

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The objective of the *Talking Values: Soulful Conversations within Community Economic Development* is to create a dialogue among those who care about the field of community economic development and to take us beyond the usual conversations about programs, techniques, and resources.

Community values that gave rise to the field — equality and opportunity — sometimes get lost in the day-to-day business details. Yet at this moment, it is those values and vision that need to be rejuvenated, brought more clearly to the surface, and articulated among a new generation of leaders. The field may need to be re-oriented or even redefined.

Talking Values is intended as a catalyst of conversations, not as an answer or the end of discussion. We expect NACEDA members, and those they touch, to use *Talking Values* as a tool to create conversations in a variety of settings, among staff and board of community economic development organizations, community leaders, and supporters in a variety of institutions. We look to get at the questions or issues rumbling beneath your group's usual activity, the issues that often get overlooked or ignored.

This Discussion Guide is intended to help you facilitate that process in four simple steps:

1. Preparation
2. Opening
3. Discussion
4. Closing

Preparation

We envision discussions might take place in a variety of forums. Two settings that might be led by a practitioner, who is not a professional facilitator, come to mind:

- a discussion as part of a meeting of the staff of an organization;
- a discussion as part of a regular meeting of the board of directors of an organization.

An open discussion at a conference with a mixed audience, like an annual statewide meeting, probably requires the skills of a professional facilitator.

The discussion organizer, you, would need to prepare differently for each of the settings. The discussion at a board meeting, for example, might be shorter than a staff meeting. Here are some basic preparatory steps:

1. Pick one of the essays for each discussion. Do not try to cover the whole range of essays in one discussion.
2. Make sure everybody has received the essay ahead of time and has ample time to read and reflect.
3. Decide who will lead or facilitate the conversation, maybe it's you. That person's role is to draw out participation from the group, not to make a presentation or be a commentator on the contribution of individuals in the group. Pick someone with the personality for that role.
4. As much as possible, prepare the physical setting of the discussion to encourage dialogue and cross conversation. Enable participants to see each other face-to-face, for example, rather than sit in theater or classroom style.

The most important thing in getting a discussion going effectively is for the facilitator to be absolutely crystal clear with the instructions you provide to the group. If the facilitator has time to practice, it would be to test all instructions on a second person. Have the second person repeat back to the facilitator what they think they should do. You don't want to waste time with people saying, "I don't know if this is what you want from me but ..." or "tell me again what I'm supposed to do" or "did you mean ...?"

Opening

Introduce the activity and what expectations, if any, you have as facilitator. Clarify by saying something to the effect of: “this discussion is not intended to come to closure on the questions. Rather it is intended to provoke reactions, surface issues, and allow us to discuss our values and vision for our work.”

Create an immediate opportunity for people to speak to set a participatory expectation from the beginning.

FOR EXAMPLE: A round robin opener among people who know each other might be “I am going to ask each of you to provide one sentence that reflects your reaction to the selected essay.” Model what you want by saying one of your own sentences.

FOR EXAMPLE: Among people who don’t know each other, you might ask participants to “introduce yourself by name, the name of your organization, and your role in the organization, adding, in one sentence, the first thing that came to mind when reading the essay.” Model what you want them to do by saying your name, your organization’s name, and your title. Then say one sentence that adds what came to your mind.

If the group has more than eight people, ask people to pair up with their neighbor to share their first reaction to the essay or question. Then ask the pairs each to share one sentence with the full group.

REVIEW SOME GROUND RULES:

1. There is no right or wrong answer, correct or incorrect comment.
2. Respect individual perspective; you might disagree with a comment but do not attack the person.
3. Be brief in your comments.
4. Allow each person to finish.
5. Follow the direction of the moderator, including prompts “to finish up, please.”

It is important that the moderator or facilitator not comment on participants’ contributions.

The Discussion

Ask each person to provide a reaction or comment to the essay in 30 seconds.

Other sample questions to get a conversation started, also with the 30 second limit:

- What was the most startling, new, or surprising point made by the essay?
- How does the writer confirm or challenge the work we are doing, or the way in which we are doing it?
- What basic values or vision of community economic development is conveyed by this essay? Does it fit your values and vision?

Ask that the group **allow everyone to make one** contribution before anybody adds a second.

Tell the group: “**Don’t comment on others’ points**, even if your comment is positive.”

Consider **writing the contributions on flip chart paper or whiteboard** for all to see if this is a group that works together regularly. This is especially important if the conversation is part of a series, and this is the first among several discussion sessions that you want recorded. Taking notes in front of the group can also help identify topics to revisit if time allows.

However, it is tough to briefly capture accurately what people mean. So, **ask each person to help**. Here’s an example of how you, the facilitator, can capture the group’s most salient points:

Stop and think a minute about what you will say. You will have only 30 seconds — it’s longer than you think. To help the recorder, think about the newspaper headline for your 30 second comment. For example, If I am going to comment how racism causes all our problems and colors everything this organization does in this community, I might end by saying my headline is ‘be conscious of racism always.’

Enforce the 30 second limit (gently).

Allow a **short period for a second contribution** from anyone with a burning second point.

Then, **at the end, you could ask the group:**

“What do you think are the implications of this essay for your work?”

OR, if they share an organization, “What do you think are the implications of this essay for this organization?”

Before ending, if time allows, **feel free to refer to the whiteboard**, and ask:

“On which of these comments would you like to have more discussion now?”

Record the votes of the group and pick the most popular one. Set a time limit for the discussion. Remind them we are not trying to come to a conclusion, rather to open a dialogue.

Closing

You will want to **wrap up the conversation** in a way that doesn’t seek consensus or stifle the questions raised, but simply marks the end of your time together.

Think ahead of time and plan how you will draw the conversation to a close. What kind of closing exercise, if any, will you use?

Thank people for their participation and encourage them to continue the dialogue with other participants in the group, and/or to be back in touch with you about their reactions and suggestions for follow-up.

Sample closing questions:

- How was this conversation useful or exciting to you?
- What do you think we should do next with this discussion?
- Where do we go from here?

If you are facilitating a discussion among people in your own organization, a good question might be:

“What was one thing this discussion you think confirms or challenges the work of this organization?”

If you are in a multi-organization leadership setting, a good question might be:

“What was one thing from this discussion you think has the most impact on the field of community economic development?”

► SUPPLEMENT:

A guide for open discussions with a mixed group

Conversations at the level *Talking Values* intends are challenging for individuals just coming together for this conversation, as might happen at a conference, for example. The potential presence of an audience is also a challenge for the mixed-group format. We recommend having a skilled facilitator moderate such a discussion. That facilitator should know how to modify the design of this Discussion Guide for a mixed group setting.

The facilitator/moderator should be asked to model facilitation methods for mixed-group participants to use back home, when a trained facilitator is not available. The moderator should announce they are providing this model, by suggesting “what you see is a good way to conduct this conversation.”

In that context, suggest to participants “we want you to take in this experience from three perspectives.”

- Be a participant – share what you want to share.
- Think how you might share this experience with someone else.
 - ▶ What would you say that would make this kind of discussion attractive to them?
 - ▶ Of course, consider their vantage point on community development (CED staff, a banker, a funder, a board member). What might attract them to this conversation?
- Think of yourself as a facilitator back home – what method, guiding phrase, (“in a moment, I’m going to ...”), sequence of activity, or technique would you want to emulate?

In summary, mixed-group facilitation is more challenging than it might seem. We recommend having a trained facilitator for such a setting.

Questions to get the conversation started

It is also challenging to convene a conversation where the facilitator sets a topic or question rather than a general reflection session. The first challenge to setting an effective environment for that conversation is drafting a question that is specific enough yet opens the conversation rather than providing or forcing a quick answer.

- You will find sample questions at the end of each lead essay to use as a starting point.