

Bridging and Bonding

How Can We Create Engaged Communities in a Time of Rapid Change?

Changing economic conditions and technological innovations, including the increasing use of mass and social media, have transformed our personal lives and our communities. Today, individuals may bond more strongly with an online community or colleagues at work than with their neighbors. How can we build and sustain engaged communities in this time of rapid change?

OPTION 1

Embrace Change and Affirm Differences

New technologies should be used to unite rather than divide us—not solely to maintain personal connections, but as tools for civic renewal. We need to rebuild our trust in one another and find ways of accepting and affirming generational and cultural differences.

OPTION 2

Strengthen and Renew Traditional Ways of Connecting

People need to see, hear, and touch each other in order to bond and develop trust. We need to rebuild traditional organizations and extend existing networks. Civic organizations must restructure their activities to accommodate the changing lifestyles of today's families.

OPTION 3

Meet People Where They Are

People who engage in the life of their communities do so because it appeals to their personal or professional aspirations. Civic organizations should seek ways to meet the needs and serve the interests of a broad array of individuals and professional organizations.



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National Issues Forums and Study Guides

Why are we here? What are we going to do?

We are here to move toward a public decision on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the PROS and CONS of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

Organizing Forums

Many NIF groups choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-a-half hours.

Other groups, however, plan for multiple sessions or study circles to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings while others might devote a separate session to each option. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large-group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

The purpose of forums is to encourage public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

Stages of a Forum

Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the program.

Ground rules

Participants and the moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

Deliberation

Participants examine all the choices. An approximately equal amount of time should be spent on each choice.

Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Read the issue guide thoroughly. Consider questions that get to the heart of the issue and think through the essence of each option. This is a critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each option, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them. (Sample questions are on Page 5.) Listen to others.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major options fairly.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

Beginning a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. They should agree that:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the options,
- all the major options should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

Ending a Forum

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

I. Individual reflections

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other peoples' views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group reflections

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

III. Next-step reflections

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

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Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions might arise that could derail the deliberation by veering into partisan political debate. It will be important to remember that, as a group, you are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and as Americans rather than as liberals and conservatives. It is helpful to consider, ahead of time, broad questions that need to be addressed in each option. Here are some examples:

Personal Stake

- Can you share a personal story about your connection to your community? How has your connection changed over time? What has been rewarding? Surprising? Disappointing?
- If you are active in your community, what drew you to into this kind of engagement? If you aren't active, what do you see as the barriers?
- When is the last time that you met someone new from your community? What factors make meeting new people easier? More difficult?

O P T I O N 1

Embrace Change and Affirm Differences

- What has been your experience with social media? Do you use it mainly to connect with family and friends or do you think it can provide opportunities for creating new kinds of communities?
- Do you belong to a club or organization that uses social media? If so is it used to reach out to members or to the community-at-large? How can technological innovations enrich rather than undermine our ability to create the bonds and bridges of community?
- Do you tend to become involved with others in your community who share your lifestyle and values? If you do regularly engage with those who are different in terms of culture, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class, what made this possible or comfortable?
- What do you think has caused the breakdown in social trust? Do you think parents should teach children to be more trusting of people in general? What, if any, limits should be established?

O P T I O N 2

Strengthen and Renew Traditional Ways of Connecting

- How important is in-person and face-to-face interaction in creating a sense of community spirit? Could you share a story to illustrate your point? What kinds of conditions make these kinds of interactions more or less likely?
- Why do you think traditional clubs and civic organizations are declining? What could be done to make them more appealing?
- Have you ever lived in a town that has community policing? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this kind of approach?
- If men contributed more to caring for household needs, would working women become

O P T I O N 3

Meet People Where They Are

- What is the appropriate role of self-interest in decisions people make about whether to become involved in their communities? What makes it so difficult to move from the “me” of the individual to the “we” of community?
- Do you think community organizations should partner with schools to develop more internship opportunities? Would this help with efforts to get younger people involved in their communities? Or might it end up sending the wrong message about volunteer work?
- Should community organizations make an effort to reach out to individuals with special skills who are only willing to help out occasionally? Is this really fair to members who then have to bear the burden of keeping the organization going?
- Should civic, educational, and arts groups sponsor programs that foster a shared sense of identity? Are you concerned that this might divert attention away from more pressing problems, such as inadequate schools or public health?

Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had and give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to your moderator or to the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, c/o GFDWC Issue Guide, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

The Role of the Moderator

- to provide an overview of the deliberation process
- to ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- to encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- to remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet at the end of this guide and return it with the questionnaires to Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799, c/o GFDWC Issue Guide.

For More Information

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum to: Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, c/o GFWC Issue Guide, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ E-mail address _____

Date and location (state) where forum was held _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, and age and number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult for the participants? _____

What common concerns were most apparent? _____

What things did participants appear to hold most valuable as they wrestled with trade-offs? _____

Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? _____

Which trade-offs did the participants struggle with most? _____

Did the group identify shared directions for action? _____

