

Building Trust and Bridging the Divide

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Last summer, like many of you, I was watching with great concern the divisions in our country and communities becoming more visible. At the same time, I was witnessing a reluctance to hold conversations across this divide around an issue that I care deeply about, climate change. In our efforts to be civil, we tend to avoid difficult issues with others (even our friends and family). Yet, in not talking about difficult issues, it seems that the divides grow deeper and we grow farther apart. What is a “changemaker” to do?

Fortunately, in the midst of my dismay last summer I got an invitation to an upcoming workshop which asked, “Do you want to learn how to have conversations in your community around sticky issues?” *Yes!* Sign me up.

Invigorated and inspired by the workshop, I came back to campus and began laying the groundwork for holding a community conversation on the polarizing issue of climate change. I knew I had touched a tender spot when after the conversation held this spring, participants responded with comments such as “*I have my own strong opinions about this issue, but I never before sat down to listen to other's concerns*” and “*We need to sit down and talk like this more often.*” The hunger and relief of reaching across the divide was apparent. The positive energy in the room was palpable.

What was this magic salve? What I learned at the workshop were forms of *deliberative dialogue*, techniques that organizations have been creating and learning from for over 20 years. These structured conversations create safe space and shared experience among the participants who then share concerns and weigh trade-offs. Most importantly to me, these conversations build trust.

The deliberations take place in small groups with facilitators and a conversation format that supports civil discourse among a diverse (ideally representative) group of participants. When we convened our conversation, borrowing from the National Issues Forum Institute's *Climate Choices* framework, over 250 participants contributed – university students, staff, and faculty, as well as community members. The structure of the deliberation formed around the question, *How should we meet the challenges of a warming planet?*

Instead of focusing on our differences, the conversations start with asking participants to share their experiences and concerns of a warming planet. You can imagine the spectrum of responses: not caring about it, finding it too costly to address, to concerns about future livelihood. The conversation then shifted to weighing possible solutions, big and small steps, and the trade-offs required to act on those solutions. What are we willing to give-up? What values underlie our concerns and preferred path of action? The deliberation ends with a reflection on what the group learned and giving voice to how one's perspective shifted over the course of the conversation.

Reaching across the divides takes effort. The reward is meeting people face to face and remembering that our hearts, concerns, and values aren't that different. The reward is also that we practice how to be citizens together. In these polarized times, it is the issues that we care about the most that are the most polarizing. Gathering to find solutions and common ground for action calls us to listen to the other, thus building trust – powerful first steps in bridging the divide.

If you want to read more, I recommend these websites: [National Issues Forum Institute](#) and [National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#).