

Midwest Conference on Masonic Education
2021 Virtual Conference

Takeaway Guides

Facilitating Dialogue

Brother Chuck Dunning

Knowing the Purpose of Dialogue: Dialogue facilitators understand that the purpose is having participants open their hearts and minds to freely sharing their thoughts and feelings on the given topic. At best, the aim is simply for the participants to better understand each other, themselves, and gain new possibilities of understanding about the topic for their further consideration after the discussion. Dialogue is not about defining problems and developing solutions, defining the “right” or “best” answer to any question, reaching agreement about the topic.

Sticking to Your Role: As the facilitator your concern is with the process not the topic. Your role is not to be an expert or teacher. Know that the best response to requests for feedback or advice is often to put such questions back to the one who asked and/or to the group as a whole. Be very careful about offering your own opinions, but if you do, then clearly state it as such. The better a group is functioning, the less you talk.

Welcoming: Remind everyone that they are meeting on the level, meaning they should be respectful to each other in all ways. That respect includes confidentiality, honoring that some may share things they do not want revealed elsewhere. Advise participants that they are welcome to offer anything they wish about the topic. Ask everyone to remain mindful that there are others in the room who may need space and time to speak, and that this time is also an opportunity for deep listening.

Making Introductions: Make time for participants to introduce themselves. Consider the number of participants and available time in deciding how much of an introduction each can make.

Opening Discussion: State the topic and ask a few initial questions to stimulate discussion.

Encouraging: Offer words of encouragement and thanks when people speak, especially on the first occurrence with each one. With groups where participants are hesitant to share, consider offering an explanation of the practical benefits to themselves and others.

Active Listening: Listen to understand, not to evaluate or counter. Do not distract yourself with thoughts about what you might say when someone stops talking. Do not outwardly assess, evaluate, or judge what participants say. Allow moments of silence as participants think about things.

Paraphrasing: Restate a speaker’s points/questions in your own words to confirm you understood. Ask questions to gain clarity. Be cautious about assuming what someone means or needs.

Linking: Point out possible similarities among things different participants have said, which builds the sense of belonging and congruence in the group. Invite people with similar ideas to speak about them to each other, rather than triangulating through you.

Scanning: Avoid focusing too much attention on the person speaking. Use both your direct line of sight and your peripheral vision to be aware of other individuals in the group. Watch for non-verbal cues, such as raising hands, nodding or shaking heads, cocked heads, or changes in facial expressions. Allow it to be obvious that you are trying to be mindful of everyone.

Bridging: As you scan the group, follow up on cues with invitations to speak, especially with those who have not yet spoken.

Respecting Differences: Be mindful that participants can be fully engaged with the group's reflections even though they are silent and seem detached, and may benefit by not being disturbed. If someone declines to speak when asked, honor that choice.

Intervening: You should also be mindful of certain members monopolizing the conversation or critiquing and advising others. Intervene and redirect as necessary. This can be a very good time to respond to the cues of less outspoken individuals by directly inviting them to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Wrapping Up: Announce when it is almost time to end the session. Invite final words. Restate some of the more common or poignant reflections. Inform them about the next time and location for such discussion.

Hosting Panel Discussions

Brother Scott Dueball

- ❖ Identify the topic. Selecting the questions and panelists should seem like a bit of chicken or egg conundrum.
 - Provide your panelists with the questions and ground rules ahead of time. Select your panelists
 - You want panelists who are knowledgeable on the topic and engaging to listen to. You want them to have a point of view.
 - You also want them to bring a diverse set of points. Include people who you know won't be 100% agreeable. The goal isn't to create disharmony, but if you stick with panelists who always agree, then the discussion won't be very lively.
 - Remember, some friction is necessary to create fire.
 - Select your questions
 - Questions can be open ended to foster the best dialogue.
 - Yes/No questions also have value—just don't let your panelists stop with a 1 word answer. Ask them to say more.
- ❖ Provide your panelists with the questions and ground rules ahead of time.
 - This allows them to bring thoughtful responses. Allowing them ample time to reflect and consult their personal resources will help them feel comfortable.
 - Ground rules. Same as before, this should serve to remove awkwardness and make the panel feel comfortable. These are what I have used:
 - I encourage you to voice areas of disagreement respectfully. If you disagree, it is likely that an audience member disagrees as well.
 - Please keep your responses to 3 minutes maximum.
 - Each panelist may not have a chance to respond to each question. If you wish to address it before moving on, let me know and I will do my best to give you time.
 - As the emcee, I will ask questions. You may not pose questions back to me other than to clarify the intent of a question.

“Better”

R.W.B. Spencer A. Hamann

Seven Thoughts to Leave With

- ❖ It’s okay not to have the answers. It is better to say “I don’t know, let’s find out” than to spread a half truth or outright falsehood. **Model humble curiosity.**
- ❖ Consider carefully the information you choose to share. Have you considered the source? Does it conform to your cognitive bias? Is the information based on verifiable fact, or opinion? **Model discretion.**
- ❖ Be gentle and loving in dialogue, and help others find the truth in the way you would want them to help you. Seek dialogue, not an exchange of monologues. Listen to other’s points of views and process them before responding. **Model respect.**
- ❖ Truth is not instant gratification. Be ready to work over a long time. Be willing to grow and evolve in searching, leaving behind what no longer serve you. **Model stamina.**
- ❖ There is nothing wrong with changing position through better understanding; this is not losing ground, but gaining it. Growth can feel painful, and takes courage. Delight in new understanding. **Model flexibility.**
- ❖ Be accepting of others and supportive of their search for truth. **Model encouragement.**
- ❖ This work is YOURS to do; not someone else’s. You can only control your own work. **Model Craftsmanship.**