



COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

Section 4. Techniques for Leading Group Discussions

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Learn how to effectively conduct a critical conversation about a particular topic, or topics, that allows participation by all members of your organization.

- **WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE GROUP DISCUSSION?**
- **WHY WOULD YOU LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?**
- **WHEN MIGHT YOU LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?**
- **HOW DO YOU LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?**
- **DO'S AND DON'TS FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS**

A local coalition forms a task force to address the rising HIV rate among teens in the community. A group of parents meets to wrestle with their feeling that their school district is shortchanging its students. A college class in human services approaches the topic of dealing with reluctant participants. Members of an environmental group attend a workshop on the effects of global warming. A politician convenes a “town hall meeting” of constituents to brainstorm ideas for the economic development of the region. A community health educator facilitates a smoking cessation support group.

All of these might be examples of group discussions, although they have different purposes, take place in different locations, and probably run in different ways. Group discussions are common in a democratic society, and, as a community builder, it's more than likely that you have been and will continue to be involved in many of them. You also may be in a position to lead one, and that's what this section is about. In this last section of a chapter on group facilitation, we'll examine what it takes to lead a discussion group well, and how you can go about doing it.

WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE GROUP DISCUSSION?

The literal definition of a group discussion is obvious: a critical conversation about a particular topic, or perhaps a range of topics, conducted in a group of a size that allows participation by all members. A group of two or three generally doesn't need a leader to have a good discussion, but once the number reaches five or six, a leader or facilitator can often be helpful. When the group numbers eight or more, a leader or facilitator, whether formal or informal, is almost always helpful in ensuring an effective discussion.

A group discussion is a type of meeting, but it differs from the formal meetings in a number of ways:

- It may not have a specific goal – many group discussions are just that: a group kicking around ideas on a particular topic. That may lead to a goal ultimately...but it may not.
- It's less formal, and may have no time constraints, or structured order, or agenda.
- Its leadership is usually less directive than that of a meeting.
- It emphasizes process (the consideration of ideas) over product (specific tasks to be accomplished within the confines of the meeting itself).
- Leading a discussion group is not the same as running a meeting. It's much closer to acting as a facilitator, but not exactly the same as that either.

An effective group discussion generally has a number of elements:

- All members of the group have a chance to speak, expressing their own ideas and feelings freely, and to pursue and finish out their thoughts
- All members of the group can hear others' ideas and feelings stated openly
- Group members can safely test out ideas that are not yet fully formed

- Group members can receive and respond to respectful but honest and constructive feedback. Feedback could be positive, negative, or merely clarifying or correcting factual questions or errors, but is in all cases delivered respectfully.
- A variety of points of view are put forward and discussed
- The discussion is not dominated by any one person
- Arguments, while they may be spirited, are based on the content of ideas and opinions, not on personalities
- Even in disagreement, there's an understanding that the group is working together to resolve a dispute, solve a problem, create a plan, make a decision, find principles all can agree on, or come to a conclusion from which it can move on to further discussion

Many group discussions have no specific purpose except the exchange of ideas and opinions. Ultimately, an effective group discussion is one in which many different ideas and viewpoints are heard and considered. This allows the group to accomplish its purpose if it has one, or to establish a basis either for ongoing discussion or for further contact and collaboration among its members.

There are many possible purposes for a group discussion, such as:

- Create a new situation – form a coalition, start an initiative, etc.
- Explore cooperative or collaborative arrangements among groups or organizations
- Discuss and/or analyze an issue, with no specific goal in mind but understanding
- Create a strategic plan – for an initiative, an advocacy campaign, an intervention, etc.
- Discuss policy and policy change
- Air concerns and differences among individuals or groups
- Hold public hearings on proposed laws or regulations, development, etc.
- Decide on an action
- Provide mutual support
- Solve a problem
- Resolve a conflict
- Plan your work or an event

Possible leadership styles of a group discussion also vary. A group leader or facilitator might be directive or non-directive; that is, she might try to control what goes on to a large extent; or she might assume that the group should be in control, and that her job is to facilitate the process. In most group discussions, leaders who are relatively non-directive make for a more broad-ranging outlay of ideas, and a more satisfying experience for participants.

Directive leaders can be necessary in some situations. If a goal must be reached in a short time period, a directive leader might help to keep the group focused. If the situation is particularly difficult, a directive leader might be needed to keep control of the discussion and make

WHY WOULD YOU LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?

There are two ways to look at this question: “What’s the point of group discussion?” and “Why would you, as opposed to someone else, lead a group discussion?” Let’s examine both.

WHAT’S THE POINT OF GROUP DISCUSSION?

As explained in the opening paragraphs of this section, group discussions are common in a democratic society. There are a number of reasons for this, some practical and some philosophical.

A group discussion:

- *Gives everyone involved a voice.* Whether the discussion is meant to form a basis for action, or just to play with ideas, it gives all members of the group a chance to speak their opinions, to agree or disagree with others, and to have their thoughts heard. In many community-building situations, the members of the group might be chosen specifically because they represent a cross-section of the community, or a diversity of points of view.
- *Allows for a variety of ideas to be expressed and discussed.* A group is much more likely to come to a good conclusion if a mix of ideas is on the table, and if all members have the opportunity to think about and respond to them.
- *Is generally a democratic, egalitarian process.* It reflects the ideals of most grassroots and community groups, and encourages a diversity of views.
- *Leads to group ownership of whatever conclusions, plans, or action the group decides upon.* Because everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion and to be heard, the final result feels like it was arrived at by and belongs to everyone.
- *Encourages those who might normally be reluctant to speak their minds.* Often, quiet people have important things to contribute, but aren’t assertive enough to make themselves heard. A good group discussion will bring them out and support them.
- *Can often open communication channels among people who might not communicate in any other way.* People from very different backgrounds, from opposite ends of the political spectrum, from different cultures, who may, under most circumstances, either never

make contact or never trust one another enough to try to communicate, might, in a group discussion, find more common ground than they expected.

- Is sometimes simply the obvious, or even the only, way to proceed. Several of the examples given at the beginning of the section – the group of parents concerned about their school system, for instance, or the college class – fall into this category, as do public hearings and similar gatherings.

WHY WOULD YOU SPECIFICALLY LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?

You might choose to lead a group discussion, or you might find yourself drafted for the task. Some of the most common reasons that you might be in that situation:

- *It's part of your job.* As a mental health counselor, a youth worker, a coalition coordinator, a teacher, the president of a board of directors, etc. you might be expected to lead group discussions regularly.
- *You've been asked to.* Because of your reputation for objectivity or integrity, because of your position in the community, or because of your skill at leading group discussions, you might be the obvious choice to lead a particular discussion.
- *A discussion is necessary, and you're the logical choice to lead it.* If you're the chair of a task force to address substance abuse in the community, for instance, it's likely that you'll be expected to conduct that task force's meetings, and to lead discussion of the issue.
- *It was your idea in the first place.* The group discussion, or its purpose, was your idea, and the organization of the process falls to you.

You might find yourself in one of these situations if you fall into one of the categories of people who are often tapped to lead group discussions. These categories include (but aren't limited to):

- Directors of organizations
- Public officials
- Coalition coordinators
- Professionals with group-leading skills – counselors, social workers, therapists, etc.
- Teachers
- Health professionals and health educators
- Respected community members. These folks may be respected for their leadership – president of the Rotary Club, spokesperson for an environmental movement – for their positions in the community – bank president, clergyman – or simply for their personal qualities – integrity, fairness, ability to communicate with all sectors of the community.
- Community activists. This category could include anyone from “professional” community organizers to average citizens who care about an issue or have an idea they want to pursue.

WHEN MIGHT YOU LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?

The need or desire for a group discussion might of course arise anytime, but there are some times when it's particularly necessary.

- **At the start of something new.** Whether you're designing an intervention, starting an initiative, creating a new program, building a coalition, or embarking on an advocacy or other campaign, inclusive discussion is likely to be crucial in generating the best possible plan, and creating community support for and ownership of it.
- **When an issue can no longer be ignored.** When youth violence reaches a critical point, when the community's drinking water is declared unsafe, when the HIV infection rate climbs – these are times when groups need to convene to discuss the issue and develop action plans to swing the pendulum in the other direction.
- **When groups need to be brought together.** One way to deal with racial or ethnic hostility, for instance, is to convene groups made up of representatives of all the factions involved. The resulting discussions – and the opportunity for people from different backgrounds to make personal connections with one another – can go far to address everyone's concerns, and to reduce tensions.
- **When an existing group is considering its next step or seeking to address an issue of importance to it.** The staff of a community service organization, for instance, may want to plan its work for the next few months, or to work out how to deal with people with particular quirks or problems.

HOW DO YOU LEAD A GROUP DISCUSSION?

In some cases, the opportunity to lead a group discussion can arise on the spur of the moment; in others, it's a more formal arrangement, planned and expected. In the latter case, you may have the chance to choose a space and otherwise structure the situation. In less formal circumstances, you'll have to make the best of existing conditions.

We'll begin by looking at what you might consider if you have time to prepare. Then we'll examine what it takes to make an effective discussion leader or facilitator, regardless of external circumstances.

SET THE STAGE

If you have time to prepare beforehand, there are a number of things you may be able to do to make the participants more comfortable, and thus to make discussion easier.

Choose the space

If you have the luxury of choosing your space, you might look for someplace that's comfortable and informal. Usually, that means comfortable furniture that can be moved around (so that, for instance, the group can form a circle, allowing everyone to see and hear everyone else easily). It may also mean a space away from the ordinary.

One organization often held discussions on the terrace of an old mill that had been turned into a bookstore and café. The sound of water from the mill stream rushing by put everyone at ease, and encouraged creative thought.

Provide food and drink

The ultimate comfort, and one that breaks down barriers among people, is that of eating and drinking.

Bring materials to help the discussion along

Most discussions are aided by the use of newsprint and markers to record ideas, for example.

Become familiar with the purpose and content of the discussion

If you have the opportunity, learn as much as possible about the topic under discussion. This is not meant to make you the expert, but rather to allow you to ask good questions that will help the group generate ideas.

Make sure everyone gets any necessary information, readings, or other material beforehand

If participants are asked to read something, consider questions, complete a task, or otherwise prepare for the discussion, make sure that the assignment is attended to and used. Don't ask people to do something, and then ignore it.

LEAD THE DISCUSSION

Think about leadership style

The first thing you need to think about is leadership style, which we mentioned briefly earlier in the section. Are you a directive or non-directive leader? The chances are that, like most of us, you fall somewhere in between the extremes of the leader who sets the agenda and dominates the group completely, and the leader who essentially leads not at all. The point is made that many good group or meeting leaders are, in fact, facilitators, whose main concern is supporting and maintaining the process of the group's work. This is particularly true when it comes to group discussion, where the process is, in fact, the purpose of the group's coming together.

A good facilitator helps the group set rules for itself, makes sure that everyone participates and that no one dominates, encourages the development and expression of all ideas, including “odd” ones, and safeguards an open process, where there are no foregone conclusions and everyone’s ideas are respected. Facilitators are non-directive, and try to keep themselves out of the discussion, except to ask questions or make statements that advance it. For most group discussions, the facilitator role is probably a good ideal to strive for.

It’s important to think about what you’re most comfortable with philosophically, and how that fits what you’re comfortable with personally. If you’re committed to a non-directive style, but you tend to want to control everything in a situation, you may have to learn some new behaviors in order to act on your beliefs.

Put people at ease

Especially if most people in the group don’t know one another, it’s your job as leader to establish a comfortable atmosphere and set the tone for the discussion.

Help the group establish ground rules

The ground rules of a group discussion are the guidelines that help to keep the discussion on track, and prevent it from deteriorating into namecalling or simply argument. Some you might suggest, if the group has trouble coming up with the first one or two:

- *Everyone should treat everyone else with respect.* no name-calling, no emotional outbursts, no accusations.
- *No arguments directed at people – only at ideas and opinions.* Disagreement should be respectful – no ridicule.
- *Don’t interrupt.* Listen to the whole of others’ thoughts – actually listen, rather than just running over your own response in your head.
- *Respect the group’s time.* Try to keep your comments reasonably short and to the point, so that others have a chance to respond.
- *Consider all comments seriously, and try to evaluate them fairly.* Others’ ideas and comments may change your mind, or vice versa: it’s important to be open to that.
- *Don’t be defensive if someone disagrees with you.* Evaluate both positions, and only continue to argue for yours if you continue to believe it’s right.
- *Everyone is responsible for following and upholding the ground rules.*

Ground rules may also be a place to discuss recording the session. Who will take notes, record important points, questions for further discussion, areas of agreement or disagreement? If the recorder is a group member, the group and/or leader should come up with a strategy that allows her to participate fully in the discussion.

Generate an agenda or goals for the session

You might present an agenda for approval, and change it as the group requires, or you and the group can create one together. There may actually be no need for one, in that the goal may simply be to discuss an issue or idea. If that's the case, it should be agreed upon at the outset.

Lead the discussion

How active you are might depend on your leadership style, but you definitely have some responsibilities here. They include setting, or helping the group to set the discussion topic; fostering the open process; involving all participants; asking questions or offering ideas to advance the discussion; summarizing or clarifying important points, arguments, and ideas; and wrapping up the session. Let's look at these, as well as some do's and don't's for discussion group leaders.

- *Setting the topic.* If the group is meeting to discuss a specific issue or to plan something, the discussion topic is already set. If the topic is unclear, then someone needs to help the group define it. The leader – through asking the right questions, defining the problem, and encouraging ideas from the group – can play that role.
- *Fostering the open process.* Nurturing the open process means paying attention to the process, content, and interpersonal dynamics of the discussion all at the same time – not a simple matter. As leader, your task is not to tell the group what to do, or to force particular conclusions, but rather to make sure that the group chooses an appropriate topic that meets its needs, that there are no “right” answers to start with (no foregone conclusions), that no one person or small group dominates the discussion, that everyone follows the ground rules, that discussion is civil and organized, and that all ideas are subjected to careful critical analysis. You might comment on the process of the discussion or on interpersonal issues when it seems helpful (“We all seem to be picking on John here – what’s going on?”), or make reference to the open process itself (“We seem to be assuming that we’re supposed to believe X – is that true?”). Most of your actions as leader should be in the service of modeling or furthering the open process.

Part of your job here is to protect “minority rights,” i.e., unpopular or unusual ideas. That doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but that you have to make sure that they can be expressed, and that discussion of them is respectful, even in disagreement. (The exceptions are opinions or ideas that are discriminatory or downright false.) Odd ideas often turn out to be correct, and shouldn't be stifled.

- *Involving all participants.* This is part of fostering the open process, but is important enough to deserve its own mention. To involve those who are less assertive or shy, or who simply can't speak up quickly enough, you might ask directly for their opinion, encourage

them with body language (smile when they say anything, lean and look toward them often), and be aware of when they want to speak and can't break in. It's important both for process and for the exchange of ideas that everyone have plenty of opportunity to communicate their thoughts.

- *Asking questions or offering ideas to advance the discussion.* The leader should be aware of the progress of the discussion, and should be able to ask questions or provide information or arguments that stimulate thinking or take the discussion to the next step when necessary. If participants are having trouble grappling with the topic, getting sidetracked by trivial issues, or simply running out of steam, it's the leader's job to carry the discussion forward.

This is especially true when the group is stuck, either because two opposing ideas or factions are at an impasse, or because no one is able or willing to say anything. In these circumstances, the leader's ability to identify points of agreement, or to ask the question that will get discussion moving again is crucial to the group's effectiveness.

- *Summarizing or clarifying important points, arguments, or ideas.* This task entails making sure that everyone understands a point that was just made, or the two sides of an argument. It can include restating a conclusion the group has reached, or clarifying a particular idea or point made by an individual ("What I think I heard you say was..."). The point is to make sure that everyone understands what the individual or group actually meant.
- *Wrapping up the session.* As the session ends, the leader should help the group review the discussion and make plans for next steps (more discussion sessions, action, involving other people or groups, etc.). He should also go over any assignments or tasks that were agreed to, make sure that every member knows what her responsibilities are, and review the deadlines for those responsibilities. Other wrap-up steps include getting feedback on the session – including suggestions for making it better – pointing out the group's accomplishments, and thanking it for its work.

Follow-up

Even after you've wrapped up the discussion, you're not necessarily through. If you've been the recorder, you might want to put the notes from the session in order, type them up, and send them to participants. The notes might also include a summary of conclusions that were reached, as well as any assignments or follow-up activities that were agreed on.

If the session was one-time, or was the last of a series, your job may now be done. If it was the beginning, however, or part of an ongoing discussion, you may have a lot to do before the next session, including contacting people to make sure they've done what they promised, and preparing the newsprint notes to be posted at the next session so everyone can remember the discussion.

Leading an effective group discussion takes preparation (if you have the opportunity for it), an understanding of and commitment to an open process, and a willingness to let go of your ego and biases. If you can do these things, the chances are you can become a discussion leader that can help groups achieve the results they want.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

DO:

- *Model the behavior and attitudes you want group members to employ.* That includes respecting all group members equally; advancing the open process; demonstrating what it means to be a learner (admitting when you're wrong, or don't know a fact or an answer, and suggesting ways to find out); asking questions based on others' statements; focusing on positions rather than on the speaker; listening carefully; restating others' points; supporting your arguments with fact or logic; acceding when someone else has a good point; accepting criticism; thinking critically; giving up the floor when appropriate; being inclusive and culturally sensitive, etc.
- *Use encouraging body language and tone of voice, as well as words.* Lean forward when people are talking, for example, keep your body position open and approachable, smile when appropriate, and attend carefully to everyone, not just to those who are most articulate.
- *Give positive feedback for joining the discussion.* Smile, repeat group members' points, and otherwise show that you value participation.
- *Be aware of people's reactions and feelings, and try to respond appropriately.* If a group member is hurt by others' comments, seems puzzled or confused, is becoming angry or defensive, it's up to you as discussion leader to use the ground rules or your own sensitivity to deal with the situation. If someone's hurt, for instance, it may be important to point that out and discuss how to make arguments without getting personal. If group members are confused, revisiting the comments or points that caused the confusion, or restating them more clearly, may be helpful. Being aware of the reactions of individuals and of the group as a whole can make it possible to expose and use conflict, or to head off unnecessary emotional situations and misunderstandings.
- *Ask open-ended questions.* In advancing the discussion, use questions that can't be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead, questions should require some thought from group members, and should ask for answers that include reasons or analysis. The difference between "Do you think the President's decision was right?" and "Why do you think the President's decision was or wasn't right?" is huge. Where the first question can be answered with a yes or no, the second requires an analysis supporting the speaker's opinion, as well as discussion of the context and reasons for the decision.
- *Control your own biases.* While you should point out factual errors or ideas that are inaccurate and disrespectful of others, an open process demands that you not impose your views on the group, and that you keep others from doing the same. Group members should

be asked to make rational decisions about the positions or views they want to agree with, and ultimately the ideas that the group agrees on should be those that make the most sense to them – whether they coincide with yours or not. Pointing out bias – including your own – and discussing it helps both you and group members try to be objective.

A constant question that leaders – and members – of any group have is what to do about racist, sexist, or homophobic remarks, especially in a homogeneous group where most or all of the members except the leader may agree with them. There is no clear-cut answer, although if they pass unchallenged, it may appear you condone the attitude expressed.

How you challenge prejudice is the real question. The ideal here is that other members of the group do the challenging, and it may be worth waiting long enough before you jump in to see if that's going to happen. If it doesn't, you can essentially say, "That's wrong, and I won't allow that kind of talk here," which may well put an end to the remarks, but isn't likely to change anyone's mind. You can express your strong disagreement or discomfort with such remarks and leave it at that, or follow up with "Let's talk about it after the group," which could generate some real discussion about prejudice and stereotypes, and actually change some thinking over time.

Your ground rules – the issue of respecting everyone – should address this issue, and it probably won't come up...but there are no guarantees. It won't hurt to think beforehand about how you want to handle it.

- *Encourage disagreement, and help the group use it creatively.* Disagreement is not to be smoothed over, but rather to be analyzed and used. When there are conflicting opinions – especially when both can be backed up by reasonable arguments – the real discussion starts. If everyone agrees on every point, there's really no discussion at all. Disagreement makes people think. It may not be resolved in one session, or at all, but it's the key to discussion that means something.

All too often, conflict – whether conflicting opinions, conflicting world views, or conflicting personalities – is so frightening to people that they do their best to ignore it or gloss it over. That reaction not only leaves the conflict unresolved – and therefore growing, so that it will be much stronger when it surfaces later– but fails to examine the issues that it raises. If those are brought out in the open and discussed reasonably, the two sides often find that they have as much agreement as disagreement, and can resolve their differences by putting their ideas together. Even where that's not the case, facing the conflict reasonably, and looking at the roots of the ideas on each side, can help to focus on the issue at hand and provide solutions far better than if one side or the other simply operated alone.

- *Keep your mouth shut as much as possible.* By and large, discussion groups are for the group members. You may be a member of the group and have been asked by the others to act as leader, in which case you certainly have a right to be part of the discussion (although not to dominate). If you're an outside facilitator, or leader by position, it's best to confine your contributions to observations on process, statements of fact, questions to help propel the discussion, and clarification and summarization. The simple fact that you're identified as leader or facilitator gives your comments more force than those of other group members. If you're in a position of authority or seen as an expert, that force becomes even greater. The more active you are in the discussion, the more the group will take your positions and ideas as "right," and the less it will come to its own conclusions.

DON'T:

- *Don't let one or a small group of individuals dominate the discussion.* People who are particularly articulate or assertive, who have strong feelings that they urgently want to express, or who simply feel the need – and have the ability – to dominate can take up far more than their fair share of a discussion. This often means that quieter people have little or no chance to speak, and that those who disagree with the dominant individual(s) are shouted down and cease trying to make points. It's up to the leader to cut off individuals who take far more than their share of time, or who try to limit discussion. This can be done in a relatively non-threatening way ("This is an interesting point, and it's certainly worth the time we've spent on it, but there are other points of view that need to be heard as well. I think Alice has been waiting to speak..."), but it's crucial to the open process and to the comfort and effectiveness of the group.
- *Don't let one point of view override others,* unless it's based on facts and logic, and is actually convincing group members to change their minds. If a point of view dominates because of its merits, its appeal to participants' intellectual and ethical sensibilities, that's fine. It's in fact what you hope will happen in a good group discussion. If a point of view dominates because of the aggressiveness of its supporters, or because it's presented as something it's wrong to oppose ("People who disagree with the President are unpatriotic and hate their country"), that's intellectual bullying or blackmail, and is the opposite of an open discussion. As leader, you should point it out when that's happening, and make sure other points of view are aired and examined.

Sometimes individuals or factions that are trying to dominate can disrupt the process of the group. Both Sections 1 and 2 of this chapter contain some guidelines for dealing with this type of situation.

- *Don't assume that anyone holds particular opinions or positions because of his culture, background, race, personal style, etc.* People are individuals, and can't be judged by their exteriors. You can find out what someone thinks by asking, or by listening when he speaks.
- *Don't assume that someone from a particular culture, race, or background speaks for everyone else from that situation.* She may or may not represent the general opinion of people from situations similar to hers...or there may not be a general opinion among them. In

a group discussion, no one should be asked or assumed to represent anything more than herself.

The exception here is when someone has been chosen by her community or group to represent its point of view in a multi-sector discussion. Even in that situation, the individual may find herself swayed by others' arguments, or may have ideas of her own. She may have agreed to sponsor particular ideas that are important to her group, but she may still have her own opinions as well, especially in other areas.

- *Don't be the font of all wisdom.* Even if you know more about the discussion topic than most others in the group (if you're the teacher of a class, for instance), presenting yourself as the intellectual authority denies group members the chance to discuss the topic freely and without pressure. Furthermore, some of them may have ideas you haven't considered, or experiences that give them insights into the topic that you're never likely to have. Model learning behavior, not teaching behavior.

If you're asked your opinion directly, you should answer honestly. You have some choices about how you do that, however. One is to state your opinion, but make very clear that it's an opinion, not a fact, and that other people believe differently. Another is to ask to hold your opinion until the end of the discussion, so as not to influence anyone's thinking while it's going on. Yet another is to give your opinion after all other members of the group have stated theirs, and then discuss the similarities and differences among all the opinions and people's reasons for holding them.

If you're asked a direct question, you might want to answer it if it's a question of fact and you know the answer, and if it's relevant to the discussion. If the question is less clear-cut, you might want to throw it back to the group, and use it as a spur to discussion.

IN SUMMARY

Group discussions are common in our society, and have a variety of purposes, from planning an intervention or initiative to mutual support to problem-solving to addressing an issue of local concern. An effective discussion group depends on a leader or facilitator who can guide it through an open process – the group chooses what it's discussing, if not already determined, discusses it with no expectation of particular conclusions, encourages civil disagreement and argument, and makes sure that every member is included and no one dominates. It helps greatly if the leader comes to the task with a democratic or, especially, a collaborative style, and with an understanding of how a group functions.

A good group discussion leader has to pay attention to the process and content of the discussion as well as to the people who make up the group. She has to prepare the space and the setting to the extent possible; help the group establish ground rules that will keep it moving civilly and comfortably; provide whatever materials are necessary; familiarize herself with the topic; and make sure that any pre-discussion readings or assignments get to participants in plenty of time. Then she has to guide the discussion, being careful to promote an open process; involve everyone and let no one dominate; attend to the personal issues and needs of individual group members when they affect the group; summarize or clarify when appropriate; ask questions to keep the discussion moving, and put aside her own agenda, ego, and biases.

It's not an easy task, but it can be extremely rewarding. An effective group discussion can lay the groundwork for action and real community change.

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Online resources

Everyday-Democracy (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/index.aspx>) . Study Circles Resource Center. Information and publications related to study circles, participatory discussion groups meant to address community issues.

Facilitating Political Discussions (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://ctb.ku.edu/sites/default/files/chapter_files/facilitating_political_dialogues_workshop.pdf) from the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University is designed to assist experienced facilitators in training others to facilitate politically charged conversations. The materials are broken down into "modules" and facilitation trainers can use some or all of them to suit their needs.

Project on Civic Reflection (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://civicreflection.org/>) provides information about leading study circles on civic reflection.

"Suggestions for Leading Small-Group Discussions (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/small_group.html) , " prepared by Lee Haugen, Center for Teaching Excellence, Iowa State University, 1998. Tips on university teaching, but much of the information is useful in other circumstances as well.

"Tips for Leading Discussions (<http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.hrea.org/pubs/tips-discussion.html>) , " by Felisa Tibbits, Human Rights Education Associates.

Print resources

Forsyth, D. *Group Dynamics*. (2006). (4th edition). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Johnson, D., & Frank P. (2002). *Joining Together: Group theory and group skills*. (8th edition). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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(<http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://www.linkedin.com/in/community-tool-box-7624bbb/>)

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