

Crafting Good Questions for Dialogue

At the core of dialogue are questions that help participants share their experiences, explore their ideas, and work through options and possibilities for how to address important matters in their communities. Below are some principles for crafting engaging questions that help get the conversation started.

1. The question does not seek a “correct” answer - by asking a question that has an exact answer, dialogue is stifled as participants work to find the one “right” response. Questions that promote dialogue are more interested in promoting creativity and exploring possibilities.

Example: How might we address the needs of our growing homeless population?

2. The question cannot be answered with “yes/no,” “either/or,” or a single word - open-ended questions are essential to promoting dialogue. By posing a question that cannot be answered simply, you invite participants to explore their thoughts or ideas. Think about questions that get at “why, how, or what” instead of “who, when, or where.”

Example: What can we do as a community to welcome new immigrants?

3. The question should be clear and simple - participants need to be able to understand what is being asked of them. Using common language or terms, and keeping the question short, will help participants to be able to respond thoughtfully, and avoid needing to provide additional clarification to get the dialogue started.

Example: What does a quality education look like in our community?

4. Good questions explore people’s aspirations and values. Asking people about what they desire to see happen in their community, what values they hold most dearly, help to turn the conversation away from repeating of opinion statements, to the real heart of the matter - what is most important to each of us.

Example: How might we strengthen our connections within our community?

5. The question should focus on the possibilities, instead of the problems. Problem-centric questions get us entrenched in who is to blame, and overwhelmed about how to fix it. Focusing on possibilities helps keep the conversation in an innovative space, to generate new ideas.

Example: In what ways might we contribute to an environmentally sustainable future?

6. The question evokes more questions - a good question will naturally raise additional questions from participants, leading to more thoughtful engagement.

Example: What role should we play in addressing hate speech in our community?