

Grow Community Involvement through Conversation: Lessons from Community Conversation Facilitators.

On May 9th 2007 a group of community conversation facilitators and community members met to discuss how conversations – whether formal or informal – between community members lead to increased involvement. The three panellists Sheila McLaughlin, David Logan, and Nicole Tarasuik – all experienced community conversation facilitators – shared their unique and overlapping perspectives on leading successful community conversations.

The following notes summarize key learnings from this discussion:

- Respect each individual and their ideas
- Communication is a powerful tool – be sure to use it positively for best results.
- Leave room for personal conversations and observations as these build relationships and trust. These connections are essential to long-term involvement.
- Start with the positive.
- Don't enter into a conversation with a pre-determined result. Let the conversation flow naturally and enjoy the often unexpected outcome.
- Be patient. Let others formulate and voice their thoughts.
- Listen attentively. Do not interrupt or think about what you want to say next.
- Bring people in by asking for opinions and sharing knowledge.
- Let the group determine their focus and needs – and listen for their voice.
- Facilitator plays the role of bridging ideas and creating connections. Not there to “guide” the conversation in a particular direction.

- Set rules for conversation that everyone can accept and work with. Either come with some suggested rules and discuss them prior to adopting them, or ask the group to set the conversation rules.
- Validate all ideas through the conversation. Recognize each persons contribution even if it appears to be off-topic. Sometime the most creative results / solutions are discovered when we look at situations from a different perspective.
- Don't get bogged down in the micro details; focus on the BIG picture and encourage others to do the same.
- Be open to being surprised by the solutions and ideas that arise out of open conversations between diverse individuals.
- Allow participants to assume roles and responsibilities that they are comfortable with. If they want to explore a new role, support them in this transition.
- Be adaptable when it comes to the expectations of the organizer and the group. The end result (i.e. the solution) isn't necessarily the most important result of the conversation; often the best result / outcome is that the conversation has occurred and participants have built trust and respect for one another.
- Trust people to do what needs to be done.