
Guiding Conversations



for Positive, Productive Discussions



Guiding Conversations¹

Learning Objectives:

- To understand the human process of dialogue.
- To learn a method that strengthens group communication.

A guided conversation is used at the conclusion of an event or experience to review the information we have taken in, explore our responses to it, interpret the significance, and identify how we will apply it to our situation. A guided conversation takes a group on a journey from big picture perspective to depth focus – from situation to resolve or action.

The process creates a non-threatening, non-judgmental climate that encourages participants to share, honor and internalize diverse perspectives. It provides an opportunity for seeing and creating new perspectives and brings awareness to a natural process of thinking and acting.

Uses

- End of a meeting or training session
- Reflection on a day, week, or year
- After a presentation or special event
- Evaluation of a project or personnel
- Performance and problem-solving
- Reflection on a study
- Personal life (one-on-one situations, family discussions, volunteer activities)

Benefits

- Improved organizations
- Enhanced communications
- Issue resolution
- Team camaraderie

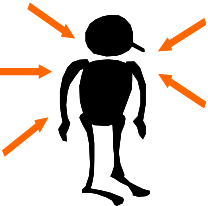


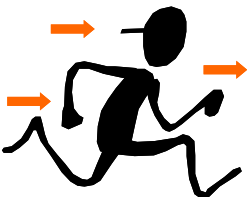
Results

- Enables creative thinking
- Builds on experience
- Provides meaningful dialogue
- Increases participation
- Affirms progress
- Builds self-confidence
- Enables constructive problem-solving
- Results in clear ideas or conclusions

¹ A number of books describe this approach to creating conversations, including Nelson, Spencer and Stanfield listed in the bibliography.

The Four Level Process

A guided conversation uses four levels of questions. Each level has a different role in the normal flow of conscious thought.

Levels		Sample Questions
<p>Observe</p> <p>Discerning the situation. Questions related to the five senses - seeing, hearing, smelling, touching/feeling, and tasting – in order to share facts about the subject of the conversation.</p>	<p>WHAT</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you see (objects, scenes)? • What did you hear (words, phrases, sounds)? • What caught your attention? • What did you notice?
<p>Reflect</p> <p>Listening to the heart. Questions that surface interior responses (feelings, emotions) and associations (memories) people have about the subject.</p>	<p>HEART</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were you reminded of? • What was memorable? • Where were high points? low points? • Where were you pleased? sad? frustrated? • What is it like for you to...? • Where did you experience confusion? clarity?
<p>Interpret</p> <p>Discerning the meaning and significance. Questions that create meaning, determine value, state significance and purpose, create insights and new understandings, identify key learning's, and reveal new relationships.</p>	<p>SO WHAT</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What difference would this make? • What could be done to...? • Where are there new opportunities? • What is the significance? • Where is a consensus emerging?
<p>Decide</p> <p>Taking action. Questions that enable resolution, determine action needed, decide next steps, draw conclusions, state intentions, suggest applications, or bring completion.</p>	<p>NOW WHAT</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you take with you as a result of this conversation? • How will you use what you learned? • Where do we go from here? • What are the next steps?

Tips for Leading Effective Conversations

Context: Establish the time frame. Encourage brevity if time is limited.

Full participation: With the first question(s) have everyone in the group respond.

- If the group size is 15 or less, go around the group one at a time to get everyone to respond.
- If the group is larger than 15, be prepared to ask 2-3 Observable questions to get everyone's responses as you go around the group.

Dealing with challenging participants:

- **Overly talkative or domineering participants:** Ask questions like,
 - “Let’s hear from someone who has not spoken yet?”
 - “Let’s hear from this side of the room.”
 - “What other perspectives do others in the group have?”
- **Distracting side conversations:** Remind group that we want to have one conversation.
- **Tangents:** Sometimes the group begins to have conversations unrelated to the focus of the conversation. Restating the question, reviewing the responses that have been made, or suggesting that the group can discuss the tangent at a later time can refocus them.
- **Abstract answers:** “Would you give us an example of what you are describing?”
- **Long responses:** Summarize what you heard. Then encourage brevity in light of the time frame for remaining responses.
- **Overly silent or non-participative participants:** By having everyone respond on the first question(s), they feel freer to respond later. You may want to call on quiet ones asking, “We have not heard much from you yet on this topic; what is your thinking at this point?”
- **Group silence:** Sometimes this is an indication that the question is unclear and needs to be rephrased. The facilitator may also give an example that often helps to clarify the question.

Key Steps for Preparing a Conversation

1. Decide focus of the conversation

2. Write objectives of the conversation

- Rational objective: What does the group need to know, understand, remember or decide?
- Experiential objective: What does the group need to experience with each other (e.g., excitement, authentic struggle, seriousness, an “aha” from new perspectives, innovative decisions)?

3. Brainstorm questions to realize the intent of the conversation

4. Select the questions needed

- Open-ended: Questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” tend to end discussions rather than open them up.
- Sequence: Organize the questions by the four levels, making sure not to leave out any level.
- Clear and practical: Practice answering the questions yourself to check for ease in understanding and responding to them. This helps to eliminate repetitive or vague questions.
- Big picture: Encourage responses that offer different perspectives on the topic: positives and negatives.

5. Prepare opening and closing comments carefully

- Opening: State the purpose and importance of the conversation. Also tell the group how long you are planning to discuss the topic to have them help support the timeline.
- Closing: Remind group about the purpose of the conversation and how it has been met by the comments made, reviewing some of the main points.

6. Reflect on the conversation, the group, yourself

- Conversation: Rehearse the conversation in your head
- Group: What do you anticipate will be responses of the group on the topic? What questions will you use to get everyone to participate initially? Where do you anticipate breakthroughs or challenges to occur?
- Self: Remind yourself that being a facilitator of the conversation, you intend to:
 - Be non-judgmental
 - Listen closely to each response
 - Affirm each person

Remember: there are no “right” or “wrong” answers.

THE O-R-I-D WAY RAP

Yo! You're looking for participation
Gettin' folks talking, no hesitation
Tune in now to what we say
For a 4-step process that leads the way

OBSERVE

First, you ask, "What's happening' now?"
See it, hear it, taste it - wow!
Once the senses are in conversation
That's the step called OBSERVATION.

REFLECT

Now all that data ain't near enough
You've got to get into the feelin' stuff
Consider the past to see the relation
Allowing the heart to do REFLECTION.

INTERPRET

Together the facts and the feelings provides
The framework for allowing one to see all sides
Seeing it all prevents confrontation
While raising questions of INTERPRETATION.

DECIDE

What's this mean that we should do?
What's for me and what's for you?
Consider next steps and resolutions
As a part of the new DECISIONS.

O-R-I-D helps create consensus,
Defuses tensions, breaks down fences
So join together, sisters and brothers,
And lead the way in facilitating others.

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Title:

Rational Objective:

Experiential Objective:

OPENING

OBSERVE

REFLECT

INTERPRET

DECIDE

CLOSING

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