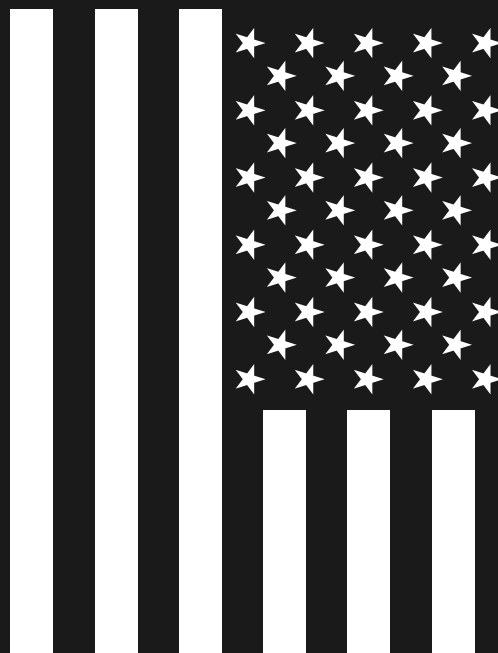


Race in America

A DIALOGUE GUIDE FROM
essential PARTNERS®



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Introduction to the Guide

Essential Partners (EP) has supported conversations about race in communities and institutions around the United States, in diverse and homogeneous contexts, for more than two decades. We've collaborated with grassroots groups, businesses and philanthropies, faith institutions, college campuses, and high schools.

Drawn from that experience, this guide is intended to help you engage in courageous, constructive conversations about race in your community or organization. There are a few things to keep in mind before you begin.

YOU'LL FIND 3 BASIC DIALOGUES OUTLINED IN THIS GUIDE

This guide outlines three EP-style dialogues about race: dialogue for a mixed-race group, dialogue for an all-BIPOC group, and dialogue for an all-white group. These dialogues will be most effective where participants already share some level of trust. If this guide does not meet the needs of your specific context, contact us for a free consultation about customization.

THE OUTCOMES OF AN ESSENTIAL PARTNERS DIALOGUE

Dialogue creates new understandings, new relationships, a new level of trust, and new opportunities. The goal is not to change anybody's beliefs or arrive at a solution (though that happens sometimes). Dialogue helps people wrestle with their differences openly, honestly, and with dignity. It encourages a stronger sense of community, which is what makes real and lasting change possible.

FACILITATION IS A LEARNED SKILL

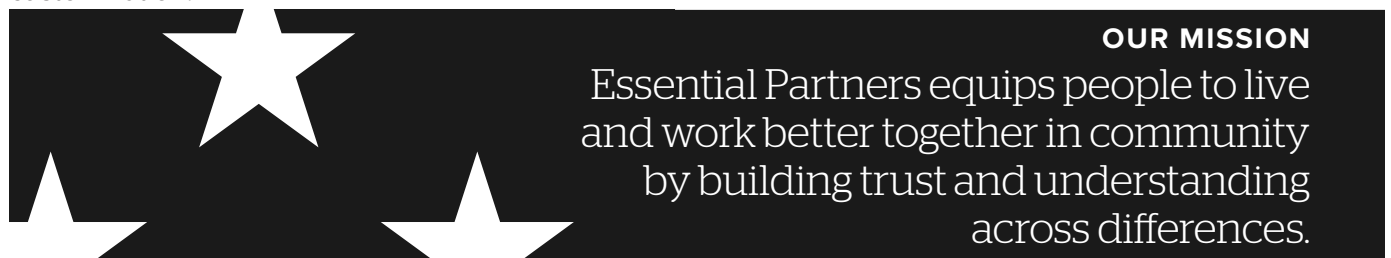
It takes effort, time, and self-awareness to become a skilled facilitator. Before you organize a dialogue about race, we recommend that you complete a basic facilitator orientation that gives you some tools to lead these conversations. In an ideal world, you would attend an EP training to learn about our model. However, if you can't attend a training, there are basic instructions included in this guide.

WHEN IS A COMMUNITY READY?

Your community may be ready to have a dialogue about race when there's a sense that the current conversation about race has failed or stalled, when people are willing to talk about this tough topic, when there's enough time to prepare and hold a dialogue, and when there are potential partners or co-hosts in the community. Do not hesitate to contact us if you aren't sure that dialogue is the right choice for you.

Conversations about race are both new and old. People come to them with diverse experiences and varying levels of fluency. They are fraught. But opportunities can emerge from the trust, understanding, and relationships that an EP dialogue creates.

EP's goal is to help each community have the conversation it needs to have. We hope this guide offers a place for you to begin.



OUR MISSION
Essential Partners equips people to live and work better together in community by building trust and understanding across differences.

A Brief Orientation to EP's Approach

Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), EP's model, has been developed over three decades and used across the globe. It is designed to support healthier conversations about differences of identities, beliefs, and values.

EP dialogues shift the communication habits of a community or an organization. These habits are everywhere. They come about organically, the product of individual communication styles, interpersonal relationships, and the cultural context.

Communication habits are hard to change. RSD works because it lets people practice new ways of communicating. It disrupts negative habits and patterns that make people feel unwelcome, unheard, or at odds.

SO WHAT IS "DIALOGUE" ANYWAY?

Broadly speaking, dialogue is a way of engaging in conversation, often in groups but also between individuals. A dialogue is not a normal conversation.

Dialogues are conversations that have been carefully designed. They help people communicate in ways that feel fresh, constructive, and honest—especially when the topic is divisive, emotional, and high stakes.

The goal of a dialogue isn't to win an argument or catch someone out or shame anyone. The goal is to listen as if for the first

time. It's to share your lived experience. It's to find a new curiosity about your friends, coworkers, and neighbors. It's to connect as complicated, whole human beings.

In places where peoples' lives are deeply intertwined—like churches, workplaces, or schools—the ability to hold a dialogue can help folks live and work better together by building mutual trust and understanding across their differences.

REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

RSD leverages the power of personal reflection and structured conversations to create mutual understanding and new relationships, as well as a solid foundation for problem solving and collaboration.

Developed more than thirty years ago and used by communities around the globe, RSD lets people share their stories and beliefs while encouraging them to really hear perspectives and experiences that may be different from their own.

RSD is designed to avoid the usual dynamics of polarized conversations. You know how it goes: people disagree, they take sides, it becomes us versus them, and all the nuances and uncertainty of the issue are suppressed until there is no space for alternative views. Polarization leads to

stagnation, dysfunction, and even violence.

RSD is a tool to stop that cycle by opening avenues for communication that have been shut down by the intensity of a conflict. Whereas polarization forces people to choose sides, RSD invites people to think about who they are and what matters to them—together.

Conversations that challenge our worldviews and reflect our differences are hard for everyone. They can be painful. But they're also critical for an inclusive, cohesive, democratic society. We have to navigate our differences while living together as members of a community.

No two communities face exactly the same challenges. This is particularly true when it comes to conversations about race in America. If the three dialogues outlined in this guide do not make sense for your community, please contact us. We will help customize it to meet your needs.

If you feel you need additional facilitation skills and support, EP provides training in our model as well as free resources and consultations.

Your Role as Facilitator

In an Essential Partners dialogue, facilitators are there to support the group through the conversation. Facilitators are the ones who manage the structure and process so that the participants are able to give their full attention to the dialogue.

As the facilitator, you'll welcome participants to the dialogue, walk them through the communication agreements, keep time during the go-arounds, and gently remind people of the purpose and communication agreements when they stray off course.

Facilitators in an EP dialogue do not participate in the conversation. The facilitator's role is to create an open, inclusive space where people are able to hear one another and feel that they have been heard. This ensures that the person leading the dialogue doesn't unintentionally bias the tone and direction of the conversation that's happening among the participants.

3 KEY RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN EP FACILITATOR

Although facilitation is a skill that you can develop, facilitating an EP dialogue can be done by anyone who seriously commits themselves to the role.

Every facilitator in an EP dialogue has three primary responsibilities.

1. Lead your group through the dialogue. You will bring people into the dialogue, tell them what to expect, and read the questions. You will keep time as people speak during the structured go-arounds and remind people of any confidentiality agreements at both the beginning and end of the dialogue.

Many EP facilitators read from a word-for-word script. This ensures that they're meeting the purpose of the dialogue and helps avoid misspeaking, which can derail a hard conversation.

2. Say when things aren't going to plan. Don't be afraid to make adjustments if it feels like they're needed, whether in the midst of a dialogue or between dialogues during a series. Be transparent about this. Invite participants to be involved in the process. You can say things like:

"We began this conversation trying to understand, rather than persuade. But it seems like we're veering into a debate. What do you need to get back to that original intention?"

Or: "I'm noticing that some folks are getting the chance to talk more than others. Let's take a minute to think about what's most important for others to understand, and then go around so everyone has a chance to speak."

3. Step in when people slip up on agreements. Dialogue is an unusual way of having a conversation—and that's the whole point! But it means that people aren't used to having agreements. They might slip up. That's only human.

The purpose and the communication agreements will help you know when it's appropriate to step into the conversation. If any of those are at risk—for any of the participants—name why you're stepping in, explain what you're seeing, and invite the participants to think with you about how to engage differently.

Avoid using language that might shame or scold participants who veer outside the agreements.

Step 1: Purpose & People

The statement of purpose for a dialogue serves as its guiding star. A clear purpose lets participants set appropriate expectations and helps the facilitator know when to make changes.

Reflective Structured Dialogue is designed to help people connect, understand one another, and shift their communication patterns. The purpose of your dialogue should be to arrive at one or more of these outcomes.

These outcomes provide the necessary precondition for effective policymaking, conflict resolution, collective decision-making, and community building without requiring the end goal of a clear agreement or consensus.

Here are purposes for three potential dialogues about race that are drawn from real-world experience.

FOR A MIXED-RACE GROUP

Purpose: To bring together people of different races to begin to explore how each person can contribute toward creating a connected community of different people rather than a community that lets different people in.

People: A diverse group of participants from the entire community.

FOR AN ALL-BIPOC GROUP

Purpose: To create an opportunity for Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC) to share their experiences, reflect on what they hear, and leave feeling supported and strengthened by this renewed sense of community.

People: People of color from a community or institution.

FOR AN ALL-WHITE GROUP

Purpose: To collectively reflect on their racial identity, discuss what an inclusive community means, and talk about ways to foster inclusive communities in their contexts.

People: A group of white people (or a predominantly white group) who are connected to each other in a family, organization, or institution.

Once you have a purpose, begin identifying potential planning team members, co-hosts, and participants. Who is this dialogue for? Whose voices need to be included?

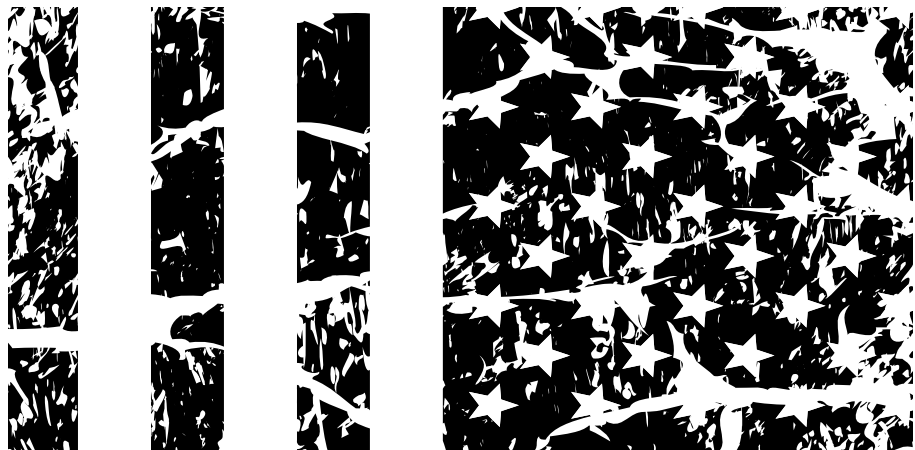
The next steps of the planning process flow from decisions about purpose and people.

What space would be inviting for the prospective participants? What time and day of the week should the dialogue (or dialogues) be held?

Think carefully about the language you're using to describe the dialogue. Language choices will have a significant impact on who feels welcome to participate.

Next, you'll send invitations—you'll find an invitation template in the appendix of this guide.

Your planning team and co-hosts can circulate the invitation through their networks. You'll want a process to have people RSVP as well, so you know how many people will attend.



Step 2: Communication Agreements

Communication agreements are a set of shared guidelines for the way people will engage and interact during the dialogue. They are guardrails to keep a tough conversation on track.

Begin the dialogue itself by talking about the conversation you want to have. Present the agreements listed below to the group. Invite them to make changes or suggest additional items.

The goal is to help them share their experiences, values, hopes, and fears with honesty, dignity, and vulnerability.

Before you begin, ask the participants to actively agree to these guidelines.

It's important to get the buy-in of all participants. People are likely to slip up in the course of the dialogue, but if they have agreed to these guidelines, a gentle reminder from you can stop a mistake from becoming a disaster.

Here is a set of communication agreements that have been effective in fostering real-world dialogues about race. These can be used for mixed-race, all-BI-POC, or all-white dialogues:

We can “pass” or “pass for now” if we are not ready or do not wish to respond. If you pass, you don't need to explain or justify why. This agreement helps ensure that people participate

voluntarily. It also allows people to take care of themselves and take what they need during the dialogue.

We'll speak one at a time and will not engage in side conversations. This framing may be amended to explicitly say “avoid interrupting.”

We will pause between speakers to take a breath. This helps people take in what others have said. It also helps create a slower, more reflective conversational pace, and invites the facilitator to step in if the conversation begins to speed up in ways that silence people or make it hard for others to speak.

We will “move up” or “move back” to share airspace. This agreement acknowledges that in every group, there are people who naturally process verbally, and often respond first or more often to prompts. There are also people in every group who hold back, waiting until the perfect time to speak, or until they have the perfect thing to say. This agreement invites people to intentionally recognize those dynamics and share the airspace—and invites the facilitator to step in if the same few people are speaking more than others.

We will speak for ourselves rather than on behalf of a group (as “I,” not “we”). This agreement invites the full complexity of personal experiences into a conversation. It also makes space for the facilitator to intervene if participants make stereotypes or generalizations of groups of people or minimize the experiences of others who might share aspects of their identity.

We will check out assumptions by asking questions. Rather than asking people not to judge, this agreement invites people to get curious in those moments and check out those assumptions. It also makes space for facilitators to intervene when someone says something that reflects an assumption about someone else's experience.

We'll respect any requests for confidentiality. Or: If we discuss our experience here with people who were not present, we will not attach names or identifying information without permission.

Step 3: Structured Dialogue Questions

Once you've welcomed people to the dialogue, explained your purpose, and confirmed a set of agreements, use a connecting question to help the participants connect with one another on a human level. This complicates preconceived ideas the participants might bring to the dialogue.

A connecting question will encourage each participant to share something personal—an experience, a song they've been listening to, or a childhood book they love.

Here are connecting questions for each dialogue in this guide (more connecting questions can be found in the resource library of the EP website):

CONNECTING QUESTION FOR A MIXED-RACE DIALOGUE

Think about a time when you had the chance to talk with someone about race or racial bias, but chose not to do so. What made that conversation feel challenging? What made you pause and how does that relate to how you're approaching the conversation today?

CONNECTING QUESTION FOR A ALL-BIPOC DIALOGUE

What would you like others here to understand about what's going on for you or how you're showing up to this conversation today?

CONNECTING QUESTION FOR A ALL-WHITE DIALOGUE

What is one thing (hope, experience, responsibility, etc.) you are setting aside to participate in this conversation? What is one thing you'd like to bring with you into this conversation?

In most EP dialogues, participants are then invited to respond to a set of three or four questions in a structured way. This is the outline of our most common structure:

Read the question aloud twice; maybe write it on a whiteboard too

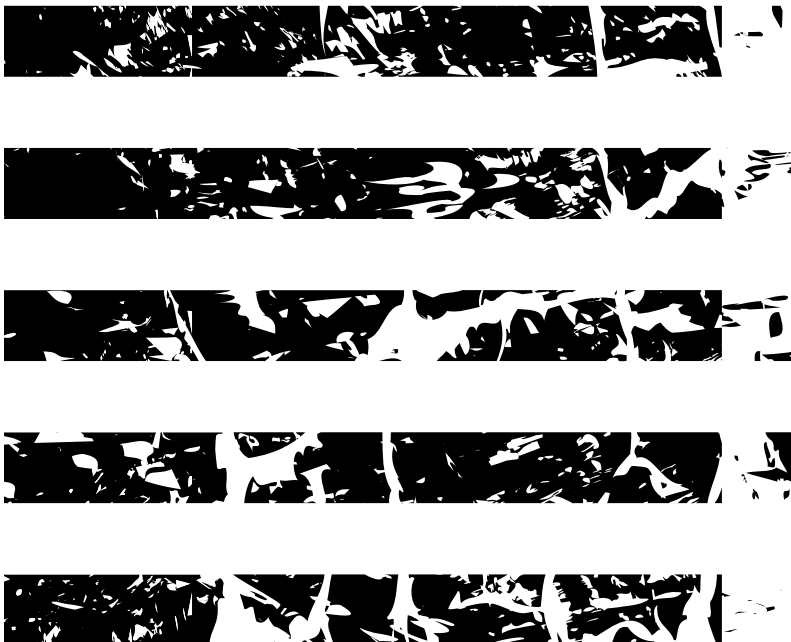
Give the participants a few minutes to reflect on the question or take notes

Allow each participant two minutes to respond, going around the circle

Pause briefly between speakers, so people can process what they heard

This structure is designed to provide time to reflect on the question, to create an equitable and orderly process for each person to respond (or pass, if that's one of your agreements), and to make a little space between speakers for people to process.

In a typical collaboration with EP, the questions and dialogue design would be co-created with



a community to meet their specific needs and cultural context. We encourage you to think deeply about your own context and adapt the sample questions accordingly.

STRUCTURED QUESTIONS FOR A MIXED-RACE DIALOGUE

Share an experience that you've had when you became aware that race, ethnicity, or bias about another core identity was a significant factor in your work and/or personal life. Or: What life experience has most significantly taught you about encounters across racial and ethnic differences?

How were you impacted by that experience? (For example, what were the effects on your feelings about yourself and others, about a group, or about a community? Were there any effects on your actions?)

What does it mean to you to be talking about that experience here?

STRUCTURED QUESTIONS FOR AN ALL-BIPOC DIALOGUE

When you reflect on recent events related to race in America, could you share an experience from your life that would help others better understand how this has been impacting you?

Where are you drawing your strength from? Or: when you've experienced things like that in the past, where have you drawn strength from?

How would you describe the ways you feel tension between your experiences and values? Or: how would you describe tension between your response to recent incidents and the responses of those around you?

STRUCTURED QUESTIONS FOR AN ALL-WHITE DIALOGUE

Think about a time in which you felt you belonged to a group or community. Share a specific story from your life when you realized that you belonged to that community. What did people do or not do? What structures, attitudes, or behaviors helped you to feel like you belonged?

Now think about a community in which you felt that you did not belong or you were "on the outside." Sit with that experience for a moment. As you reflect on it, what do you wish had happened—what could you or others have done, said, modeled, or shifted—to help you belong?

When you think about incidents you have witnessed or stories you have heard relating to racial bias, what have you learned from others who are working to support inclusive communities or institutions?

Step 4: A Connected Conversation

Following the structured questions, where everyone responds to the same question prompts, EP dialogues make time for a less structured conversation—an intentional space for questions of genuine curiosity that can lead to a deeper understanding of one another.

This is the time for participants to learn more about what others have said and to make connections between what is on their minds and what they've heard.

When you begin this section, it might be helpful to remind the group that this conversation is not a debate, but a place to deepen their understanding by listening and sharing stories and perspectives.

This is also a good time to revisit the purpose of the dialogue and the communication agreements, which will remain in place.

At this point, you're going to invite the participants to ask questions of each other that stem from a place of genuine curiosity. The questions that work best are:

Based on what has been said in the room

Intended to explore, deepen, and understand—not to challenge the correctness, morality, logic, or honesty of others

Not asked with the purpose of persuading

Not rhetorical (a rhetorical question is one that answers itself, a question that is really a statement by the asker)

Not questions you already have the answer to

Not requiring the person asked to make a case for or justify their position

Make sure participants specify whether they're asking the whole group or just one person. After the person who has been asked has had a chance to answer—if they choose to answer—invite other members of the group to reflect and comment if they wish.

As you facilitate this section, try to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. This time is less structured, but the agreements are still in place. If you need to step in as facilitator, refer back to the agreements.

There will be some silence. Let it sit for as long as you can stand it. You want to make sure people aren't looking to you (the facilitator) as the "question-asker."

If people need a spark to get the connected conversation started, you can invite them to reflect on the following questions:

Is there something someone said that you are curious about, or would like to know more about or understand better?

Is there a question you'd like to ask the whole group?

Did you make an assumption based on what someone said? If so, check your assumption out by asking them about it.

Have you heard something that stirred fresh thoughts or feelings that you'd like to offer?

Has a theme or idea emerged that you would like to add to or pick up on?



Step 5: Final Reflection & Closing

No matter how much time you've set aside for each conversation, it is crucial that you lead the group through a closing appropriate to the conversation.

Dialogues can unlock strong emotions and reveal stories, experiences, and perspectives that will take time to work through as a community. You want to help people transition away from the space of the dialogue in an intentional way.

The final reflection and closing invites people to appreciate what has been shared. This section often includes three parts: an acknowledgement and reminder about what's next; a closing reflection (often in the form of a timed go-round); and a reminder about confidentiality.

Take a look at the sample script at the end of this guide for language to lead people through a structured final reflection. Here are three final reflection questions for each of the three dialogues outlined in this guide:

MIXED-RACE DIALOGUE

What is one thing you want to continue thinking about, talking about, or working on as a result of this dialogue?

ALL-BIPOC DIALOGUE

What are one thing you hope for your community, one thing you're taking away, and one thing you're still wrestling with as you leave this dialogue?

ALL-WHITE DIALOGUE

As you reflect on the experiences you've shared and heard here, what is one challenge that you are facing in regard to building inclusive communities? What is one strength, commitment, or value you are bringing to the work of building inclusive communities?

Give people a minute to reflect on the question, then invite someone to begin the go-round. Each person can be given one or two minutes to speak, depending on the amount of time left.

If the group made an agreement about confidentiality, this is the time to remind the group and make sure that it's still appropriate for the conversation you just had together.

Your closing words typically highlight the continued relationships the participants will have—as members of the same community, as coworkers, as members of a faith community, etc. You might also acknowledge next steps if this is the beginning of a longer process of community transformation.

This is also a great opportunity to invite feedback, via email or survey, about the experience of the dialogue. Feedback is especially useful if you plan to hold a series of dialogues about race. Find out what went well, what was missing, and what could be improved for next time.

Appendix: Examples, Handouts & Tips

A Facilitator Script Outline

This facilitator script should be customized according to which of the three dialogues outlined in this guide you've chosen to lead. We encourage you to read directly from the script, word for word, so you can avoid unintended missteps or misunderstandings.

WELCOME & PURPOSE

Welcome. My name is **[name]** and I'm going to be facilitating our dialogue today. I'll say a bit more about my role later on, but essentially, I'm your guide.

But first, let's be clear on the purposes for our coming together. This dialogue is intended to **[statement of purpose]**.

A dialogue is not a normal conversation. The goal of this dialogue is not to persuade. It is to gain a new level of mutual understanding and self-reflection.

I hope that this dialogue will create an environment that supports careful listening and open speaking, a space in which every perspective is welcome and relationships across differences can be built.

INTRODUCTIONS & CONNECT

Let's do a round of introductions. I'll ask you each to tell us your name, your affiliation or role, and then respond briefly to a question. You'll each have one minute to introduce yourselves. When you're

done, the person to your left will introduce themselves, and so on.

Here's the question you'll respond to:

[connecting question from the Structured Dialogue Questions section; read it aloud twice]

You'll each have one minute to share your name, your affiliation or role, and answer the question. We'll go around the circle. Who would like to go first?

COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS

Now let's review what we'll be doing for the rest of our time. We'll begin by reviewing our communication agreements. After that, we'll talk a bit more about my role as facilitator and your role as participants.

Here are our draft agreements:

[Present the communication agreements; it's best to put them on a white board or easel so people can read them and they're visible throughout the dialogue.]

Please review these communication agreements. See whether you feel there's anything missing. We can bring new agreements or alterations to the group. Does anyone have any additions or changes?

If these agreements look right to you for our conversation, I'd

love it if you could give me verbal or nonverbal confirmation.

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Now I'd like to review our roles in the dialogue. As the facilitator, I am here to guide you through the dialogue, keep track of the time, and make sure everyone has a chance to speak.

If it's necessary, I may also remind folks about the communication agreements and our purposes here. However, I won't participate in the dialogue. My purpose is to support your conversation and I am committed to remaining in this role.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS CAN EXPECT

Now a word about your role as participants. These conversations are designed to be dialogues—a search for mutual understanding and self-reflection—not debates.

The communication agreements will serve as our norms for participating in the dialogue. We've reviewed those already. The most important ways you can contribute to the success of this dialogue are by listening and by seeking both to understand and to be understood.

When you listen, work hard to shift your full attention to what a speaker is saying and what feelings and energy they are expressing.

Resist the urge to switch your focus to preparing a question or thinking about something you want to say. You'll have time later to prepare yourself for those things.

Listen for points of connection as well as difference. Notice if you feel upset by something. It can be helpful to make a quick note to remind yourself of something you want to pick up on later; then return to listening.

When we get to the more open conversation, ask questions that come from a place of genuine curiosity—something you don't know and want to hear more about. You might also ask for clarity, or for more explanation to help you better understand the person.

Stay away from questions that are really a statement or an accusation (by you). Avoid questions with built-in assumptions. Ask about what's meaningful to the person instead.

Consider how to express yourself in a way that's most likely to be heard. Sharing personal experiences is one effective way. Speaking only for yourself is another. Consider how you can share the meaning and values behind your stories.

Aim to be honest about language or questions you hear that are problematic for you.

OK. You've been doing a lot of listening. Are there any questions before we start the dialogue? Is everyone ready? Let's begin!

STRUCTURED QUESTIONS

In this section of the dialogue, you will each be invited to respond to three questions. These questions are designed to prompt a fresh conversation about race in America.

We're going to do this in a pretty structured way. First, I will read the question twice. Then you will have **[time, e.g. "three minutes"]** to reflect on what you want to say. You can take notes during this time or just sit and think quietly.

Next, you'll each have **[time]** to respond to the question. We'll go one by one around the circle. I'm going to keep time on my **[phone, watch, etc]**. I'll give you a small signal when your speaking time is almost finished.

Everyone will have the chance to speak, but you can always choose to pass, or pass for now. If you pass, I'll come back at the end of the go-round to see if you want to share then.

Let's also allow for a brief pause between speakers. Just take a breath before you begin to respond to the question.

Is everyone ready? Do you have any questions? OK. Let's begin.

[Process: Ask the structured question. Give the group a minute to reflect. Invite someone to begin the go-round. Go around the circle, giving each person a chance to speak.]

Before we move on, let's capture this moment of curiosity. Reflect back on what you've heard. Is there a thought or question you want to preserve for when things open up in a minute? Something

you wish you could hear more about?

I'll give you just a few minutes now to make any notes about what you just heard. These notes might help you in the next section of the dialogue.

[Pause briefly but long enough for people to write notes for themselves.]

A CONNECTED CONVERSATION

Now you'll have the chance for a connected conversation. This section of the dialogue is more open. You'll ask questions of one another.

The goal of this connected conversation is to learn more about each other and to make connections between what is on your mind and what you just heard. It's good to remember that this is not a debate. This is a place to deepen our understanding about one another by listening and by sharing our own stories and perspectives.

Please try to allow space for everyone to have a chance to speak. A good general rule is: if you've already spoken, hold back until everyone has been heard. This obviously doesn't apply if someone asks you a question directly.

Remember as well that the communication agreements, purposes, and participant roles are our continuing guides for this portion of our conversation.

As a spark for your thinking about what you might ask or offer, consider the following:

Is there something someone said that you are curious about, or would like to know more about or understand better?

Is there a question you'd like to ask the whole group?

Did you make an assumption based on what someone said? If so, check it out by asking them.

Have you heard something that stirred fresh thoughts or feelings that you'd like to offer?

Has a theme or idea emerged that you would like to add to or pick up on?

Let's pause now for a minute to let people collect their thoughts. When you look up, I'll know you're ready to go. Then I might invite someone to start us off.

[Wait until people are ready, and then invite them to engage in a connected conversation. Make sure to keep track of the time. Give people a two-minute warning before the end of this section of the dialogue.]

Thank you all for sharing. There's never a perfect time to end a conversation like this, but I want to be respectful of the time that you have committed.

Now we're going to move to the final reflection and closing.

REFLECTION & CLOSING WORDS

The purpose of this part of the dialogue is to bring this evening's dialogue to a conclusion. I hope, however, that it won't be the end of this conversation.

Let's begin with a closing reflection, an opportunity to think about this conversation and share

your thoughts. You will each have one minute to respond to the following question:

[Question from the Final Reflection and Closing section; read it aloud twice.]

Take a minute to reflect on this question. In a minute, I will ask someone to begin—remember you will have up to one minute to answer.

[Go around the circle, with each person responding to the prompt or passing.]

Thank you all so much for what you've shared today.

[If there is a confidentiality agreement, review that here.]

During this dialogue, you may have taken risks. You may have spoken a vulnerable truth or listened deeply when it was difficult to hear what people were saying.

Thank you. Thank you for coming together to have a different conversation about race.

Though this dialogue is ending, I hope that the experience of listening deeply, sharing openly, and asking curious questions will continue for all of us.

Thank you again so much for participating in this conversation.

A Dialogue Invitation Template

PARAGRAPH 1: STATE THE PURPOSE AND PEOPLE

Start with the most important things: the purpose of the dialogue and who it is for.

Sample Text: You are cordially invited to have a new kind of conversation with people in this community whose views, values, and identities may differ from your own. The topic will be racial identity and racism. Our goals will be to encourage mutual understanding, new relationships, and self-reflection.

PARAGRAPH 2: BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE THE PROCESS

Give people a rough idea of what they'll experience.

Sample Text: We'll be using the Essential Partners approach, Reflective Structured Dialogue. Designed over three decades, this is a way of holding a conversation that is more structured and intentional than usual. We will work together to make sure that all participants feel comfortable talking about their experiences, values, and beliefs. You'll be invited to share your stories and perspectives as part of the dialogue.

PARAGRAPH 3: EXPECTATIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

This is the place to address concerns people might have about engaging in a topic like race.

Sample Text: This is not intended to change people's beliefs or values. Participants should be ready to engage in difficult conversations with respect, honesty, and an open mind. Dehumanizing or threatening speech toward any individual or group will not be tolerated. We ask that you commit to attending the entire dialogue, so please make sure you don't have competing commitments.

PARAGRAPH 4: PRAGMATIC & LOGISTICAL DETAILS

In this section, communicate the important information, such as:

Where the dialogue will take place	What date and time it will take place
How long it will last	Whether there will be food / drink
How participants can RSVP	Parking / public transportation information
Accessibility options	Additional information for reference

Give people some information about yourself, your planning team, any co-sponsors, and Essential Partners. The more transparent you are, the more trust you can build.

ABOUT THE FACILITATOR(S): Brief (one or two sentence) bios of the facilitator(s).

ABOUT OUR SPONSORS: If there are one or more organizations sponsoring the dialogue, include information about them here. This can be important for dialogues across polarizing topics, where sponsors are needed to build trust.

ABOUT ESSENTIAL PARTNERS: The model of dialogue we're using, Reflective Structured Dialogue, is an innovation of Essential Partners, a nonprofit organization founded in 1989. Essential Partners equips people to live and work better together in community by building trust and understanding across differences. Find out more about Essential Partners' history and approach at <http://whatisessential.org>.

Stepping in When Things Get Hot

Stepping in when a conversation begins to get heated—or when people drift away from the intentions and agreements—can be intimidating.

Your role as facilitator is to lead the group through the dialogue, speak up when things aren't going to plan, and step in when people slip up on agreements.

State your role clearly when you welcome people into the dialogue. Note in particular that one responsibility is stepping in if the dialogue goes off track. By stating this up front, you create the expectation that you will speak up if you see a need to attend to an agreement, the purpose of the conversation, or the role you play.

In the EP model, a facilitator typically intervenes in the conversation for any of the following three reasons.

1. The purpose is at risk

Example: During the open conversation section, the group starts brainstorming ways they can make change in their community, rather than working toward mutual understanding.

2. One or more agreements has been breached

Example: A participant offhandedly makes a generalized statement (e.g., “liberals have completely turned against law enforcement”).

3. Your role as facilitator is at risk

Example: A participant goes over their allotted speaking time and doesn't notice or care that the timer has gone off.

These guidelines allow for a legitimate intervention because they are observable and objective—you can refer to specific observations and actions that others saw or heard.

EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS: PSA

To intervene effectively, we recommend using the PSA method: name the Purpose, observe the Slip, present an Alternative.

We will offer three examples of PSA interventions below, for each of the three reasons you might intervene in a dialogue.

Purpose

Whenever you intervene in a conversation, name the purpose of your intervention. For each of the three reasons above, the purpose is a little different. Here are ways you might name the purpose for each of the three reasons to intervene:

Reason 1: The purpose of this dialogue is to make space for people to hear others and feel heard, and to build greater understanding across different perspectives, experiences, and identities.

Reason 2: The purpose of our agreements is to help people feel heard for who they are.

Reason 3: My purpose as a facilitator is to help make sure everyone is heard and to help guide you through this dialogue.

Slip

After you've named the purpose of your intervention, name the slip that you observed.

Note: this is different than making the person the problem. Don't say, “You aren't respecting other voices.” Say instead, “I noticed you interrupting Sarah.” Assume good intentions.

Having a difficult or emotional conversation in a new way can be tough. Slip-ups are natural—even expected.

Again, here are three examples of ways to name a slip for each reason for intervening:

Reason 1: I've noticed that you've begun to move into negotiating solutions or problem solving.

Reason 2: You may not have intended it, but you just made a statement about a whole category of people.

Reason 3: I hear that your story is important, but you've reached the end of your speaking time and I want to ensure others have the same amount of time that you have.

Alternative

Finally, invite people into an alternative way of engaging.

You can offer an alternative to one person or the whole group. You can also pause the dialogue to brainstorm alternatives.

Don't be afraid to transparently manage these dilemmas by saying something like, "I want to offer an alternative solution here." Here are example alternatives for each intervention reason:

Reason 1: I'd love to make sure we don't move on until we've had a chance to fully hear from everyone about what matters most, so I'm curious if anyone has a question that would help them better understand what others have said. [Then call on someone or offer a question.]

Reason 2: It seems like there's something important for you in what you were trying to say about your experience. Could you try saying that again, but focusing on only your personal experience (using "I" instead of "we" or "they")?

Reason 3: I'd like to invite you to wrap up your speaking, but it seems like you have more to share. If you want, you can take a moment to write down what you didn't get to say, so you won't forget it when we move on.

Remember that an intervention isn't a confrontation! It's a tool to remind people of the shared purposes, agreements, and roles that everyone in the dialogue committed to following.

A Dialogue Participant Handout

A dialogue is not a normal conversation. It may feel awkward or unnatural at first. But that's the goal: to take us out of our usual patterns of communication.

Dialogues are a search for mutual understanding. They're not debates. Our model, Reflective Structured Dialogue, is designed to help you listen to understand and speak to be understood.

Communication agreements will set the norms for participating in the dialogue. Do your best to stick to them. They help serve the shared purpose.

WHEN YOU LISTEN

Shift your full attention to what a speaker is saying, as well as their feelings and energy. Listen for points of connection as well as differences. Notice your feelings.

It can be helpful to make a quick note to remind yourself of something you want to pick up on later. Then return to listening.

Resist the urge to switch your focus. Don't think about your next question or something you want to say.

WHEN YOU SPEAK

To help people understand you and your perspective, the goal is to express yourself in a way that's likely to be heard by others.

Personal experiences and stories can be very effective.

Try to be honest about language or questions that present problems for you, and do your best to explain why.

Consider how you want to share the meaning and values that lie behind your statements and stories.

Speak for yourself, don't try to be a spokesperson. Be yourself. And be your whole self.

WHEN ASKING QUESTIONS

During the more open conversation, ask questions that come from a place of genuine curiosity.

Ask about something you don't know already but want to hear more about.

Ask for clarity or further explanation to understand the person.

Stay away from questions that are a statement or an accusation (by you).

Check your assumptions by asking about what is meaningful to the person.

And when someone asks you a question, remember to speak openly, honestly, and from your own experience.

FINAL NOTES

A few other notes to help you participate fully in the dialogue:

Trust the facilitator to hold space so you can focus on the conversation

Ask follow-up questions during the connected conversation

Share the stories that are important to you

Notice your own reactions, pay attention to how you feel

If you get stuck, ask for more—more depth, more clarity

Find out more about dialogue and Essential Partners at whatisessential.org.

