

Beginning a Dialogue Session: A Guide

Introductory Go-Rounds

We often ask participants, in turn, to say their names and tell the group something about them- selves. Sometimes we model responses, e.g, “If I were answering this question, I might say...”

Some introductory go-rounds we have used are:

- Please tell us in a sentence or two about something you had to give up or set aside in order to be here now; anything that may be competing for your attention as you try to settle in, or anything that you need to let go of to be present.
- Tell us something you would like us to know about you; something that you consider to be a strength of yours, something that you value about yourself, possibly a personal quality that may be a resource for this process.
- Please tell us something about yourself that is important to you and not directly related to the issue we are here to discuss; something about a passion, an interest, a hobby, or a pre-occupation in your life.

Questions to Consider for the Opening Phase

- Do you have any fears or concerns about participating in these conversations that you would like to identify as we begin? What enabled you to come today despite your fears and concerns?
- Do you have hopes for these conversations that you are willing to speak about at this time? What could happen while we are here that would strengthen your hopes?
- Can you tell us something about one or more of the life experiences that are connect- ed in your mind with your commitment to the issues we are here to discuss?

Design and Facilitation Tips

GIVE PEOPLE TIME TO THINK. After we pose a question, we try to give people time to think before anyone responds. This time for reflection allows participants to decide what they will say. Having decided that, they can listen carefully to what others say. When their

turn comes to speak, they are more likely to speak their own considered thoughts rather than simply a reaction to what others have said.

SPECIFY AN AMOUNT OF TIME TO TALK. We typically give participants a specific (and fairly short) amount of time to respond to each question. This prevents wide variations in “air time” and monopolization of the floor by a few participants. The amount of time allotted can vary from question to question. We often involve participants in time management by asking them to pass a watch. The person who has just spoken keeps time for the next speaker.

OFFER A STRUCTURE FOR SPEAKING AND LISTENING. We often use a “go-round” format in which people speak after the person sitting next to them has finished. This format allows people to focus their energy on speaking and listening, rather than on trying to decide when to speak. (If people are not ready to answer a question when their turn comes, they can “pass” and will be given another opportunity when the others have finished.) By prior agreement, when a speaker learns that time is up, he or she wraps up, adding a concluding sentence if needed. An alternative to the “go-round” format is the “popcorn” format, which allows participants to determine the order of their talking; they simply speak up when they feel ready.