# Responsive Dialogues Guiding Principles

## Overview

The goal of this document is to provide an outline and best practices for leading a micro dialogue or conversation that addresses high stakes, potentially sensitive topics.  This document is by no means exhaustive nor should be substituted for intentional facilitation training; good facilitation is not easy and requires extensive training, practice, and commitment. This is a guide with best practices for those who seek to convene groups and lead conversations mostly with intact groups (e.g. student organizations, affinity groups, staff meetings). Ideally, any conversation of this type is led by a skilled facilitator but we understand that leaders may be called upon to quickly address the needs of their community and hopefully the questions presented and resources offered will provide a baseline for embarking upon these conversations in a thoughtful manner.

This guide is primarily for short conversations (60 - 90 minutes). This is **not** for conflict mediation. The dialogue being convened should potentially provide space for participants to:
- Process charged / concerning incident(s) - i.e. racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, acts of violence and brutality
- Be in community together
    - Process and reflect areas of concerns and issues under consideration
    - Engage in constructive guided dialogue
    - Agreement may be an outcome, but not the primary intention as this often requires different competencies and structures for engagement; exposure to differing opinions, ideas will likely occur during dialogues
    - Identify strategies (individual, collective, institutional) for moving forward individually, and as a collective/group/cohort

Given the current physical limitations on gathering, the guidance in this document will focus on virtual engagement and assume that the reader is the one initiating or convening the dialogue.

## Preparation and Inquiry

Rushing to create a dialogue or conversation without proper assessment and planning can be harmful and counter to the goals of gathering.

If you are asked to lead a dialogue with a group, please engage in an intake process or initial conversation with point people from the group to understand the needs and expectations of the group:

- How did the group come to be and what leadership or power structures exist now? Historically?
  - Is the group composed of students, staff/administrators, scholars. Is this an affinity group? Cohort based collective?
  - Is there a president, leader, etc? Formal or informal leadership? Elected or appointed officials? What is the current status of the leadership?
  - Are there any identity-based power dynamics within the group that would be important to be mindful of (e.g., senior leaders in the unit are predominantly white and front-line staff are people of color)?
- How is information coming forward or being disseminated?
- What is the sense of urgency, level of "upsetness," or reach of concern? Will this dialogue address impact in the short-term, medium-term, long-term?
- What needs, concerns, or ideas, if anything, have been expressed by the group? By individuals?
- Have all perspectives on the incident(s) been heard? How might additional information be gathered to include those perspectives?
- What interventions have been tried already? Many leaders may have tried to address things internally and having that information in advance is important.
- What and how have dialogue goals been established and communicated to all who will participate in the dialogue?
  - Have you confirmed that participants understand the dialogue goals and there is buy-in?
  - What will be the follow up to ensure alignment and communication and feedback loops are transparent?
  - It is important to confirm if the dialogue is mandated or not. Mandated dialogue may pose challenges to having group buy-in without proper framing.
- Did the incident or issue involve members of the group? If so, what has been the follow up? What are the next steps?
  - If there is a disciplinary issue, members of the group may expect an update on the status of that action - are you prepared to engage that conversation?
- Are the issues raised local, national, or global? Are they escalating or dormant?
  - What education and framing may need to take place before convening?
- What have some suggested next steps, or actions been thus far? What are some additional suggestions? Are these suggestions based on individual or communal action and response?

**Pre-Convening the Dialogue**

Prior to the dialogue or conversation the organizers should meet to discuss all aspects of the dialogue. Setting expectations, establishing structure, and identifying roles in advance are

helpful and necessary. In this meeting the person(s) requesting the dialogue and potential facilitator(s) should discuss all aspects of the dialogue including but not limited to:

- Expectation Setting
  - Think through the various aspects of the gathering including what the gathering will or won't do (i.e. may be a forum to express feelings but not a debate to argue perspectives).
- Structure
  - Where and when will this take place? Is the setting appropriate for the type of dialogue you're going to have, and how might you need to adapt to make the environment conducive to your goals?
  - Make certain that the convening platform is accessible for all participants
  - Who will be invited?
    - A secure Zoom room or other type of meeting space is recommended
  - Establish how you will facilitate/guide the dialogue
    - Will it be a formal program or open conversation?
    - How will you prepare and what guiding questions will you use?
    - Engagement
      - Will people be called on to speak one at a time?
      - If using Zoom will you ask people to use the "raising hand" feature?
      - Will you pre-establish speaking time and give participants a limit with the aim of maximizing participation?
    - Who will assume the responsibility of maintaining the structure of the dialogue, including time management and monitoring any community agreements?
    - Additionally, send out the agenda in advance so that participants can prepare or opt out if they are not ready to engage.
  - Determine if there will be notes or any other kind of document generated as a result of the dialogue. Keep in mind that documentation and recording may limit or minimize engagement and vulnerability. If you are recording establish:
    - Who will have access to the recording and how will it be distributed?
    - How will privacy be maintained?
    - Where will it be stored? For how long and access privileges?
- How will the dialogue come to a close; and what resources, if any, should be provided? What will be communicated about what can take place next and what will not?

# Facilitation

Facilitating dialogues is a skill and can be challenging in even the most positive of circumstances. Significant advance planning and preparation are critical factors in successful dialogue spaces where participants can feel engaged, heard, and even challenged. Determine if you have the emotional capacity to facilitate the conversation and hold space for ALL participants. Depending on the topic or group you may want to seek out a co-facilitator that is internal or external to the group who can offer additional support and can offer parity in identities represented in those facilitating the content. Additionally, think through the identities of the facilitators and how that might impact the dialogue.

Below are a few roles to consider when establishing the dialogue:
- **Convener** - Person to open the gathering and review the intention of the gathering
- **Facilitator** - Person who can establish the group agreements and maintain the flow of the conversation.
  - Should be comfortable with the topic, able to reinforce the agreements, name issues or concerns that arise, pause and restart the gathering as needed
  - May have to do homework/research to prepare for dialogue and understand historical and contemporary contexts
  - Can be a member of the group or external but should introduce themselves and clarify their role in the gathering
  - Is able to deal with difficult and challenging discussion moments; can refocus and redirect people and conversation when necessary; will hold people accountable for actions and statements
- **Closer** - Person to bring the gathering to a close
  - Check in with all participants to gauge how they feel and what support may be needed going forward
  - Thank and acknowledge the participants
  - Offer resources or share any further engagement opportunities

Guiding questions for the conversation:
- What events and issues have brought this group together for this conversation?
- What kind of emotions are people experiencing? Individually? Communally?
- What are you hoping to reflect on together in this space? What do you hear from others?
- What more would be helpful as you continue to process your thoughts/feelings? What do you need from the group?
- What actions and/or outcomes would be ideal; what is doable; what will your contributions be?

- What will our next steps be, individually? Collectively? Suggestions for community or expanding the dialogues?

Keep in mind that throughout the gathering the facilitator may need to remind folks to take time and space; some participants may demonstrate emotions such as anger, frustration, immense sadness. Balance acknowledging an individual's emotions to show care for the person but do not make them the center of the gathering. Having this sentiment expressed in the group agreements can help people self-manage throughout the conversation.

## Topic-Specific Considerations

As you think about convening conversations about some of the specific topics listed below, it is essential to acknowledge that related incidents are not new nor do they occur in a vacuum. It is important to situate the conversation within a historical context and name that there are communities who experience compounding intersectional realities that make them susceptible to experiencing multiple experiences outlined below (e.g. trans people of color). Ideally the facilitator will keep these points in mind and offer guidance as needed but not present them as a lecture or training. This list is by no means exhaustive but instead a few helpful prompts to be mindful of when engaging in these conversations.

Additionally, throughout the conversations it will be important to continue to ground participants in their experiences and their individual impact and responsibilities while still engaging with a broader conversation about what these issues mean for larger communities.

- Racism
    - How does this action show up in our systems, structures, and in what ways embedded in common practices? What is the impact on individuals and broadly across varying communities?
    - What are the specifics of racism as it pertains to specific groups -- Similarities in applications? Differences in applications?
    - How do we both address the idea of and push against notions of "reverse racism"
    - How do we address central issues such as power and inequity?
    - Move away from good vs. bad dichotomies

- Brutality; State and Institutional Violence
    - Explore how people and spaces are patrolled, policed, and monitored - historically? What is happening in the contemporary moment?
    - What does justice look like? How can liberatory practices be utilized in communities? How do we think beyond punishment and create spaces for people

to re-enter into communities being held accountable for actions, yet without fear of being punished/isolated for harm they have caused in the past?
- ○ Think beyond individual actors and examine the systems and structures that create disparities within communities

- LGBTQ+ Related Discrimination (Transphobia and Homophobia)
  - ○ What is cissexism and heterosexism?  How are they connected to transphobia and homophobia?
  - ○ In what ways do the intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ communities create greater vulnerabilities and threats of discrimination and bias for trans and queer people of color, femme queer/trans folks, LGBTQ+ disabled communities, LGBTQ+ immigrants, etc.?
  - ○ How can we protect LGBTQ+ folks who are in the process of coming out as LGBTQ+? What are the barriers to coming out for LGBTQ+ people?  How are experiences of coming out made more complex by the intersections of other identities?
  - ○ How do we uphold gender binaries in our everyday language, practices, policies, and systems?  How can we undo these?

- Disability and Accessibility
  - ○ How to move away from additive efforts and toward universal design?
  - ○ How have disruptions (i.e. Covid-19) revealed opportunities and new potential standards for engagement?
  - ○ Include conversations about the diversity (across spectrum and include those with hidden disabilities and neuro-diverse members) within our NYU community

- Immigration
  - ○ Move the conversation beyond the DREAM Act as this potentially sets up a good vs. bad immigrant conversation
  - ○ How have historical acts of exclusion framed conversations about immigration and citizenship (who has rights, what rights?)
  - ○ Avoid "we are all immigrants" as that erases Native American and Indigenous people as well as people brought to locations as slaves

- Solidarity
  - ○ How do we center the experiences of the community?
  - ○ How does erasure continue to marginalize people?
  - ○ How do we utilize our privilege to be in solidarity with groups?

- ○ How will we educate ourselves about pertinent issues, including issues of power, equity, and privilege?
- ○ What are tangible and sustainable practices that can endure beyond a "moment?" How can one be proactive?
- ○ How will we hold ourselves accountable in proactively doing the work of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within our spheres of influence?

# Follow-Up

In closing the session, it's important to check in with all of the participants for a quick reflection to gauge how they felt and name support that may be needed. Post gathering, check in with your contact. Has the group expressed ongoing concerns? Did new issues arise? Did it go well? A follow up conversation is important and reiterates to the community that we are invested in them.

# Resources

**NYU**
- Office of Global Inclusion, Diversity, and Strategic Innovation - [Learning and Development Resources](#)
  - ○ Center for Multicultural Education and Programs
  - ○ LGBTQ+ Center
- [Chaplains' Circle](#)
- Department Social and Cultural Analysis - [Faculty Writings](#)
- [The Disabilities, Inclusion and Accessibility Working Group (DIA)](#)
- [Employee Assistance Program - Carebridge](#)
- [Mindful NYU](#)
- [Wellness Exchange](#);  24-hour hotline: (212) 443-9999

**Dialogue and Facilitation**
- [The Art of Mindful Facilitation](#)
- Everyday Democracy - [Dialogue Guides](#)
- Group and Community Agreements
  - ○ [Sample Community Agreements](#)
  - ○ [Cultures Connecting, LLC](#)
- [Intergroup Resources](#)
- The Public Conversations Project - [Fostering Dialogue Across Divides](#)
- [University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching](#)
- [Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching](#)
- [Sustained Dialogue Institute](#)