts of the agenda, such as goals and ground rules, can help reduce anxiety and build trust. It signals to participants how the discussion will be structured.

### Additional Considerations for Polarizing Conversation Agendas

- **Share norms and agreements in advance and at the start of the session**
- **Start with an icebreaker:** Use an activity to promote connection, foster trust, and encourage openness before diving into contentious issues. A few examples:
  - **Talk about your day:** Ask participants to share how they got to the meeting, or something good that happened to them that day.
  - **Optimistic thoughts:** Ask participants to share what they are most proud of, or something that inspires them.
  - **Personal stake:** Ask participants why this issue is important to them, their friends, or their family.
- **Plan for flexibility:** For polarizing conversations, your plans may need to shift to accommodate unexpected shifts in the discussion.
- **Incorporate breaks and reflection time:** Include moments for participants to process their thoughts, which can help de-escalate tension.

- **Facilitator support:** Ensure facilitators are equipped to navigate challenges and encourage balanced participation from all attendees.
- **Plan for conflict management:** Anticipate potential challenges and allocate time for facilitators to address difficult moments constructively. Chapter 4 will cover this in greater detail.

Thoughtfully developing an agenda ensures the conversation stays on track while creating a space where participants feel respected and empowered to contribute. For polarizing issues, a well-prepared agenda is especially valuable in fostering a balanced and meaningful discussion.

## CONVERSATION STRUCTURE

A thoughtful sequence of questions helps participants ease into the dialogue, build trust, explore differing perspectives, and—if appropriate—consider collective insight or next steps. A typical structure that promotes listening includes three to four overall guiding questions to help move the conversation along, with space for follow-ups and flexibility based on group dynamics. These questions fall into the following categories:

1. **Opening the Conversation:** Promotes sharing personal experiences or stories and helps participants connect to the issue.
2. **Follow-Up and Deepening:** Encourages exploration of the subject and reflection on differing perspectives or emerging tensions.
3. **Going Deeper or Identifying Action:** Offers space for courageous reflection and, if appropriate, exploration of possible next steps.
4. **Reflection and Closing:** Provides time to share what has been learned, key takeaways, or appreciation for one another.

### 1. Opening the Conversation: Connection Before Content

Name the reality of polarization—don't pretend it doesn't exist. Acknowledge the vulnerability of participating in these conversations and appreciate that discomfort may arise. Begin with a question that invites participants to share personal experiences or values that relate to the issue. The aim is to lower the temperature, establish common humanity, and offer everyone a way into a potentially difficult conversation.

Examples:

- “Why is this issue important to you, your friends, or your family?”
- “What experiences have shaped your connection to this issue?”
- “What do you value most about our community?”
- “Can you share a time when you felt heard—or not heard—in a conversation about this issue?”

These questions help move the conversation away from debate and into personal reflection, inviting each person's story without forcing alignment.

## 2. Follow-Up Questions: Stepping Into Complexity

These questions invite participants to explore the nuances of the issue from multiple angles, while remaining grounded in their lived experiences. They open space to acknowledge tensions, values, and personal meaning. This allows people to engage more directly with the tension while continuing to listen and reflect.

Examples:

- “What do you find most difficult or challenging when talking about this issue?”
- “Which values do you hold as most important when considering this issue?”
- “Have you ever had a meaningful conversation with someone who sees this differently? What helped it go well—or not?”
- “Why might someone think differently about this issue? What values might they hold?”

These follow-up prompts deepen the dialogue while still supporting an atmosphere of inquiry and care.

## 3. Going Deeper: Courageous Exploration

Once the conversation is underway and participants have engaged with the initial questions, you can guide them into deeper reflection. These questions push the group to reflect on what’s not being said, what might be uncomfortable, and what’s at stake. This could involve examining options for addressing an issue, deciding how to respond, or reflecting on insights gained during the dialogue. This is often where the real heart of polarization lies: in what’s painful, misunderstood, or historically unresolved. Sam Kaner’s *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (2014) includes what is called the “Groan Zone”: As diverse perspectives are raised and ideas are suggested from a variety of these perspectives, misunderstandings and frustrations are likely to rise before shared understanding can be identified, and then convergence on a potential outcome or action can be achieved.

Examples:

- “Whose voices or perspectives might be missing in this space?”
- “What assumptions do we each carry into this conversation?”
- “What are we risking—or protecting—by staying in our current positions?”
- “What are the tensions among potential actions? How might we address them?”

For polarizing conversations, more profound questions like these can encourage participants to reflect on their assumptions, consider alternative viewpoints, and collaboratively identify actionable next steps, if that’s appropriate. They also help move the discussion from abstract dialogue to meaningful outcomes, fostering a sense of shared purpose and progress. Encourage participants to lean into discomfort with empathy, and remind them that growth often begins at the edge of what feels safe.

### TIP

Start with personal and relational questions before moving into issue-specific ones. This sequencing builds trust and increases participants’ openness as the conversation deepens.



## OPTIONAL: From Reflection to Action

If your conversation is structured to identify actions or next steps, introduce these questions only after trust and understanding have been established.

Examples:

- “What common ground have we identified?”
- “What possible actions might we take together?”
- “How might we address the concerns raised in the conversation so far?”
- “What might a small next step look like—for you, or our community?”

By moving from connection to complexity to possibility, your conversation structure can transform polarization into a catalyst for understanding and change.

## 4. Closing the Conversation: Reflection and Next Steps

As the conversation winds down, give participants a chance to reflect on what they’ve heard, what they’ve learned, and what they might carry forward. Even if the goal isn’t action-oriented, this closing round helps mark the conversation’s impact and encourages participants to internalize what they’ve learned.

Examples:

- “What did you hear today that will stay with you?”
- “Did anything shift for you in this dialogue?”
- “What would help you continue this kind of conversation beyond today?”
- “What have you learned today that could influence how you show up in future conversations?”

At the close of the session, share with participants how the collected feedback and input will be used and any additional opportunities for further engagement on the issue.

## DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS IN POLARIZED SPACES

Your questions are among the most powerful tools you have. In a polarized setting, they should create room for nuance, disrupt binary thinking, and guide participants away from judgment and toward curiosity. They help guide the conversation, surface shared values, and invite diverse perspectives.

### Developing Questions

Crafting questions to guide the conversation should include thoughtful consideration of framing. Just as you aim to make the issue welcoming to all, your questions should help participants feel comfortable responding. This means removing any underlying assumptions or biases that may be present in the wording. A couple of well-crafted questions can guide your conversation and make the facilitator’s job much easier.

Well-designed questions serve multiple purposes:

- They guide the conversation and keep it focused.
- They help uncover shared values.
- They encourage constructive dialogue by inviting diverse perspectives.

Open-ended, inviting questions encourage participants to share their views without feeling excluded or judged. Starting with clear, impartial questions sets the tone for a meaningful exchange, allowing participants to explore the issue collaboratively and productively.

To make your questions more effective:

- Avoid assumptions or embedded judgments.
- Frame questions to explore, not persuade.
- Test your questions by reading them aloud and asking yourself, ‘Would someone with a different perspective feel invited to respond?’

## Examples of Question Development

Refining your questions ensures they support broad participation and are effective at fostering open dialogue. Start with an initial question and refine it to ensure it is welcoming and impartial. Here are examples to illustrate how questions can evolve:

- **Initial Question:** What should we do to reduce pollution in our city?
- **Good Question:** What are some ways we can work together to improve our community’s environmental health?
- **Better Question:** How can we address environmental challenges to create a healthier future for everyone in our community?
  
- **Initial Question:** Do you agree that stricter housing policies are necessary?
- **Good Question:** What challenges do you see with current housing policies?
- **Better Question:** How can we ensure our housing policies support a range of community needs?

Testing out your questions can help determine if you’ve reached a better question. Ask people with differing perspectives to review your question and share whether they feel welcomed and able to answer it. If they find it slanted toward a specific view, consider revising it!

## Engaging Community Partners

Community partners can play a vital role in refining your questions and ensuring your conversation is open to all participants and impactful. If you are discussing an issue closely tied to a particular group or organization, their feedback can help identify unintended biases, suggest improvements, and ensure the questions resonate with diverse perspectives.

Engaging partners not only ensures your questions are practical but also builds trust and strengthens relationships. This collaboration signals that their voices are valued, which can lead to greater participation and shared ownership of the event. Additionally, partners may become valuable allies in helping to promote the conversation, recruit participants, or even co-facilitate the discussion.

## Appreciative Inquiry as an Entry Point

Appreciative Inquiry is a change method that begins by asking about the “best of what is” to imagine “what could be.” This method focuses on strengths, shared experiences, and values, helping participants start from a place of connection rather than conflict.

In the context of polarizing conversations, Appreciative Inquiry allows individuals to ground their perspectives in lived experience and shared values, shifting the tone from adversarial to relational and aspirational.

For example:

- “What experiences at the library have made you feel most connected to your community?”
- “When have you seen people with different viewpoints work well together? What made that possible?”

This approach can help soften polarization and encourage relational, rather than adversarial, thinking.

## Fostering Civility in Small Groups

Small group conversations can foster more intimate and honest dialogue, but they also require careful design to ensure civility and safety. Providing clear discussion agreements, encouraging active listening, and modeling curiosity and compassion are important practices for promoting civility. Rotating participants between groups periodically during the dialogue can reduce the risk of echo chambers or entrenchment. It’s also helpful to give each group a structured prompt or reflection question to keep the focus constructive. Facilitators should be prepared to gently step in or regroup participants if a discussion becomes unsafe or unproductive. Pre-assigned roles (e.g., timekeeper, scribe) can also help structure participation and create shared responsibility for the tone of the conversation.

## PRACTICING FOR POLARIZING CONVERSATIONS

Facilitating a conversation on a polarizing issue can feel daunting, especially when emotions may run high or perspectives are deeply entrenched. Whether you’re leading the conversation solo or sharing facilitation with others, intentional preparation can help you feel more confident, grounded, and responsive in the moment. Below are recommended steps for practicing and preparing in advance of the conversation.

### 1. Map Out the Flow Together

Take time to co-design the conversation with your team or co-facilitators. Identify the questions you plan to ask and determine who will lead each part of the conversation. For polarizing issues, consider:

- Who is best suited to open the space with calm and clarity?
- Who has experience managing difficult emotions or redirecting harmful language?
- How can you support each other if tension arises?

Create a brief agenda with estimated times, clear roles, and flexibility to adjust based on the group’s energy or needs.

## 2. Prepare a Grounding and Transparent Introduction

Opening remarks matter more than ever in polarized conversations—they set the tone for safety, respect, and clarity. Practice saying your introduction aloud, ideally with a trusted colleague or someone who will serve as a sounding board. Your introduction should:

- Acknowledge the challenge and courage it takes to show up.
- Clearly state the purpose of the conversation and what it is not (e.g., it is not a debate or a space for persuasion).
- Introduce the community agreements you'll be using to guide the conversation—we'll share more about how to craft agreements in Chapter 4.
- Invite participants to share their own experiences and values.

Rehearsing these words helps ensure you remain calm and centered in the room, especially if tensions rise.

## 3. Hold a Practice Conversation

If possible, host a brief mock session with staff, volunteers, or close partners. This isn't a roleplay—participants should engage from their perspectives rather than “performing” different viewpoints.

In this run-through:

- Try out your introduction and walk through the planned structure.
- Pose your core questions and allow short periods of discussion.
- Practice timekeeping and transitions between sections.
- Invite honest feedback on what feels clear, accessible, or emotionally challenging.

Ask participants:

- Does the framing feel balanced and welcoming across perspectives?
- Are the questions clear, open-ended, and grounded in real experiences?
- Is anything missing that would help participants feel safer or more supported?

This kind of rehearsal helps facilitators better anticipate where discomfort might arise, what support they may need, and what refinements can strengthen the overall flow of the event.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

While polarization challenges our communities, it also presents an opportunity for libraries to serve as courageous conveners and bridge builders in the community. Structuring conversations with intention, care, and awareness of the forces driving polarization allows libraries to create spaces where connection and understanding can begin. These conversations are not easy, but they are essential. With thoughtful design and preparation, we can turn tension into transformation.

# CHAPTER 4

## Best Practices on Facilitating Tough Conversations

Facilitating conversations on polarizing issues is both an art and a practice. Even with thoughtful preparation, conversations on divisive issues can sometimes feel unpredictable or uncomfortable. Facilitators play a vital role in helping participants navigate tensions and discomfort with care, curiosity, and respect.

This chapter offers practical tools and strategies to help facilitators maintain a supportive environment, address disruption, and hold space when things get hard. It also outlines approaches to co-facilitation, grounding techniques, and crafting community agreements to foster safety and connection.

### SETTING THE TONE: GROUNDING THE CONVERSATION

How a facilitator opens a conversation shapes the tone of the entire event. A strong opening helps participants feel welcome, grounded, and oriented to the shared purpose of the space.

Start by establishing clear expectations for the conversation, including the issue to be discussed, the purpose of the dialogue, and the group agreements that promote respectful and productive dialogue. These agreements—such as active listening, speaking from personal experience, and assuming good intent—help participants engage constructively and set expectations for how to navigate disagreements.

Facilitators should also acknowledge the nature of the conversation up front. Let participants know that polarization can bring up strong emotions or discomfort and that this space is designed to hold those moments with care. Normalizing discomfort helps reduce shame and allows people to show up more honestly and transparently.

Example language: “We recognize that today’s topic can bring up strong feelings. It’s okay to feel uncertain, frustrated, or uncomfortable—we’re here to practice respectful dialogue, not to agree on everything.”

#### Steps for Grounding Your Opening:

- Welcome participants and remind them of the issue to be discussed.
- Acknowledge the potential emotional and personal connections participants may have regarding the issue.
- Remind participants of the conversation’s purpose and what it is not (e.g., not a space for persuasion or debate).
- Introduce the session’s structure and let participants know how to participate or step back if needed.
- Share the group’s conversation agreements early, and invite participant input or questions.

## Use Grounding Activities to Set the Tone

At the start of the session, consider incorporating a brief grounding practice to help participants shift into the mindset of thoughtful dialogue. This might include:

- A moment of silence or deep breathing
- A general check-in question (e.g., “What brings you here today?”)
- A shared reading, quote, or value reflection
- Gentle movement or stretching

These simple tools signal a transition from the outside world into the shared dialogue space and help participants regulate their nervous systems before engaging with tough issues.

## Facilitator Tip



Post the agreements where everyone can see them or include them in printed handouts.

Consider a projected slide or a flip chart with the agreements listed in case participants in the room suggest additional agreements.

## CREATING AND UPHOLDING GROUP AGREEMENTS

In polarizing conversations, group agreements are more than just ground rules—they reflect a shared commitment to how the group will engage with one another. These agreements create psychological safety, mutual respect, and dignity, especially when conversations become emotionally charged or uncomfortable. Agreements also help reduce uncertainty and anxiety by giving participants a clear sense of what to expect. When necessary, the facilitator can refer back to them as a tool for keeping the conversation on track.

Introduce these agreements at the start of the session and invite participants to add additional agreements, if desired, before finalizing them. Co-signing these agreements as a group helps reinforce collective ownership of the space and responsibility for upholding them. If a participant does not wish to co-sign, they may choose to leave. If someone violates the agreements, the facilitator or other participants may note this violation, and if it continues to happen, that person may be asked to leave.

### Sample Agreements for Polarizing Conversations:

- Speak from personal experience, not on behalf of a group.
- Assume good intentions, and attend to impact.
- Approach disagreement with curiosity, not animosity.
- Expect and allow discomfort; it's part of growth.
- Listen to understand, not to respond.
- Take space, make space—share the air.
- No shaming, blaming, or attacking others.
- Uphold confidentiality: Share stories, not identities.

## Group Agreements as a Compass

Group agreements are not just opening rituals. They serve as essential tools when conversations become heated or someone crosses a line. Referencing them allows facilitators to interrupt harm without escalating conflict. Returning to these agreements—such as “speak from personal experience” or “no shaming or blaming”—can remind participants of their agreed norms and help regroup or redirect without creating shame or defensiveness.

## FACILITATING WITH INTEGRITY: BALANCE, POWER, AND HARM

In polarizing conversations, “balance” means holding a principled commitment to broad participation, harm reduction, and ethical dialogue, without necessarily positioning all perspectives as equally valid.

### What Balanced Conversations Look Like:

- **Offer opt-out mechanisms:** Provide the option to skip a question to preserve participant agency.
- **Centered on lived experience:** Invite stories and truth-telling, not point-counterpoint debates. Balance means listening to diverse realities, not creating artificial binaries (e.g., “for or against”).
- **Naming power dynamics:** Acknowledge that not all perspectives carry equal weight in society. Facilitators can say: “This conversation doesn’t assume all views have equal power within society. We recognize that people experience harm and marginalization differently, and we can explore how those realities may appear in this conversation.”
- **Setting agreements that prioritize respect and harm reduction:** Make clear that respecting others’ humanity in a dialogue is a baseline, not a negotiable belief. Group agreements should promote respect, curiosity, and sharing.
- **Distinguishing discomfort from harm:** Growth requires discomfort, especially when participants are challenged to explore a polarizing issue. But harm, like dehumanizing language or identity denial, should never be normalized in the name of “dialogue.”

### A Note on Neutrality

Facilitators often hear that they must remain “neutral,” but neutrality is a deeply contested term. Most of us carry conscious or unconscious biases, and pretending to have none can lead to harm rather than fairness. Attempting to maintain “neutrality” in the face of dehumanizing comments or identity-based harm compromises the integrity and safety of the space.

### Facilitator Tip

In moments of disruption, you might say, “Let’s pause and revisit our agreements. We’re committed to listening to understand and speaking from our own experiences. Let’s use those principles to guide us here.” This allows the group a moment to regroup.



Facilitators can remain fair and open without being passive in the face of harm. Facilitators don't need to be neutral—they need to be impartial, treating all participants fairly and without discrimination. Impartiality doesn't mean having no biases; it means being aware of them, transparent about the values guiding the conversation, and committed to upholding dignity, participation, and respect. That means doing the inner work to understand their biases, being transparent about the values guiding the conversation, and balancing openness with a clear stance on dignity, full participation, and respect. It also may mean deciding not to facilitate a conversation on an issue that you feel too personally connected to or where your impartiality is challenged. Recognizing when additional help may be needed is a sign of a self-aware facilitator.

## CO-FACILITATION AND SUPPORT ROLES

Facilitating conversations on polarizing issues is rarely a solo job and shouldn't have to be. These dialogues often involve navigating emotional complexity, responding to tension in real time, and balancing both content and group dynamics. Having a co-facilitator or support person distributes the logistical load and strengthens your ability to hold the space with care and responsiveness.

In moments of intensity or disruption, a second facilitator can provide calm reinforcement, manage the room's energy, or privately support a distressed participant. Co-facilitation also models collaboration and mutual accountability—two values especially important in conversations inviting vulnerability and difference.

### Tips for Effective Co-Facilitation:

- **Plan together in advance** to clarify roles, handoffs, and what support looks like.
- **Use hand signals or visual cues** to communicate silently during the session.
- **Debrief afterward** to reflect on what went well, what felt hard, and what could improve for next time.

## What we mean by harm

In this context, harm refers to language or behavior that dehumanizes, excludes, stereotypes, or denies someone's identity or lived experience. This can include dismissive or mocking comments, identity-based attacks, or reinforcing dominant narratives that erase marginalized perspectives. Harm can be intentional or unintentional, but still impacts participants' sense of safety, dignity, and belonging.

## Why this matters

Naming power imbalances or harms in polarizing conversations builds trust and reduces existing divides. This approach helps facilitators hold space for complexity while setting clear boundaries—creating an environment where difficult truths can emerge without causing avoidable harm. It's not about censoring discomfort but ensuring that every person is treated with dignity.

## Use Your Co-Facilitator Strategically

If you're working with a co-facilitator or support staff, develop a shared plan for how to step in during tense moments. Sometimes, having another person gently intervene, offer a breathing break, or shift the pacing can de-escalate without amplifying the disruption.

Example: One facilitator continues the dialogue while the other checks in privately with a distressed or disruptive participant.

In small group settings—such as a circle where everyone is visible—discreet check-ins can be challenging. Co-facilitators might invite the person to help with a logistics task (like stepping out to help prepare a break) or simply take a brief pause in the conversation and ask if anyone needs a moment. This allows for subtle support without singling anyone out.

## Preparing Your Team for the Conversation

Polarizing conversations require not only thoughtful facilitation, but also thoughtful team preparation. Ensuring facilitators, volunteers, and support staff are ready helps maintain consistency, safety, and shared purpose throughout the event.

## Facilitator Readiness

While professional expertise isn't required to host meaningful dialogue, thorough preparation is still key. Facilitators of polarizing conversations should feel equipped to:

- Stay grounded when tension arises.
- Redirect unproductive exchanges with care.
- Guide conversations in ways that prioritize respect, curiosity, and reflection.
- Know when to pause, reframe, or ask for support.

Even if you don't have formal training, reviewing response strategies and planning with a co-facilitator or mentor can go a long way. What matters most is that you show up with humility, clarity, and a willingness to steward the space thoughtfully. Preparation doesn't mean having all the answers—it means having a plan, practicing responsiveness, and knowing you're not alone.

For more detailed guidance on developing a safety plan—including who should be involved and how to prepare for potential disruptions—refer back to Chapter 2.

Need backup? The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) offers a public member map of experienced dialogue and deliberation practitioners. If you'd like support from a trained facilitator—or are unsure about

### Facilitator Tip

First-time facilitators may not be ready to lead conversations on deeply polarized issues. Consider choosing an issue that is less contentious but still relevant to the community. The *Libraries Transforming Communities: Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries* e-course provides a thorough review of facilitation basics.



facilitating a highly polarizing conversation—you can use this resource to find someone in your region or connect with a potential co-host.

### Staff & Volunteer Support

Beyond facilitators, staff and volunteers supporting the conversation should also be briefed and aligned. They can:

- Reinforce group agreements.
- Provide logistical and emotional support (e.g., helping someone step out or locating a quiet space).
- Help manage the physical space and assist with accessibility needs.
- Ensure participants feel welcomed, seen, and supported.

For library-hosted conversations, frontline staff who interact with the public before or during the event and those who handle library communications and program promotions should have clear guidance on describing the program and answering questions. This can prevent misinterpretation of the event's purpose and help maintain trust with the community.

## TOOLS FOR GROUNDING YOURSELF

Facilitating polarizing conversations means stepping into spaces where emotions may run high, trust may be fragile, and tension may arise without warning. Facilitators must first regulate their nervous systems to guide others effectively through these moments. Grounding yourself doesn't just help you stay calm and responsive—it also sets the emotional tone for the group.

In charged conversations, your ability to stay present and centered is often more impactful than anything you say. Prepare and practice grounding tools in advance so they're available to you when the moment calls for them.

### Facilitator Grounding Tools

- **Breath awareness**, like box breathing (inhale-4, hold-4, exhale-4, hold-4), to settle your system quickly
- **A grounding object** you can keep in your hand or pocket to connect with physical presence (e.g., small stone, silent fidget toy, shell)
- **Brief physical movement** during breaks (e.g., stretching, shaking out your hands) to release tension and reset
- **A short personal mantra or phrase** to repeat quietly (e.g., “Breathe and stay steady,” or “Curiosity over control”)

## TIP



Consider hosting a brief team huddle before the event to clarify roles, discuss the event's framing, and answer any last-minute questions. Review protocols for potential issues, such as angry or threatening patrons, reporter attendance or questions, etc. Shared clarity leads to shared confidence.

If you become overwhelmed, pausing or asking your co-facilitator to take over temporarily is okay. Modeling self-regulation is not a failure—it’s a powerful demonstration that even difficult conversations can be navigated with care and integrity.

Reminder: Your regulation helps regulate the room. People tend to sync emotionally with those around them—your calm presence can be a silent anchor in moments of strain.

## GRAPPLING WITH MISINFORMATION AND EPISTEMIC SHIFTS

In today’s rapidly evolving information landscape, facilitators must navigate differences in values, perspectives, and perceptions of truth. As access to data changes, definitions are contested, and public narratives diverge, it is increasingly common for conversation participants to work from fundamentally different epistemic foundations—that is, different understandings of what is true and how truth is established.

This reality presents a significant challenge for facilitators: How do we hold space for constructive dialogue without inadvertently validating or amplifying misinformation, distortion, or propaganda?

While this toolkit is rooted in mutual respect, curiosity, and collaboration, not every perspective is rooted in good faith inquiry or verifiable information. The considerations below offer guidance for navigating these moments with integrity and care.

### Facilitator Considerations: Navigating Distorted Information

1. **Don’t pretend all perspectives are equal:** Facilitating balance doesn’t mean giving equal weight to harmful or false narratives. Facilitators can set the tone by grounding the conversation in verifiable facts, naming shared sources, and clarifying the difference between opinions and falsehoods.
2. **Acknowledge the context of disinformation:** Where appropriate, acknowledge that participants may encounter contradictory or politicized information. Consider naming this explicitly: “We know a lot of conflicting information impacts this issue, and even the data has been contested. Part of today’s conversation concerns understanding how we make meaning in this context.”
3. **Equip yourself with reliable sources:** Prepare by gathering materials from nonpartisan, evidence-based sources recognized for accuracy. These can be included as pre-readings or framing materials to establish a common starting point.
4. **Frame with transparency and purpose:** Emphasize that the goal is not to resolve every factual dispute but to understand how people experience and interpret information, and how we build understanding across those divides without compromising integrity.
5. **Address the risk of harm:** If someone shares misinformation or harmful distortions, facilitators can intervene without escalating: “Let’s pause there. That statement doesn’t align with the information we’ve gathered. Would you mind sharing what has led you to that view?”
6. **Remind people of the conversation purpose:** If the conversation is veering toward a debate of facts and data, regroup by restating the purpose: “Let’s focus on the lived experiences and values behind our positions rather than trying to fact-check each other in real time.”

## What This Means for Facilitated Conversations

Dialogue has the power to transform understanding, but this is challenged by the prevalence of misinformation. Facilitators are not arbiters of truth but are responsible for designing spaces that minimize harm and promote constructive engagement grounded in good faith.

These tools and framing strategies help facilitators hold these complex tensions, where factual disagreement may not be a misunderstanding but a reflection of deeper societal fractures. These strategies are not foolproof but aim to support thoughtful, principled engagement in an increasingly divided world.

## RESPONDING TO DISRUPTION AND TENSION IN THE MOMENT

Even with thoughtful design and strong facilitation, difficult moments can arise during polarizing conversations. A participant may share something offensive, a discussion may veer off course, or emotions may run high. These moments don't mean the conversation has failed—they're often signs that the dialogue is touching something meaningful.

Facilitators don't need all the answers but do need a plan on how to address the situation. Grounding in the group's shared agreements, purpose, and structure can help navigate tension skillfully and maintain trust.

### Strategies for Navigating Disruption

- **Slow down the pace.** When tensions rise, deliberately slowing your speech, repeating the purpose of the session, or even inserting a minute of silent reflection can refocus the energy in the room. Slowing the pace gives participants time to process, reduces reactivity, and signals that the conversation is handled carefully. It creates breathing room—literally and emotionally—when things feel charged.
- **Pause the conversation.** Take a breath and create space to assess the moment. Tension can escalate quickly in polarizing conversations. Pausing allows everyone—including the facilitator—to regulate their emotions, gather their thoughts, and return to the discussion with more intention. It shows that care is being taken with the conversation rather than rushing through discomfort. Facilitators should be careful, however, not to stop the conversation every time they feel uncomfortable, but instead focus on the responses in the room to indicate when participants may need a break or moment of pause.

*Facilitator language: "Let's take a moment to pause and reflect before we move forward."*

- **Name what's happening.** Gently calling attention to tension can defuse it. Often, tension builds when it's unspoken. Simply naming what you observe without blame can relieve pressure in the room and normalize emotional responses. It signals that discomfort is not a failure but something to move through together.

*Facilitator language: "I'm noticing some discomfort. Let's take a minute to check in on how we're doing."*

- **Name the emotion, not the person.** When someone's tone or energy escalates, reflect on what's emerging without assigning blame. This approach helps reduce defensiveness and encourages personal reflection. It allows facilitators to address disruption without singling someone out, preserving safety and dignity for everyone involved.

*Facilitator language: "It sounds like there's some frustration in the room right now. That is normal when discussing important issues. Let's take a breath and check in with what we need to keep going productively."*

- **Reground in purpose and agreements.** Remind participants why the group is here and what agreements they committed to. Returning to shared purpose and group agreements helps recenter the conversation in moments of tension. It reminds participants of the intentional space they co-created and reinforces collective responsibility for the space.

*Facilitator language: “Our purpose is to learn from one another, not to debate. Let’s return to our shared goal of understanding.”*

- **Ask reflective or reframing questions.** If the conversation gets stuck in debate or tension, use an impartial, curiosity-driven prompt to shift the lens. These questions help move the conversation from reactive disagreement to thoughtful reflection. They invite empathy, interrupt binary thinking, and surface shared values beneath the conflict.

*Facilitator language:*

- “What values might be at the heart of this disagreement?”
- “What feels most important for us to understand here?”
- “What’s the impact of this conversation so far, and what would help us move forward with care?”

- **Shift the format temporarily.** If full-group discussion escalates, move into small groups or pairs for reflection. Changing the structure lowers emotional intensity and gives participants space to think more privately. It also allows quieter voices to emerge and can reduce performative or reactive dynamics in the larger group. Note: If possible, try to mix perspectives in your small groups. This allows the exploration of multiple perspectives without as much reactivity.

*Facilitator language: “Let’s take a few minutes in pairs to reflect on what’s surfacing before we return to the full group.”*

- **Offer a “step out, step back in” option.** Remind participants they can take a break anytime and return when ready. This reinforces agency and helps prevent public conflict or emotional shutdown. Normalizing breaks supports self-regulation, reduces pressure, and empowers participants to stay engaged in a way that works for them. A break can also be scheduled at an appropriate pause in the conversation to allow participants to anticipate time for a restroom break, refreshments, or to get some air.

*Facilitator language: “If anyone needs to take a moment, please feel free to step out and return when you’re ready. We want you to care for yourself in this space.”*

- **Use structure.** Offer a journaling prompt, a pair-share, or a short breathing break to reset the energy and allow participants to reflect. Built-in structure helps participants move from reaction to reflection. These moments provide containment, allow nervous systems to reset, and help redirect energy back toward productive dialogue. This can be built into your plan for the conversation to address any tensions that may arise.

*Example journaling or pair-share prompts:*

- “What’s coming up for you in this moment?”
- “What do you need in order to stay present in this conversation?”
- “What’s one thing you heard that challenged or resonated with you?”

## ADDRESSING HARM IN THE MOMENT

In polarizing conversations, not all tension is created equal. Some discomfort is productive, but when harm arises, facilitators must act clearly and compassionately to uphold the safety and dignity of the space.

These strategies help you respond in real time while maintaining group trust and accountability:

- **Have a response plan:** Know how you'll respond if harm occurs; pause the conversation, revisit agreements, offer restorative options, or take a break.
- **Embrace complexity while holding the line:** People have a range of perspectives, but those perspectives aren't all equally informed or rooted in care. Facilitators can hold space for curiosity, change, and nuance without entertaining harmful ideologies. "I want to remind the group that while we may see things differently, disrespecting or dehumanizing one another will not be tolerated."
- **Name harm calmly and clearly:** "I want to pause here. That language may be harmful. Let's take a moment to reset and return to our agreements."
- **Reground in agreements:** "Let's come back to our shared agreement to speak from personal experience and avoid generalizations."
- **Interrupt and redirect:** State, "Let's shift from assumptions to lived experience." Or ask, "How are folks responding to what was shared?"
- **Offer private paths for concerns:** Let participants know they can speak privately with a facilitator or host if they feel unsafe or harmed.
- **Follow up after incidents:** If harm happens, contact those affected after the event. Acknowledge the impact and take responsibility for any contribution you made as a facilitator, as well as ways you will be more accountable in the future.

## What to Avoid

**False equivalency** occurs when two opposing arguments are presented as equally valid—even when one is rooted in lived experience, research, or established facts, and the other is based on denial, misinformation, or bias. This framing may seem balanced, but it can distort reality and cause harm, especially to those directly impacted by the topic at hand—whether that's racial injustice, climate change, or other high-stakes issues (e.g., "Some people say systemic racism exists, others say it doesn't—let's treat both views equally."). This may sound balanced, but it flattens the conversation by treating credible evidence and lived experience as just one "side" of a debate. When facilitators frame harmful denial or misinformation as equally valid, it undermines trust and can retraumatize or alienate participants—especially those directly impacted by the issue being discussed.

*What to do instead: Acknowledge that people bring different experiences and understandings to frame the conversation around how racism shows up in people's lives or institutions, not whether it exists.*

**Debating someone's identity or humanity** as a valid "perspective." Framing someone's existence—such as their race, gender identity, or sexuality—as a topic up for debate sends the message that their dignity is conditional. It creates an unsafe environment where participants must defend their right to be seen and respected.

*What to do instead: Establish that group agreements include respect for people's humanity as a non-negotiable baseline. If participants raise concerns or questions, center personal experience and curiosity, not judgment or identity denial.*

**Over-prioritizing civility at the cost of truth-telling and justice.** Overemphasizing politeness can suppress valid anger or discomfort, especially from those naming harm. When civility becomes the primary goal, it can silence marginalized voices and prioritize comfort over accountability.

*What to do instead: Encourage respectful dialogue, but clarify that emotional expression, especially in response to injustice, is welcome. Make space for truth-telling and complexity, even when it feels uncomfortable.*

Interrupting harm is not about punishment—it’s about modeling accountability and care, and making it possible for the group to move forward together.

## Interrupt Harm With Care

If a participant makes a comment that is dehumanizing, offensive, or violates group agreements, facilitators should respond directly and calmly. Interrupting harm is essential to protect those who may be impacted and preserve the space’s trust, safety, and integrity. When left unaddressed, harm can silence others, reinforce marginalization, or erode group safety. A firm, respectful intervention affirms the group’s commitment to dignity, fairness, and respect.

Facilitator example: “I want to pause here. That language may feel hurtful or exclusionary to others in the room. Let’s return the conversation to personal experience and curiosity, as we agreed.”

If the behavior continues after redirection, facilitators may need to escalate their response:

- Reiterate the purpose of the gathering and group agreements.
- Offer the individual a chance to take a break or step out.
- If necessary, remove the person from the conversation to uphold the safety of others.

If escalation is needed: “We’ve reviewed our agreements, and this space is designed to be safe and appropriate for everyone. I will ask that we pause here, and I’d like to connect with you one-on-one outside the group.”

## KNOWING WHEN TO STEP IN (OR STEP OUT)

In polarizing conversations, discomfort is not a problem—it’s part of the process. When participants explore deeply held beliefs, identities, or values, some emotional intensity is normal—and even necessary—for growth and learning.

But discomfort isn’t the same as harm. Part of the facilitator’s role is to discern when to gently intervene to protect the integrity of the space and when to let the group move through discomfort on its own.

Intervene when:

- A comment dehumanizes or disrespects someone’s identity, experience, or humanity.
- Someone breaks a group agreement (e.g., one person dominates, interrupts, or blames others).
- A participant appears visibly distressed, overwhelmed, or unsafe.
- Misinformation or harmful narratives steer the conversation in a way that violates the space’s stated purpose or integrity.

Let the group work through it when:

- The discomfort stems from genuine disagreement, tension, or complexity, not a personal attack.
- Participants grapple with opposing ideas within the bounds of respect and curiosity.
- The moment feels difficult but still productive (e.g., participants are leaning in, not shutting down).

Facilitators don't need to protect people from all discomfort, but they do need to protect the space. By learning when to intervene and when to let things unfold, facilitators help groups build resilience, trust, and deeper insight—even amid polarization.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Facilitating tough conversations requires courage, humility, and skill. As this chapter has outlined, supporting meaningful dialogue in polarized times isn't about having all the answers—it's about creating conditions where people feel safe enough to speak, brave enough to listen, and grounded enough to stay engaged. From setting strong agreements to addressing harm with care, facilitators play a critical role in modeling the values of dignity, curiosity, and accountability. Whether you're a seasoned dialogue practitioner or stepping into this work for the first time, know that each conversation you host is a chance to build trust, deepen understanding, and strengthen the fabric of community.

# CHAPTER 5

## Moving Forward with Polarizing Conversations

Facilitating a polarizing conversation is only part of the journey. How a dialogue is closed, how lessons are carried forward, and how the library nurtures continued engagement all determine the long-term impact of the work. This chapter focuses on the steps that follow a conversation: wrapping up with care, gathering feedback, reflecting on lessons learned, sustaining yourself and your team, and finding ways to continue practicing over time. It also highlights how libraries can build a culture of dialogue that extends beyond individual events, ensuring that conversations contribute to a lasting pattern of connection and resilience in the community.

### CLOSING CONVERSATIONS WITH CARE

In conversations about polarizing issues, how the session ends is just as important as how it begins. A thoughtful closing provides participants with a sense of closure, an opportunity to process and reflect on what they've heard, and a reminder that they are still part of a community, even when they disagree.

#### Closings create space for:

- **Reflection:** Inviting people to notice shifts in perspective or insights and areas of common ground
- **Gratitude:** Acknowledging the courage it takes to show up and share honestly
- **Integration:** Helping participants identify what they want to carry forward or decisions made

#### Closing Questions:

- “What are you taking with you from this conversation?”
- “What did you learn about yourself or others?”
- “What do you hope to do or reflect on after this session?”

Before ending the conversation, note any follow-up opportunities—such as future conversations, a feedback form, or resources to explore—and leave the door open for continued engagement. If the information from the conversation will be used in any way, remind participants and let them know if they will receive any follow-up afterwards.

Closing well can help participants leave feeling more grounded, more connected, and more capable of continuing the work beyond the conversation.

#### TIP

If the session was intense, consider including a brief grounding practice or shared breath before ending. Closing rituals help release tension and return participants to a calmer baseline.



## EVALUATING AND LEARNING FROM EACH CONVERSATION

Success in polarized conversations often looks different than in other types of programming. You're not measuring consensus or the number of participants—you're measuring connection, resilience, and civic courage. Still, gathering some data and metrics will be helpful in gauging your success.

What to Track:

- **Representation:** Were multiple perspectives present? Did participants reflect a range of lived experiences, ideologies, or identities relevant to the issue?
- **Safety and belonging:** Did participants feel respected and heard? Were they able to be honest without fear of retaliation or shame?
- **Shifts in understanding:** Did participants leave with a broader understanding of others' perspectives? Do they report feeling more willing to engage across differences?
- **Post-conversation engagement:** Did the conversation spark a desire to keep talking, reflect further, or explore shared action?

How to Measure It:

- Use short post-conversation surveys with scaled and open-ended questions.
- Invite reflection through journaling or a closing question.
- Track follow-up actions, such as continued participation, new partnerships, and requests for future dialogues.

## REPORTING AND REFLECTING

Evaluation does not end when participants walk out the door. One of the most valuable steps libraries can take after hosting a polarizing conversation is pausing to reflect on what happened and documenting lessons learned. Reflection helps identify insights while they are fresh, and reporting ensures those insights are not lost and can inform future practice.

### Reflecting on lessons learned and best

**practices:** Just as important as documenting outcomes is reflecting on the process. After each session, gather involved facilitators, staff, volunteers, and/or partners to ask:

- What worked well in the design and facilitation of this conversation?
- What challenges or tensions emerged, and how were they addressed?
- What adjustments would improve future conversations?
- What best practices can we carry forward?

### Facilitator Tip

Build in a short team debrief immediately after each session while the experience is fresh, then return for a more extended reflection once participant feedback has been reviewed.



**Simple Reflection Process:** After each conversation, gather your team or partners in a circle (or around a table) for a short debrief. Go through each of the reflection questions one by one. Invite each person to share their observations, while someone documents the key points. This process can take as little as 20–30 minutes and ensures that important insights are captured consistently.

**Reporting on conversations:** Consider creating a short report or summary after each conversation. This does not need to be overly formal, but should include:

- The purpose and goals of the conversation
- Number and diversity of participants (without disclosing personally identifiable details)
- Key themes or insights that emerged
- Areas of agreement, disagreement, or ongoing tension
- Any follow-up actions identified
- Participant feedback and evaluation data

A one-page summary or even a shared email with key insights may be sufficient for your purposes. The goal is to capture lessons in a way that feels doable and useful, not burdensome.

Such reports can be shared with library leadership, partners, funders, or the wider community. They demonstrate accountability, highlight impact, and make the case for continued investment in dialogue. Clear documentation strengthens your library's internal learning and serves as evidence of impact that can be shared with potential funders. Demonstrating how conversations on polarizing issues benefit the community can open doors to new funding opportunities and partnerships that make this work more sustainable.

By consistently reporting and reflecting, libraries create a cycle of learning that strengthens their role as conveners. Over time, these records become a valuable archive of community insights, building a foundation for more representative and effective dialogue.

## SUSTAINING THE TEAM

Facilitating polarizing conversations can be exhausting. It is normal for facilitators and staff to feel stretched or even drained after holding space for difficult issues. A strong, well-supported team creates the foundation for success and resilience.

For larger libraries, this may mean building shared practices across staff. For smaller libraries where staff may be limited, “team” can also mean trusted partners, volunteers, or community members who co-facilitate or provide support. What matters most is not doing this work entirely alone, if possible.

### Strategies for facilitator and staff care:

- **Sharing the load.** Rotate facilitation roles or invite outside practitioners to co-host, so responsibility is shared, especially if you are planning a series of conversations.
- **Debriefing as a team.** Take time to reflect together on what went well, what was challenging, and what support is needed.

- **Foster a supportive team environment.** Build a culture where team members feel comfortable discussing challenges and sharing strategies. Use practice scenarios, group debriefs, and collaborative planning to refine approaches to conflict and facilitation.
- **Celebrate successes.** Acknowledge and share moments of successful dialogue or conflict mitigation from both the facilitator’s perspective and the participants’ experiences. Recognizing these successes, whether big or small, reinforces confidence and inspires others to continue engaging in conversations.
- **Seeking outside support.** For mentorship and support, tap into networks like the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) or regional facilitation groups.

Remember: This is long-term work. Libraries thrive when staff are supported and resourced to continue convening, whether that support comes from fellow staff, volunteers, or external partners.

## SUSTAINING YOURSELF

Facilitating polarizing conversations can take a real toll on energy and emotions. Sustaining yourself is essential for staying grounded and effective over time, especially in libraries where staff may be limited. Tending to your well-being ensures you can continue this work long-term.

### Strategies for sustaining yourself:

- **Practicing self-care.** Use grounding techniques, rest, and practices that help maintain your well-being. Small rituals, such as taking a short walk, journaling after a session, or deep breathing, can help you reset.
- **Acknowledge the emotional labor.** Recognize that facilitating polarizing conversations requires emotional energy. Allow yourself time to recover, and give yourself grace when the work feels heavy.
- **Celebrate successes.** Take time to notice what went well and acknowledge your role in making dialogue possible. Small wins, like a moment of respectful listening or a participant sharing something vulnerable, add up and sustain motivation.
- **Build your circle of support.** Reach out to peers in other libraries, statewide associations, or networks like ALA and NCDD. Even if you are the only library staff member, you don’t have to do this work alone. Connecting with colleagues beyond your immediate setting provides both encouragement and fresh ideas.

You can only model calm, grounded presence for your community if you first take care of your own grounding. Sustaining yourself is not optional; it’s what makes the work possible.

## FACING CHALLENGES WITH COURAGE

Not every conversation will go smoothly, and challenges may arise. Some dialogues will feel awkward, others may be disrupted, and not every participant will walk away changed. That is not failure; it is part of the process. Discomfort is a sign that the dialogue is touching something important. Yet every effort matters. Each time your library chooses to hold space for dialogue, you affirm the possibility of community, even in the face of division.

This reality may be especially true for libraries with a single staff member. Carrying the responsibility alone can feel daunting, which is why it is so important to connect with peers and partners for support.

### As you move forward, remember:

- **You don't have to do this perfectly.** The value lies in showing up with care and intention.
- **You don't have to do this alone.** Seek partners, co-facilitators, and networks for support.
- **Every conversation matters.** Even small steps contribute to building a more connected, resilient community.

## Facilitator Tip

Normalize imperfection. Share with participants that the goal is not perfection but practice, learning together how to engage across differences.



## CONTINUING TO PRACTICE AND LEARN

The ability to facilitate polarizing conversations improves with practice. Treat each interaction as an opportunity to build confidence and deepen skill. Like any discipline, these habits are strengthened through repetition and reflection. For smaller or rural libraries, where staff capacity may be limited, this often means practicing in partnership with others, whether colleagues at nearby libraries, trusted community partners, or professional networks. Connecting with peers ensures you don't have to learn these skills in isolation.

- **Encourage practice.** Integrate facilitation and de-escalation skills into daily interactions with patrons and colleagues. Small, consistent steps help normalize constructive dialogue as part of library culture.
- **Utilize reflection.** Reflect on your experiences with tough conversations and seek feedback from colleagues regarding what worked and what didn't. These reflections foster growth, confidence, and resilience in handling future dialogues.
- **Commit to ongoing learning.** Regularly revisit training materials, seek additional resources, and attend workshops to expand knowledge and adapt to evolving challenges. Engaging with professional networks, such as ALA, statewide library associations, or NCDD, can provide accessible learning opportunities and a community of practice.

Practicing in low-stakes situations—like staff meetings, book discussions, or informal conversations—can build readiness for higher-stakes community dialogues. When possible, collaborate with peers to share experiences, role-play scenarios, and build collective confidence.

## BUILDING A CULTURE OF ONGOING DIALOGUE

Hosting one conversation is a meaningful step. Hosting many conversations, over time, begins to shift the culture. Libraries that regularly commit to convening dialogues can normalize respectful disagreement and nurture a shared expectation that community members can discuss hard things together.

For libraries with limited staff capacity, consider partnering with nearby libraries or community organizations to co-host dialogues. Even if your library cannot hold frequent conversations on its own, collaborating regionally can extend impact and make the practice sustainable. In doing so, libraries help reduce polarization in individual conversations and the broader civic environment.

## Strategies for sustaining momentum include:

- **Create continuity.** Offer follow-up conversations or series that revisit key themes, allowing relationships to deepen and perspectives to evolve. This also allows participants to come back again, hopefully bringing others with them.
- **Embed dialogue in programming.** Incorporate conversational elements into book clubs, author talks, or civic education programs so dialogue becomes part of the library's identity. The community will be familiar with the practice, and respectful conversation will become part of the expectation of joining a library event.
- **Build partnerships.** Work with schools, faith communities, advocacy groups, civic organizations, and local leaders to share responsibilities and expand the reach of dialogue. Consider holding conversations in different community spaces, using a variety of facilitators, and working collaboratively on follow-up.
- **Lift up community stories.** Share outcomes, reflections, or participant quotes (with permission) to demonstrate impact and inspire others to join. Encourage participants to help spread the word, too!

## THE BROADER IMPACT

The impact of library-facilitated conversations goes far beyond the event itself. Each dialogue contributes to strengthening the civic fabric of your community.

When libraries host these conversations, they help individuals understand one another better and help communities learn to navigate differences constructively. This role is both radical and profoundly needed in an era of deep polarization.

This work affirms the role of libraries as trusted conveners and community builders. Each conversation, whether large or small, constitutes an act of civic care that helps neighbors remember their shared humanity.

### By modeling respectful engagement, libraries:

- Inspire individuals to carry the skills of listening and empathy into their daily lives.
- Counteract the pull of division and echo chambers.
- Strengthen civic trust and resilience.
- Provide a template for how other institutions can engage across divides.
- Demonstrate how transformational respectful conversations can be for the individual and the community.

Libraries are places where community building and civic life can take root. By convening polarizing conversations, you are contributing to something larger than any single event: you are nurturing the skills, relationships, and resilience communities need to thrive.

This ripple effect extends beyond the library walls, influencing schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and civic institutions. In this way, libraries are not only places of learning, they become places of civic resiliency.

## WHY THIS WORK MATTERS

Throughout this guide, we have seen why libraries are uniquely positioned to convene conversations on difficult issues. In today's climate of division, libraries stand out as one of the most trusted community anchors that can model a different way forward. As we conclude, it is important to zoom back out: why does this work matter in the long run?

Polarization is not something that can be “solved” in a single event. It is a condition of civic life that requires steady attention, skill, and care. By hosting dialogues, libraries do more than offer programs. They help their communities practice the democratic habits of listening, curiosity, empathy, and collaboration across differences. These practices are not just skills for a meeting; they are foundations for civic trust and community resilience.

Every time your library creates a space where people can talk about difficult issues respectfully, you are counteracting the forces that pull us apart. You are strengthening trust. You are helping neighbors remember that, despite disagreements, they are part of the same community.









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