Cultural Communication Styles: Part A

The following statements describe different styles of communication that are often related to cultural customs. Choose the statement *in each pair* that you agree with most.

1. ☐ a. I am a “hugger”— I like to be physically close to people.  
☐ b. I feel uncomfortable when others invade “my space.”

2. ☐ a. I think young people should address their elders formally (“Mr.” or “Mrs.”).  
☐ b. I think it’s OK for young people to call adults by their first name.

3. ☐ a. I want people to tell me what they think, and not “beat around the bush.”  
☐ b. I feel uncomfortable when people are too direct with me.

4. ☐ a. I think that it’s important to be on time.  
☐ b. Being on time is not important to me.

5. ☐ a. I value individuality and independence.  
☐ b. Fitting into the group is important to me.

6. ☐ a. I take time to think about what I am going to say before I speak.  
☐ b. I just say whatever is on my mind.

7. ☐ a. I feel comfortable expressing my emotions.  
☐ b. I prefer to keep my emotions to myself.

8. ☐ a. It makes me uncomfortable when people yell at one another.  
☐ b. Raised voices don’t bother me.

9. ☐ a. I think disagreements can be productive.  
☐ b. I believe arguments lead to misunderstandings.
Caution: The communication styles described here are generalizations and do not hold true for all members of a cultural group. Understanding these basic cultural values can help us get along better with one another. But be careful not to stereotype individuals based on the descriptions below.

Keep the following questions in mind as you do this exercise:

> How might cultural differences affect a small-group dialogue?

> What will help my ability to facilitate a mixed group? What might be a barrier?

> How are racial and cultural dynamics the same? How are they different?

NOTE: The numbers after each topic refer to the corresponding numbers in Cultural Communication Styles: Part A.

**Personal Space (1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Close</th>
<th>Farther away</th>
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</table>

Some cultures value closeness; in others, people like to keep their distance. To learn how people in different cultures feel about personal space, watch the way people in the same cultural group greet one another. For example, Americans usually shake hands when they meet for the first time. In some other cultures, people may bow, or kiss one another on the cheek.

What happens when people who have different “greeting styles” meet? What does this tell you about how people in different cultures think about “personal space”?
Cultural Communication Styles: Part B
(continued)

Formality (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Informal</th>
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Social interactions may be formal or informal, depending on the culture. Some cultures are quite formal. For example, in some Asian cultures, it is impolite to call a person by name. Instead, you would say, “Oldest Aunt,” “Little Brother,” “Wise Doctor,” or “Honored Teacher.”

In contrast, American culture usually is quite informal. Children or employees often call people by their first names. But it isn’t the same for every generation or in every part of the country. For example, people who were born before 1950—or people who were raised in the South—often prefer formal terms of address (“Sir” and “Ma’am,” or “Mr.” and “Mrs.”).

Sometimes formality is built into a language. For example, in Spanish there are two levels of address, informal (“tú”) and formal (“ustedes”). Friends and family members use the informal vocabulary, and they use formal language with people they don’t know.

What would happen in a typical American school if a student always said “Teacher,” instead of addressing the teacher by name? How would you feel if someone called you by your first name, the first time you met?

Directness (3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
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Some cultures are more “direct” than others. Many Americans prefer directness. We like people to “get to the point,” or “tell it like it is.” We don’t like people to “beat around the bush.” We also think someone who doesn’t “look us right in the eye” is dishonest or rude.

Other cultures prefer the indirect approach. In some cultures, it would be considered very rude to confront someone about a problem. To “save face,” you would ask someone else to tell the other person about the problem. And in some Native American cultures, children are taught that it is rude and disrespectful to look a person directly in the eye.

What would happen if an employee didn’t look the boss in the eye? What might the boss think? Or, how would you feel if one of your co-workers told you that your boss was unhappy with you?
Cultural Communication Styles: Part B
(continued)

**Importance of Time (4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punctuality</th>
<th>Time is flexible</th>
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</table>

Cultural attitudes about time vary a lot. In some cultures, being on time is very important. People who are late are regarded as rude, lazy, or disorganized. Americans say, “time is money.” It’s more important “to make the most of your time” than to spend time building relationships.

In other cultures, the view of time is flexible. The meeting starts when everyone is present and ends when people are done talking. Taking time to build relationships between people may be more important than sticking to a timeline.

*How might a teacher react if parents are late for a 10-minute conference? When building relationships is very important to them, how would parents feel if they were allowed only 10 minutes to meet with a teacher?*

**Individual vs. Group (5)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Group</th>
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</thead>
</table>

Most Americans put the individual before the group. “I” comes before “we.” In our culture, we’re expected to “stand on our own.” It’s up to us whether we succeed or fail. At school and at work, we single out individuals and reward them. We teach our children to be independent, and many young people live on their own after they graduate from high school.

Some other cultures put a high value on *interdependence*. People in these cultures put teamwork first. They seldom give rewards for individual achievement. Sticking together and fitting in with the group is more important than individual success. Children usually live with their parents until they are married. And, often, the extended family lives together, or nearby. Children are taught that they bring shame on the whole family or community when they do something wrong.

*If a person in a company comes up with a great idea for a new product, who should get credit—the individual or the entire team?*
Cultural Communication Styles: Part B
(continued)

Showing Emotion (6 & 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressive/spontaneous</th>
<th>Reserved/reflective</th>
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</table>

People in some cultures express their emotions freely. For example, Italians and Greeks and people from Latin American and African/African American cultures tend to be more open.

Other cultures are more reserved. Native American people tend to be more reflective; their rule is, it is better to listen than to speak. In some Asian countries, people seldom express strong feelings. (So, we have the stereotype of the “inscrutable Asian.”)

Most Americans are somewhere in the middle. They are likely to “speak their mind.” And they are fairly comfortable letting people know if they are happy or sad (although there are some gender stereotypes about expressing emotion).

*What might a boss think about an employee who rarely speaks in meetings and always waits to be invited to join a project? What might people think when they see a diverse group of noisy, excited teenagers?*

Approach to Conflict (8 & 9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict is OK</th>
<th>Conflict is to be avoided</th>
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</thead>
</table>

Cultures vary in their comfort with conflict. In some cultures, including American culture, people are taught to stand up for themselves, even when it leads to a disagreement. They believe that conflict can lead to “real communication.”

In other cultures, conflict is to be avoided at all cost. Yelling, expressing anger, or even speaking up is bad behavior. Any kind of disagreement makes people feel uncomfortable. In Japan, people are taught to blend in and to avoid arguments.

There are also cultures where raised voices may mean that people are just having a lively discussion, not arguing with each other.

*What would people think if two of their co-workers started shouting at one another? What might you think about a person who talked about you behind your back instead of coming directly to you about a problem?*
Further Information

This is a diagram of the three phases in a “round:” organizing, dialogue, and action. A diverse group of organizers sets goals and plans for a round. Then, many circles take place simultaneously across the community. When the small groups complete the dialogue, everyone comes together in a large meeting to share their experiences and their ideas for change. Large programs lead to a range of outcomes—from changing people’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, to new projects and collaborations, and to institutional and policy change.
A Community Dialogue-to-Change Program

A Community Dialogue-to-Change Program...

• is organized by a diverse group of leaders from different parts of the community.

• includes a large number of participants from all walks of life.

• uses balanced discussion materials, with a range of viewpoints.

• relies on trained facilitators to run the small-group discussions.

• helps the community connect dialogue to action and change.

Further Information

A community dialogue-to-change program is a process for public dialogue and problem solving. It begins with planning and organizing (which often takes several weeks or months), followed by many facilitated, small-group dialogues involving large numbers of people. In these small groups, people talk and work together to find solutions to public issues. The action ideas generated in the circles can lead to changes that will enable the community to make progress.

The results of these dialogues can be powerful. Real change happens when people gain new understanding of an issue, and form new relationships—across the barriers of race, background, political ideology, income, and geography. By participating in the dialogue, citizens take “ownership” of the issues. They discover connections between public policies and their own lives, and they gain a deeper understanding of their own and others’ concerns. And citizens build new connections with government, paving the way for institutional and policy change.
A Dialogue Circle

A Dialogue Circle...

• is a small, diverse group of 8 to 12 people.

• meets for several, two-hour sessions.

• sets its own ground rules. This helps the group share responsibility for the quality of the discussion.

• is led by an impartial facilitator who helps manage the discussion. The facilitator is not there to *teach* the group about the issue.

• begins with people getting to know one another, then helps the group look at a problem from many points of view. Next, the group explores possible solutions. Finally, they develop ideas for action and change.

Further Information

A dialogue circle is small-group democracy in action—all viewpoints are taken seriously, and each participant has an equal opportunity to participate. These face-to-face, facilitated dialogues help ordinary people understand complex social and political issues, and work together to find solutions.
What Dialogue Circles Are and Are Not: A Comparison

Dialogue Circles Are...

> small-group discussions that combine dialogue, deliberation, and problem solving. Based on balanced discussion materials, the dialogue is enriched by the members’ knowledge and experience. These groups are aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to keep the discussion on track.

> discussions where people examine a public issue from many angles and work together to find solutions that can lead to change in the community.

Dialogue Circles Are NOT the Same as...

> conflict resolution—a set of principles and techniques used in resolving conflict between individuals or groups.

> mediation—a process used to settle disputes that relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement. (Mediators often make excellent dialogue facilitators, and have many skills in common.)

> focus groups—small groups organized to gather or test information. Participants (who are sometimes paid) are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.

> traditional education—where a teacher instructs students.

> facilitated meetings with a predetermined agenda—such as a committee or board meeting with tasks established ahead of time.

> town meetings—large-group meetings where citizens make decisions on community policies.

> public hearings—large-group public meetings which allow concerns to be aired.
A Typical Two-Hour Session

- Welcome and Introductions
- Ground Rules
- Dialogue and Deliberation
- Summary and Common Ground
- Evaluation and Wrap-Up

Further Information

While these small-group discussions vary in content, they usually have the same basic structure and last about 2 hours.

> The *welcome and introductions* is a time to gather the group, set the tone for the discussion, help people get to know one another, and begin the conversation.

> The *ground rules* are key to the group’s success. Each group develops its own ground rules to ensure that the conversation is respectful and productive.

> *Dialogue and deliberation* are at the heart of this process. Participants use dialogue to build trust and explore the problem. This can include viewpoints, data, and other content. Participants also deliberate—weighing the pros and cons of different choices. This leads to concrete action ideas.

> The *summary* is a time to reflect on key themes and look for common ground.

> The session ends with a *wrap-up*, instructions for next time, and a quick *evaluation*: “How did things go? What would we like to change?”
Typical Progression of Sessions

**Session One:**
Getting to know one another: What is my connection to this issue?

**Session Two:**
What is the nature of the problem? (May include supplemental data)

**Session Three:**
What are some approaches to change? (May include visioning or asset-mapping)

**Session Four:**
Moving from dialogue to action: What can we do?
Sample Ground Rules

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Share “air time.”
- If you are offended or uncomfortable, say so, and say why.
- It’s OK to disagree, but don’t personalize it; stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Personal stories stay in the group, unless we all agree that we can share them.
- We share responsibility for making the conversation productive.

Further Information

Ground rules (also known as guidelines or agreements) help the group members conduct civil, productive discussions. Each circle sets its own ground rules at the beginning, and uses them in all sessions.

These guidelines “belong” to everyone. Group members can modify them at any time, and are expected to help enforce them.
Key Facilitation Skills

- Reflecting & Clarifying
- Summarizing
- Shifting Focus
- Asking Probing or Follow-Up Questions
- Managing Conflict
- Using Silence
- Using Non-Verbal Signals (Body Language)

Further Information

**Reflecting and Clarifying**—feeding back or restating an idea or thought to make it clearer.
- “Let me see if I’m hearing you correctly….”
- “What I believe you are saying is….”

**Summarizing**—briefly stating the main thoughts.
- “It sounds to me as if we have been talking about a few major themes….”

**Shifting Focus**—moving from one speaker or topic to another.
- “Thank you, John. Do you have anything to add, Jane?”
- “We’ve been focusing on views 1 and 2. Does anyone have strong feelings about the other views?”

**Asking Probing or Follow-Up Questions**—using questions to help people explore disagreements, understand multiple perspectives, and uncover common ground.
- “What are the key points here?”
- “What would someone with a different point of view say?”

**Managing Conflict**—helping conflict and disagreement to be productive.
- “Let’s refer to our ground rules.”
- “What seems to be at the heart of this issue?”
- “What do others think?”

**Using Silence**—allowing time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.

**Using Non-Verbal Signals (Body Language)**—recognizing and understanding how people communicate without using words.
- “What signals am I sending with my body?”
- “What signals am I reading from others?”
- “How do I signal encouragement?”
- “How do I invite others to participate?”

For more information on facilitating, please see pages 53–62, and *Managing Conflict*, on page 50.
## The Art of Recording

- Capture big ideas and themes, not every word.
- Use the words of the speaker as closely as possible. Be careful not to alter the intended meaning.
- Check with the speaker or the group to make sure your notes are correct.
- Write neatly so everyone can read the notes.
- Number each page at the top. Identify each set of notes with a clear title.
- Use markers that are deep earth tones, such as dark green, brown, blue, and purple. Use black sparingly. Use light colors (red, yellow, orange, light green) for highlighting or emphasis only.
- Be low-key. Stay in the background and don’t distract people from the conversation. Be aware of times when recording is not appropriate (for example, when people are sharing personal stories).
- Create a sheet called “Parking Lot.” Capture—or “park”—ideas that come up in the conversation that the group wants to return to later.
- Post the ground rules each time, along with any notes or sheets of paper that the group will need to refer to during a particular session.

### Note taking serves many purposes:

- It helps group members stay on track and move the discussion along.
- It creates a group memory of the whole dialogue.
- It provides a way to capture the wisdom and common themes that develop in the discussion.
- Notes from the circles can help organizers plan for action.
- Notes from all the circles in your program can contribute to a summary report of the activities.

### Further Information

Every discussion group can benefit from having someone take notes. This person’s job is to listen carefully, keep track of the big ideas that come up in the discussion, and record them clearly where everyone can see them. Sometimes co-facilitators take turns facilitating and recording. If you need a group member to serve as a recorder, make sure different people take turns, because the recorder cannot fully participate in the conversation.
Leading a Brainstorm

Brainstorming is a way for a group to come up with lots of ideas in a short period of time.

**Purpose**
- To help the group be creative
- To come up with many different ideas in a short time

**Guidelines**
- All ideas are OK.
- Don’t stop to talk about each idea.
- Don’t judge ideas.

**How to Do It**
- Anyone can offer an idea.
- People don’t need to wait for their “turn.”
- Write down every idea.
- Write ideas in the speaker's words.

**Brainstorming—Variation**
- Invite people to reflect quietly for a moment.
- Ask people to jot down their ideas on a piece of paper.
- People can also use markers, clay, paper, etc., to create a picture or symbol of their idea.
- Go around the circle and invite each person to share one of their ideas. Repeat until all ideas have been shared with the group.
Developing Action Ideas:  
*Helping Participants Prepare to Move from Dialogue to Action*

During the first several sessions, participants in circles use dialogue as a way to examine an issue from different points of view. Then, they explore what’s at the root of the problem. By the last session each group is developing ideas for action.

The following questions will help people come up with effective action ideas.

- **Issue**—Will the action address the key concerns the group has been discussing?
- **Doable**—Is the action practical?
- **Effectiveness**—Will the action create a desirable change?
- **Assets**—Are resources available to help implement the action?
- **Situation**—Does the action make sense in our community?

Here is an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Concern</strong></th>
<th>Our neighborhood is unsafe.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broad action idea</strong></td>
<td>We need to make our neighborhood safe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Actions</strong></td>
<td>1. Meet with the police department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Request regular neighborhood patrols.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Start a neighborhood watch program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Further Information**

Ideally, action ideas should grow out of a discussion about approaches to change. However, sometimes people suggest large, abstract ideas for change, rather than specific “doable” actions. The facilitator can help the group focus by using the questions above.
How to Prioritize a List of Ideas

Following a brainstorm, here is a way to prioritize ideas:

1) Sort ideas by category. Group similar ideas together and remove duplicates.

2) Allow time for people to discuss the pros and cons of each idea. After this discussion invite people to narrow the list. Check with the group to see if there is general agreement.

3) Or, give participants colored dots or markers and ask them to vote for their top ideas. Use N/3 (number of ideas divided by 3) to determine how many votes each person gets. People can apply their votes to one idea, or spread them around.

4) Identify top choices.
Managing Conflict

Not all disagreement or conflict is bad. In fact, it can provide an opening to understanding. However, for dialogue to be productive, disagreements must be handled respectfully. Stick to the issue at hand. Don’t make the conversation personal.

Using Conflict Constructively

> Create shared ground rules to cover conflict. Ask the group, “How shall we handle disagreements between group members?”

> Encourage speakers to use “I” messages, such as, “I feel strongly that people who send their children to our school have a responsibility to be involved.” Remind people to speak for themselves, not for others or a group.

> Ask the people in conflict, and the larger group, to help focus the conversation, saying, “What do you think is the root of the disagreement between James and Jessie? What are the key issues here?” This takes the focus off the people, and puts it on the issue at hand.

> Invite people to share the experiences that led to the formation of their opinions, saying, “Could you tell us more about any experiences in your life that have affected your feelings and thoughts about this issue?”

> Invite others into the conversation if conflict is escalating between two people. For example, say “We’ve heard quite a bit from John and Jane. Would someone else like to offer an opinion?” By bringing the larger group into the discussion, the focus shifts to a more general conversation.

Handling Unproductive Conflict

> Interrupt and remind group members of ground rules, if the conversation becomes heated.

> Intervene immediately and stop the conversation if it becomes personal or confrontational.

> Take a short break.

> Speak to individuals privately and ask them to comply with the ground rules.

> As a last resort, remove anyone who is disruptive.
Facilitating Viewpoints and Approaches

How to Facilitate

➢ Write the topic sentence for all the views/approaches on a flip chart, to use as a quick reference.
➢ Help people understand they are not choosing a “winner” but rather exploring a range of ideas.
➢ Give people time to look over the information.
➢ Ask participants to choose one view to discuss. They can agree or disagree with it.
➢ Ask for a volunteer to read the view or approach aloud.
➢ Touch on all of the views/approaches, and help people see the connections.
➢ Summarize the discussion by noting areas of agreement and disagreement.
➢ Help people think about how this issue plays out in their own lives and in their community.

Helpful Questions

➢ Which views are closest to your own? Why?
➢ Think about a view you don’t agree with. Why would someone support that view?
➢ Which views conflict with each other?
➢ What views would you add?
➢ Which approaches appeal to you and why?
➢ What approaches would work best in our community? Which wouldn’t?
➢ How would this approach help us make progress?

Further Information

Exploring different points of view about an issue is one of the hallmarks of this approach to dialogue. These viewpoints reflect some of the ways that different kinds of people think and talk about a public concern.

This method allows participants to deliberate about different ways to create change. Looking at different “approaches” helps people understand the complexity of an issue and the tradeoffs that are often necessary to make progress. As the group develops a sense of what might work in their situation, they are more likely to come up with action ideas and strategies that make sense.
A Neutral Facilitator

A Neutral Facilitator…

• explains his/her role.

• sets a relaxed and welcoming tone.

• introduces her/himself, but does not share personal opinions or push an agenda.

• does not take sides.

• makes everyone feel that their opinions are valid and welcome.

• does not use his/her personal experiences to make a point or to get people talking.

• uses probing questions to deepen the discussion.

• brings up issues that participants have not mentioned.

• reminds participants of comments they shared in earlier sessions.

Further Information

The most important thing to remember is that the facilitator should not share personal views and stories, or try to push an agenda. The facilitator’s job is to serve the group and help people have a productive conversation.
Tips for Facilitators

A dialogue facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed. But the facilitator should be well prepared for the discussion. This means the facilitator…

> understands the goals of the community change effort.
> is familiar with the discussion materials.
> thinks ahead of time about how the discussion might go.
> has questions in mind to help the group consider the subject.

Helping the Group Do Its Work

> Keep track of who has spoken, and who hasn’t.
> Consider splitting up into smaller groups occasionally. This will help people feel more at ease.
> Enter the discussion only when necessary. When the conversation is going well, the facilitator isn’t saying much.
> Don’t allow the group to turn to you for the answers.
> Resist the urge to speak after each comment or answer every question. Let participants respond directly to each other.
> Once in a while, ask participants to sum up important points.
> People sometimes need time to think before they respond. Don’t be afraid of silence! Try counting silently to ten before you rephrase the question. This will give people time to collect their thoughts.
> Try to involve everyone; don’t let anyone take over the conversation.
> Remember that this is not a debate, with winners and losers. If participants forget this, don’t hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the discussion ground rules.
> Don’t allow the group to get stuck on a personal experience or anecdote.
> Keep careful track of time.

Helping the Group Look at Different Points of View

> Good discussion materials present a wide range of views. Look at the pros and cons of each viewpoint. Or, ask participants to consider a point of view that hasn’t come up in the discussion.
> Ask participants to think about how their own values affect their opinions.
> Help participants see the things they have in common.
**Tips for Facilitators**
*(continued)*

**Asking Open-Ended Questions**

Open-ended questions can’t be answered with a quick “yes” or “no.” Open-ended questions can help people look for connections between different ideas.

**General Questions**

- What seems to be the key point here?
- Do you agree with that? Why?
- What do other people think of this idea?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What experiences have you had with this?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- How might others see this issue?
- Do you think others in the group see this the way you do? Why?
- How does this make you feel?

**Questions to Use When There is Disagreement**

- What do you think he is saying?
- What bothers you most about this?
- What is at the heart of the disagreement?
- How does this make you feel?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?
- What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?
- What is blocking the discussion?
- What don’t you agree with?
- What do you find most convincing about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- Could you say more about what you think?
- What makes this topic hard?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?

**Questions to Use When People are Feeling Discouraged**

- How does that make you feel?
- What gives you hope?
- How can we make progress on these problems? What haven’t we considered yet?

**Closing Questions**

- What are the key points of agreement and disagreement in today’s session?
- What have you heard today that has made you think, or has touched you in some way?
Responses to Typical Facilitation Challenges

Most dialogue circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and care about the conversation. But there are challenges in any group process. Here are some common challenging situations, along with some possible ways to deal with them.

**Situation: Certain participants don’t say anything, seem shy.**

**Possible Responses:** Try to draw out quiet participants, but don’t put them on the spot. Make eye contact—it reminds them that you’d like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Consider using more icebreakers and warm-up exercises, in pairs or small groups, to help people feel more at ease.

Sometimes people feel more comfortable after a few meetings and will begin to participate. When someone speaks up after staying in the background for a while, encourage them by showing interest and asking for more information. Make a point of talking informally with group members before and after sessions, to help everyone feel more at ease.

**Situation: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.**

**Possible Responses:** As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you must intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate. Use the ground rules to reinforce the message. You might say, “Let’s hear from some people who haven’t had a chance to speak yet.” If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. “Ed, we’ve heard from you; now let’s hear what Barbara has to say.”

Pay attention to your comments and tone of voice—you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker. If necessary, speak to the person privately and ask them to make room for others to join the conversation.

You might also say, “I notice that some people are doing most of the talking. Do we need to modify our ground rules, to make sure everyone has a chance to speak?” Ultimately, your responsibility as facilitator is to the whole group, and if one or two people are taking over the group, you need to intervene and try to rebalance the conversation.
Responses to Typical Facilitation Challenges
(continued)

Situation: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible Responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator’s role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. “We’re a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?” If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: “We are wandering off the subject, and I’d like to invite others to speak.”

Refer to the suggested times in the discussion materials to keep the conversation moving along. Or, when a topic comes up that seems off the subject, write it down on a piece of newsprint marked “Parking Lot.” You can explain to the group that you will “park” this idea, and revisit the topic at a later time. Be sure to come back to it later.

Situation: Someone puts forth information that you know is false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts, but no one knows the answer.

Possible Responses: Ask, “Has anyone heard other information about this?” If no one offers a correction, you might raise one. Be careful not to present the information in a way that makes it sound like your opinion.

If the point is not essential put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information and bring it to the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Situation: There is tension or open conflict in the group. Two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible Responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that airing different ideas is what a dialogue is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue. It is OK to challenge someone’s ideas, but attacking the person is not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that discourage such behaviors and encourage tolerance for all views.

Don’t hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members have bought into the ground rules, they will support you. You might ask the group, “What seems to be at the root of this dispute?” This question shifts the focus from the people to their ideas. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question. (See Managing Conflict, page 50.)
Responses to Typical Facilitation Challenges
(continued)

Situation: Participant is upset by the conversation. The person withdraws or begins to cry.

Possible Responses: The best approach is to talk about this possibility at the beginning when you are developing the ground rules. Remind the group that some issues are difficult to talk about and people may become upset. Ask the group how it wants to handle such a situation, should it arise. Many groups use the ground rule, “If you are offended or upset, say so and say why.”

If someone becomes emotional, it is important to acknowledge the situation. Showing appreciation for someone’s story, especially when it is difficult, can be affirming for the speaker and important for the other participants. In most cases, the group will offer support to anyone who is having difficulty.

Ask members if they would like to take a short break to allow everyone to regroup. Check in with the person privately. Ask them if they are ready to proceed. When the group reconvenes, it is usually a good idea to talk a little about what has happened, and then the group will be better able to move on.

Situation: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible Responses: This rarely happens, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle asking everyone to respond. Or, pair people up for a few minutes, and ask them to talk about a particular point. Then bring everyone together again.

Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and doesn’t appreciate the complexity of the issue. In this case, your job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. Try something like, “Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?”
Facilitation Tips for Special Situations

Working with Cultural Differences

Awareness of cultural dynamics is important. This is especially true when issues of race and ethnicity are a part of the conversation. We may not agree on everything, but we have enough in common as human beings to allow us to talk together in a constructive way.

Sensitivity, empathy, and familiarity with people of different backgrounds are important qualities for the facilitator. If you have not spent much time with all kinds of people, get involved in a community program where you can see cross-cultural dynamics in action.

Remind the group that no one can represent his or her entire culture. Each person’s experiences, as an individual and as a member of a group, are unique and OK.

Encourage group members to think about their own experiences as they try to identify with people who have been victims of discrimination. Many people have had experiences that make this discussion a very personal issue. Others—particularly those who are usually in the majority—may not have thought as much about their own culture and how it affects their lives.

Encourage people to think about times when they have been treated unfairly, but be careful not to equate the experiences. To support participants who tell how they have been mistreated, be sure to explain that you respect their feelings and are trying to help all the members of the group understand. Remind people that no one can know exactly what it feels like to be in another person’s shoes.

Invite group members to talk about their own experiences and cultures. This way, they will be less likely to make false generalizations about other cultures. Also, listening to others tell about their own experiences breaks down stereotypes and helps people understand one another.
Working with Interpreters

> Remind interpreters that their job is to translate accurately, not to add their own opinions.
> At the start, explain that this will be a bilingual discussion. Encourage everyone to help make the conversation productive and meaningful.
> Tell the group that it may be awkward at first, but it will get easier as the sessions progress.
> Give interpreters written materials ahead of time, and go over the process with them.
> Ask interpreters to let you know if they need more time.
> Speak in short sentences and keep ideas simple. (This gives the interpreter time to catch up.)
> After every session, ask interpreters to translate discussion guidelines and notes that were posted on newsprint.
> Sometimes participants who speak a different language are reluctant to talk because they are afraid of making a mistake. Give them time to collect their thoughts before speaking.
> Consider putting people in small groups, but don’t separate people by language. (You may need more than one interpreter per circle.)
> Try to practice together beforehand.
> Look at the participant—not the interpreter—when speaking.

Working with Groups Where Literacy is a Concern

At the start, give a simple explanation of how the dialogue will work, and tell participants the goal of each session. Each time you meet, state the goal of the session.

> If the people in your group can’t read, or have trouble reading, limit your use of the flip chart.
> If participants are required to fill out forms, assign someone to ask the questions and fill out the forms with/for them.
> Be prepared to read aloud to the group, or ask for volunteers to read.
> Ask people to rephrase or summarize to make sure everyone understands.
> Avoid using jargon or acronyms. When these terms come up and people look puzzled, ask: “What does that mean?”
> In between sessions, check in with participants. Make sure they know that what they have shared is very important to the group.
Facilitation Tips for Special Situations
(continued)

Working with Multigenerational Groups
Facilitating multigenerational groups can be extremely rewarding. Young people add energy, enthusiasm, and innovative ideas while their elders add the benefit of extensive experience. And including people of all ages helps everyone look at a situation with fresh eyes.

Here are a few things to help multigenerational circles work well:

> If young people are not speaking up, divide participants into pairs or threesomes for part of each session.
> Use icebreaker exercises at the beginning of each session.
> Step in and redirect the conversation if the discussion turns into a question-and-answer session between adult participants and young “experts” about youth issues.
> Try to have several people in each age group in every circle. Avoid having a “token” young person or senior citizen.

Working with Public Officials in the Circles
Dialogue is most effective when people from all walks of life and all parts of the community take part. This includes public officials, whether they are elected or appointed.

Public officials—such as a police chief, school superintendent, city manager, mayor, city workers, school board members, planning board members—play particular roles in solving community problems. They often have the authority to “make things happen,” and can provide a different perspective or expertise. Also, working with a range of people offers a promising alternative to typical public processes that often pit citizens against officials.

Here are a few things you can do to help your dialogue work well when public officials are present:

> Take some extra time to set the context and establish the ground rules.
> Make sure that everyone (including public officials) knows exactly what to expect from the process.
> Provide ample time for the group to talk about the ground rules including confidentiality.
> Remind people that this is a democratic conversation—acknowledge that there may be people in the room with different levels of authority or expertise in the community. However, during the dialogue, every person’s experience and perspective is equally important to the conversation.
Facilitation Tips for Special Situations
(continued)

> Step in if the conversation turns into a question-and-answer session between the public officials and the other participants.
> If the public official begins to dominate, work to bring in other voices and points of view.

**Working with Programs that Address Racism**

Racism is a very challenging issue for many people in our country to talk about. It can be hard to get to a deep discussion that helps people speak truthfully and work effectively toward community change.

Here are a few things to remember when addressing this issue:

> Take some time for self-reflection. Assess how much experience you’ve had talking about racism. If your experience is limited, you may want to read some books or articles, or view some videos to help you become more comfortable with the topic. (See the bibliography in Everyday Democracy’s discussion guide, *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation*.)
> Talk about the issue with your co-facilitator before you begin.
> At the beginning of the discussion, acknowledge that this can be a difficult subject to address and commend the group for being willing to participate.
> Each circle should have more than one participant from the same racial group.
> Ideally, a group talking about racism should be racially diverse and co-facilitated by a biracial team. Avoid having the facilitator(s) from a different racial group than the participants.
> When you are setting ground rules, make sure to talk about how to handle offensive remarks, even if they are unintentional.
> Briefly describe your own ethnic background before asking other participants to share theirs.
> If you are facilitating a discussion using Everyday Democracy’s *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation*, be sure you are familiar with the activities in Session 3—“Move Forward, Move Back” and “Opportunities and Challenges”—and the Community Report Card in Session 5. Take extra time to practice so that you feel completely prepared.
## Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Debate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.</td>
<td>Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.</td>
<td>In debate, winning is the goal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.</td>
<td>In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.</td>
<td>Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.</td>
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<td>Dialogue reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.</td>
<td>Debate defends assumptions as truth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.</td>
<td>Debate causes critique of the other position.</td>
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<td>Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.</td>
<td>Debate defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.</td>
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<td>Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.</td>
<td>Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.</td>
<td>In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.</td>
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<td>Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.</td>
<td>Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.</td>
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<td>In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.</td>
<td>In debate, one searches for glaring differences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.</td>
<td>In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.</td>
<td>Debate involves a countering of the other position, without focusing on feelings or relationship, and often belittles or deprecates the other side.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.</td>
<td>Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue remains open-ended.</td>
<td>Debate implies a conclusion.</td>
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Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo-Smith, Lally Stowell, and Gene Thompson. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (617) 492-1764.