



Grant Proposal Resources for EP Partners

Language about Essential Partners

Updated March 2023

Introduction

The following is intended to support EP's partners in drafting grant and sponsor applications to fund local dialogue collaborations. This sample language offers a basic description of Essential Partners' mission and approach, impacts, and evaluation methods and findings.

Please feel free to use and adapt this language in drafting proposals. We only request that you reach out to EP's Development team at development@whatisessential.org, for assistance and coordination if you are using this resource to apply for funding to support working with EP. We are happy to co-author language, when appropriate, to support your applications.

Language Samples

EP Mission and Vision Statement

Founded in 1989, Essential Partners helps people build relationships across differences to address their communities' most pressing challenges. We envision a world of thriving communities strengthened by difference, connected by trust.

EP Overview

Essential Partners is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Since its founding, EP has helped communities, schools, and institutions around the world build trust, understanding, and belonging by fostering healthier engagements across polarizing differences of values, beliefs, and identities.

Essential Partners collaborates civic groups, faith communities, secondary schools, colleges, nonprofits, and corporations in several ways:

- *Training stakeholders in their trademark dialogue approach*
- *In long-term collaborations to shift community or institutional cultures*
- *Co-creating new proprietary programs and materials*
- *Via remote program design consultation and coaching*
- *Facilitating dialogue around particularly tough topics*

- *Through ongoing research, evaluation, and innovation*

EP Origins and Roots

Building the capacity to live and work together is essential work. It is the work of our times: to live out both the courage of our convictions and the courage of community.

Working at the intersection of community engagement, conflict resolution, culture change, and dialogue, Essential Partners owes its existence to a research group composed primarily of family therapists. Established in 1989 as the Public Conversations Project, this group explored the possibility that the concepts and methods of family therapy might be adapted for conversations on divisive public issues. They were drawn to this possibility when they noticed striking similarities between patterns of behavior in political conflicts and chronic family disputes.

This origin makes EP unique among organizations working to create more pluralistic, inclusive, and engaged communities and teams.

EP Theory of Change

If you shift how people have a conversation, you can change the relationships between stakeholders. You can change what people are willing to speak about—not just specific issues but their deeply-held values and beliefs, their experiences, their genuine hopes and fears. If you can do that, you can change what is possible.

Dysfunctional Communication Patterns EP Addresses

EP pays special attention to systems—to the dynamics and patterns of communication that become self-perpetuating and stifle trust, relationships, understanding and collaboration. While their work does lead to decisions or policy changes, EP's priorities go further than a single outcome. Their work helps people recognize and transform the self-perpetuating patterns that undermine effective communication and collaboration across differences of identity, belief, personality, and perspective. EP's approach addresses patterns such as:

- *The same small group of vocal people dominating conversations;*
- *The silence, avoidance, or underrepresentation of people who have complex, marginalized, or underdeveloped views;*
- *Stereotyping, polarization, and misinformation campaigns;*
- *Interruptions, angry outbursts, and personal attacks;*
- *Disengagement and avoidance that, at worst, leads to low participation rates and struggles with retention;*

- *Confirmation bias, the human tendency to seek out facts that support one's own perspective while dismissing facts that force them to question their deeply held values or beliefs;*
- *Repetitive or surface-level debates where little new information surfaces as the values, intentions, and complexities of opponents go untested.*

These patterns are most evident in hot conflicts across lines of ideology or identity. But EP also finds those same patterns within groups whose members have a shared identity and common goals but who disagree strongly about priorities and strategies.

Sometimes these patterns are hidden by an uneasy silence that cloaks underlying disagreement.

EP's Methodology

EP's trademark dialogue methodology, Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), is designed to help communities and organizations disrupt dysfunctional communication patterns to hold open, honest, constructive conversations about potentially divisive topics.

Changing dysfunctional communication patterns can have huge system-wide effects. But how a conversation shifts matters too. Every choice invites new possibilities or returns to old, stuck patterns. Intention, design, and structure are the keys.

RSD relies on preparation, conversational structures, question design, facilitation skills, and reflective practices to encourage people to engage meaningfully across differences. This approach allows for groundbreaking conversations that restore trust, deepen mutual understanding, and lay the foundation for collaborative action.

Rooted in family therapy strategies, RSD has drawn innovation from a wide array of related fields, including professional mediation, systems theory, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication theory, appreciative inquiry, narrative approaches, organizational development, psychology, neurobiology, and intercultural development.

EP's Impact Evaluation System

EP's proprietary Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) system is the most advanced impact assessment system in the field of dialogue and deliberation. MEL encompasses a variety of research tools to measure and understand the impact of a dialogue project and to learn from that data to deepen EP's impact as they move forward.

EP uses research and the data from their research to learn as an organization, respond to growing calls for robust evaluation in the field, and tell powerful stories about dialogue.

EP looks at longitudinal impact—impacts of their work over time. This research is conducted first through a set of interviews that take place three months after a project ends, occurring at intervals for as long as two years. EP conducts research and measures the impact of their work in four categories (or domains):

- 1. Understanding Others and Being Understood
Impact in this area is felt immediately in a conversation and can be measured with quantitative questions in pre- and post-project surveys.*
- 2. Willingness to Engage Across Differences
In the short term, EP measures this by asking how people's willingness to engage across differences has changed since working with them. Over time, EP measures personal transformation: How have people's habits shifted?*
- 3. Equipped to Engage Across Differences
Immediately after a project, EP begins measuring how equipped people feel to engage across differences. EP asks people to set goals and articulate clear next steps to apply what they've learned. In the long term, EP measures perceived shifts in communication patterns within the community and resilience, defined as the capacity of a community to remain invested in one another in moments that threaten the identities of one or more groups.*
- 4. Healthy Relationships and Social Cohesion
EP begins to see improvement in trust and belonging immediately after dialogue and continues to measure the growth and healthiness of relationships over time.*

EP's Results and Impact Findings

Immediately after a project is completed, more than 90% of participants report one or more of the following shifts in their own outlooks and attitudes:

- Increased understanding of one another*
- Increased respect and appreciation for one another*
- New skills and knowledge for communicating across differences*
- Realization that constructive communication is possible*
- Commitment to engaging differently, especially in difficult moments.*

Stronger relationships and new possibilities emerge. Communities and teams that EP works with have leaders and systems in place to support public conversations on divisive topics. They develop a plan suited to their own unique context that anticipates upcoming challenges and works toward community resilience. Specifically, EP's evaluations find reports of:

- Personal transformation*

- *Increased social cohesion (including both new relationships and improved relationships)*
- *Increased sense of belonging and inclusion in communities*
- *Use and retention of skills, leading to increased resilience within the community*

Over time, as communication habits shift, people begin to trust each other enough to come together in exceptionally difficult moments as well. When that happens, people feel a greater sense of belonging to their community, and trust that others—even those of different opinions, backgrounds or ideologies—are committed to helping their community thrive.

With a foundation of healthy communication and cohesion, these communities are able to cooperate, plan, collaborate, and innovate to address challenges.

More Resources

To find more language about EP, our work, and our impacts, please reach out to EP's Development team at development@whatisessential.org.

We also invite you to visit the following pages of our website for more language and resources:

[About Us](#)

[What We Do](#)

[Who We Work With](#)

[Impact Stories](#)

[EP's Evaluation System & Findings](#)

[EP's 2020-21 Annual Report](#)

[Free EP Resource Materials](#)

[EP in the Press](#)