

HOW LIBRARIANS AND LIBRARIES CAN LEAD COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE

A Conversation Guide



WELCOME

CONVERSATIONS THAT MOVE THE COMMUNITY FORWARD

Communities are looking for public space where they can come together to discover common ground and do common good. Libraries are already positioned as welcoming places where people of all ages and cultures are comfortable. Librarians have standing in their communities as trusted convenors. Hosting conversations on issues that matter is an important way for libraries to help their communities move forward. This includes your ability to:

- **Engage people in a different way:** Libraries can take a leadership role by engaging people around their aspirations and the small actions they can take to get started.
- **Find common ground for action:** People want to restore confidence that we can come together and get things done. By convening diverse groups, libraries can help people see what we hold in common, and take the first step to restoring belief in ourselves and one another.
- **Forge deeper relationships:** Reflecting back the insights from these conversations gives people a sense that they've been heard, and is the first step to forging deeper relationships within the broader community.
- **Strengthen library efforts:** Insights about people's aspirations and where we could get started help the library think more strategically about its programs and efforts. These conversations surface insights about ways libraries can be even more relevant moving forward.

PLANNING THE CONVERSATION

The ideal size for these hour-long conversations is between eight and fifteen people. To get that many, invite at least twenty people, as some will be unable to make it. If fewer than eight show up, that's fine. Go ahead—it'll be worth your time. If more than twenty show up, consider breaking into two groups.

DECIDE WHO TO INVITE

These conversations are a powerful way to get to know different parts of the community or learn from voices not usually heard. Think about what you want to learn, what your goal for this conversation will be. Do you want to get a general understanding of how people see the community? If so, invite a broad group of people to come and talk. This is a great starting point. Maybe you want to get a better sense of how a specific group of people or people from a certain part of town think and talk about their community? Then you will want to be more targeted in inviting people. Either of these options is fine. No matter what you choose, remember that since these are conversations, not rigorous academic research, you do not need a random or demographically representative sample.

After you've identified who you want to engage, think about the individuals or groups who could help you reach those people. Ask yourself:

- Who knows the part of the community or the people we want to talk to?
 - Library staff, volunteers, board members, patrons
 - Library partners and their staff
- Who already brings people together? Think about asking for help from:
 - Local businesses: barber shops, beauty parlors, diners
 - Religious leaders, congregations, choirs, prayer groups
 - Book clubs, gardening groups, parenting groups, neighborhood associations
 - Groups such as YMCA, Rotary, PTA, unions

TIPS FOR GETTING PEOPLE TO COME

- Invite people personally and encourage your staff and partners to do the same.
- Contact people on your email lists or via social media.
- Ask people to suggest others to invite (friends, neighbors, and peers).
- Set clear expectations in the invitation (see page 4).
- Follow up by email or phone to determine how many people are coming.
- Where possible, try to invite people at least two weeks before the event.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

When you invite people to the conversations, it is important to set clear, realistic expectations. These are different from the conversations most groups hold, so it is helpful to explain what these conversations ARE, and what they ARE NOT.

First, what these conversations ARE:

- Sixty-minute conversations to help the library better understand the community and how to restore belief that we can get things done, together.
- Inspired by *The Work of Hope*. Many people find it helpful to read the book beforehand, but you can fully participate without reading it.
- Focused on learning. The library pledges to follow up with people after the conversation to share what it learned and how it will use that information.

Secondly, what these conversations ARE NOT:

- A Town Hall, academic research or a focus group—they are conversations.
- Sponsored by a political party, a business development effort.
- About trying to sell a particular solution or approach.
- A gripe session.

CONVERSATION LEADER

The role of a Conversation Leader is to create a conversation that helps you learn how people think about the community. Good Conversation Leaders are curious listeners. Librarians can be both the convener and the leader, or you can recruit someone else to lead the conversation. You also want a Note Taker. This person should listen for the words people use, the way they connect ideas. You want detailed notes, not a transcript.

SET UP THE ROOM

- Arrive early. Leave time to set up the room before people arrive.
- Put up signs to direct people from the main entrance to the meeting room.
- Have a sign-in sheet for participants that is in compliance with your library's privacy and information-gathering policies. Ask people to fill this out before the conversation.
- Put refreshments in a location easily accessed without interrupting the discussion.

WHAT TO BRING TO THE CONVERSATION

- Extra pens/pencils
- Refreshments
- Sign-in sheets
- Copies of the Ground Rules

CONVERSATION GROUND RULES

HAVE A “KITCHEN TABLE” CONVERSATION

Everyone participates; no one dominates.

THERE ARE NO “RIGHT ANSWERS”

Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs – you do not need to be an expert.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Listen carefully and try hard to understand the views of those who disagree with you.

HELP KEEP THE DISCUSSION ON TRACK

Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.

IT IS OKAY TO DISAGREE, BUT DON'T BE DISAGREEABLE

Respond to others the way you would want them to responded to you.

HAVE FUN!

SETTING UP THE CONVERSATION

1. Introductions

- Introduce yourself.
- Thank any groups or individuals involved in setting up the conversation.
- Thank the participants for coming.

2. Set expectations

- Tonight's conversation is a chance for us to better understand how you see things in our community.
- The library is holding these conversations to [insert your reason].
- The conversation is inspired by insights from Richard C. Harwood's book, *The Work of Hope*. But you don't have to have read it to participate. Your experiences, concerns, and hopes are what matter.
- We can't promise to create a new program based on this conversation, but we will promise to get back to you with what we learn tonight and make sure you're able to participate moving forward if you want to.
- These conversations usually last an hour, although sometimes folks want to talk more.

3. Review the Ground Rules

- Review the Ground Rules from page 5. Ask if those rules work for everyone.

4. Explain your role as Conversation Leader

- Tonight, my role is to ask questions that help us have a good conversation. I won't participate or offer my views—this is a conversation about what you think.
- To be sure I get what you're saying, I may ask follow-up questions, or play devil's advocate.
- To make sure we hear from everyone, I may ask you to hold off on comments at times.

5. Identify the Note Taker

- We have someone (point them out) taking notes tonight. The notes won't include anyone's name; they're to make sure we catch what you're saying.

6. Get Started

- Before we get started—please tell us your first name, where you live, and what you like to do in your free time.

QUESTIONS

1. **What are your aspirations for your community?**
2. **What will it take to reach our aspirations for the community?**
3. In *The Work of Hope*, Richard C. Harwood found that “instant gratification” now drives people’s daily behaviors and is behind an unwillingness to make long-term investments in their communities and the nation.

What do you make of this, and what would it take to get people thinking beyond instant gratification?

4. In the book, people said that Americans have become too certain about their own positions on important issues and concerns and don’t listen to one another. They argued we need more room for compassion, openness, and humility in our lives and communities.

Given what we’ve been talking about, what would that look like here? And what’s holding us back?

5. As mentioned in *The Work of Hope*, people also said that to put the country on a better path we must find small, local actions that will help restore our belief we can get things done, together.

In this community, what are some things that would help restore our belief that we can get things done together? Where could we get started?

6. Hope is always important to whether people will step forward and engage with others.

What would give you hope that we are moving in the right direction in this community and the nation?

WRAP-UP

Thanks for a great conversation. Our goal was to listen and learn to see how we might support people who want to get things done together. Moving forward, we’ll follow up with you about what we’ve learned by [your plan to follow up].

We’d like to hold more conversations. If you have suggestions for people, or groups to include please email us at [your email].

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

USING WHAT YOU LEARN

After the conversation, review your notes and think back to what you heard. You will want to look for patterns—ideas that resonated with people, and that they came back to. Consider:

- **People’s shared aspirations.**
What aspirations do people hold in common?
What small steps might the library take to help people move toward their aspirations?
- **The key challenges that people agreed are preventing the community from moving forward.**
What it will take to reach their aspirations?
How do they talk about the conditions we need to create in the community?
- **Several small actions people think could help restore belief in our ability to work together.**
What kind of actions do people say would restore their belief that we can get things done together?
What gives people hope? What would people need to see to believe things were improving?
How might the library help people take those steps?
- **Who else needs to know what we’re learning?**
Who can we share these insights with to help them strengthen *their* efforts?

FOLLOWING UP WITH PARTICIPANTS

Use the suggested template below to create a follow-up email to participants. Be sure to 1) thank them for participating; 2) share what you learned; and 3) identify next steps. You can use the sample text below.

Thank you for being a part of the community conversation on [date]. As we said, our goal for the conversation was to [your goal].

We learned from the conversation that people aspire to live in a community where [aspirations]. And to get there we’ll need to [key challenges]. It was exciting to hear a number of different suggestions for places individuals and groups can get started whether it was [small action] or [small action] or [small action]. We’ll be sharing these insights with staff across the library and others we work with.

We believe it is important to have more conversations in this community—where the focus is on our aspirations and how to get things done together. We want to make it easier to do that. If you are looking for space to hold community conversations, let us know—the library may be able to provide space for the conversation or help you find other options.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and your time.

PARTNERS & FUNDING

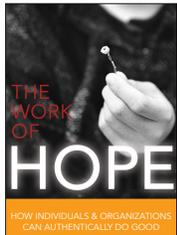
THE PROMISE OF LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

The American Library Association has been working in partnership with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to adapt and develop community engagement approaches for use by libraries as part of the Promise of Libraries Transforming Communities initiative. The Promise of Libraries has developed this conversation guide and additional resources and learning opportunities for libraries and librarians that can be found at www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/libraries-transforming-communities/.

The Promise of Libraries Transforming Communities initiative is designed to strengthen the role of librarians and libraries as conveners and facilitators of community innovation and change. This initiative has been made possible with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC INNOVATION AND *THE WORK OF HOPE*

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a national nonprofit organization that teaches and coaches people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. Based on twenty-five years of innovating with communities, The Harwood Institute has developed a proven practice that is used in communities nationally and worldwide.



This conversation guide is based on Richard C. Harwood's latest book, *The Work of Hope*. The book chronicles a “long walk” across the country, talking with a cross-section of Americans about their perspectives on how things are going in the country today; their chief concerns; and the extent to which they feel they can make a difference in their community. The book concludes with ideas about what people say would give them confidence about moving forward.

For more information, please visit www.theharwoodinstitute.org.