BIG QUESTION
CONVERSATIONS

RESOURCES FOR
CONVERSATION LEADERS
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CONVERSATION IN CONTEXT

KNOWING YOUR PURPOSE

An Ask Big Questions conversation is different from most casual conversation – it is an intentional conversation with a particular purpose. Understanding the guiding spirit of asking Big Questions will help you set a tone that supports the purpose of the conversation.

WHAT IS “ASK BIG QUESTIONS”?

Ask Big Questions seeks to deepen understanding and strengthen community through reflective conversations about questions that matter to everyone. No matter our background or perspective, we need opportunities to see and hear each other more deeply – not as labels but as human beings.

Conversations that help us connect are essential building blocks for strong and inclusive communities. Big Question conversations support and strengthen civic habits of listening, civility, and engaging diverse perspectives, which are important steps toward better problem solving. Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel International.

WHAT IS A BIG QUESTION CONVERSATION?

The heart of our reflective conversations are questions that matter to everyone and everyone can answer. They might be challenging questions, but they’re not “hard;” they’re not questions that require expertise to answer. They’re questions we all have stories about, questions all of us share. In this conversation, we will focus on sharing our stories and considering how our Big Question connects to our lives, not taking positions and debating issues. For our time together, we want to listen and explore to understand and learn, instead of to convince or persuade others.

JOIN THE BIQ QUESTIONS COMMUNITY!

Join our movement to build connection, trust, and community through better conversation! A good conversation changes us, and as those effects ripple outward, it can change the world. Visit askbigquestions.org to access our free, downloadable Big Question conversation guides and resources to help you use our guides for better civic dialogue.
BASIC CONVERSATION LEADERSHIP

UNDERSTANDING YOUR DISCUSSION GUIDE

Each conversation guide will take your group through a structured conversation, designed to encourage participants to share their stories and to listen to those of others. The conversation components and questions have been developed specifically to support the tone and purpose of the conversation. The written guide functions as a centering point, to help your group have a shared discussion that stays focused and allows everyone to participate. Basic instructions and timing references are included in the guide. Following the structure and content of the guide will help you really listen and respond to what people are saying, rather than worrying about what to do next.

THE CONVERSATION FLOW:

ASK
We’ll look at the question we are considering together and make mutual agreements for our group conversation.

SHARE
We’ll begin sharing our experiences related to the Big Question of this conversation.

DO
We’ll reflect on what we have learned and what we can take forward from this conversation.

LEARN
We’ll explore a story that helps us think further about our Big Question and connect it to our own experiences.

OPENING

- To begin your conversation, be sure to review the opening sections “What kind of conversation is this?” and “Conversation Flow” with your group. These sections set the tone for the conversation and help everyone know what to expect. Just like this guide helps you understand the purpose and format of the conversation, the opening sections do that for your group.

- It can be tempting to skip or rush through the opening, but setting the tone can influence everything that follows, and is worth the small investment of time it takes.
ASK

- The “Ask” section sets parameters to guide the group, asking everyone to agree to their shared responsibility for the experience they will have together.
- Taking the time to review the Agreement of Mutual Responsibility helps create a more trustworthy space by establishing expectations and responsibilities for how we interact.
- This section is designed to be interactive to encourage self-reflection and personal responsibility by asking participants to assess their own tendencies and needs when participating in a group discussion.
- Reviewing the Agreement together also empowers you and participants with standards you can return to if you feel participants are veering away from the kind of conversation you wish to encourage.

SHARE

- The “Share” section invites everyone to share a personal story or reflection connected to the topic you will be discussing.
- This helps people get to know one another, makes it easier for quieter participants to get comfortable in the room, and builds up to the Big Question by asking smaller questions that relate to it.
- People don’t usually start conversations with Big Questions in part because they are daunting and require a kind of vulnerability we don’t display in every day conversation. “Share” let’s us approach the Big Question more naturally.
LEARN

- The “Learn” section is where you will spend the bulk of your time. It always centers around a text, image, or other “object,” which the group will interpret and discuss together.

- The Learning Object gives your group a common reference point for exploring the topic. It helps create a more democratic space because everyone is experiencing the object at the same time.

- Remember, the discussion is not a class, and the point isn’t to learn the subject matter of the text. Rather, the goal is to learn from one another, and from the discussion process itself.

- Each Learning Object is followed by specific types of questions, all of which serve a purpose in creating a meaningful and lively conversation:

  - **Clarifying Questions**: What’s happening in the object? What’s going on in the text/images/video?
    These questions are simply to ensure everyone understands what’s happening in the object and levels the playing field so that everyone feels like they can participate in the discussion.

  - **Interpretive Questions**: What’s the author’s intent?
    These questions are meant to help unpack (interpret) the possible meanings of what is happening in the object through close reading. The key here is to stay as close as possible to the object and what we can tell from what is actually there — that is, don’t use this section to move into evaluative questions like “What do you think about it?”

  - **Reflective Questions**: How does it resonate with us?
    In many ways the whole conversation is a lead-up to these “reflective” questions that help us bridge from the author’s intent to our own experience. It is important to remember that evaluative questions like, “What do you think about this?” are different than reflective questions — evaluative questions invite opinions which can lead to taking positions and debating, while reflective questions invite considering and sharing one’s experience.
DO

- This final section asks everyone to reflect on what they have discovered during the conversation. How has it changed how they think about the topic? How might they choose to act differently in light of what has been discussed?

- One goal in this section is to let the participants reflect on their time together and what happened. This helps participants synthesize for themselves and each other, which makes new ideas stick around longer.

- A second goal in this section is to share ideas about how we can each take steps to support more civil and respectful conversation beyond this conversation. Having participants share their goals and strategies about this – speaking it aloud into the space -- helps affirm and promote the value of civil conversation.

- This final activity also helps a facilitator grow from hearing how participants felt about the conversation.
CONVERSATION CHECKLIST: THE BASIC STEPS

□ Before you Begin
  • Set up room/space - Be intentional about choosing and arranging a space where interruptions are minimized and chairs can be arranged in a circle so everyone can see each other
  • Make copies of the conversation guide for each participant

□ Opening
  • Welcome
  • Remind everyone of the Big Question
  • Give an overview of the purpose, format, and timeframe of the conversation

□ Ask
  • Lead participants through the Agreement of Mutual Responsibility

□ Share
  • Ask participants to consider the question
  • Give everyone a moment to collect their thoughts
  • Ask each person to introduce themselves and share a brief answer

□ Learn
  • Read introductory text, if any
  • Experience the Learning Object(s) together as a group
  • Facilitate a discussion that moves through:
    • Clarifying: Examining what is happening in the object
    • Interpreting: Exploring interpretations of what happened in the object
    • Reflecting: Exploring how the object resonates with participants’ experiences

□ Do
  • Lead participants through the final questions, giving them time to reflect and then share

□ Closing
  • Thank participants
  • Make any summary comments
  • Invite participants to share feedback using the survey link and to share stories using social media tags
  • Remind participants of next step/session, and provide any instructions for between session actions
PLANNING YOUR CONVERSATION

Beyond the conversation format and logistics, there is a bigger picture to consider: your vision for your conversation. What do you want it to look like? What do you want it to feel like? These tips and questions address a few key points to help you translate your vision into a rich experience.

TIPS

1. For group conversations, small works best; if your group is large, consider breaking into pairs or small groups for some portions of the conversation (there are some options described in the “Additional Conversation Options” section of this guide)

2. Since the questions are reflective in nature, plan enough time so the conversation isn’t rushed.

3. Be intentional about choosing and arranging a space for your conversation, where interruptions are minimized and where chairs can be arranged in a circle so everyone can see each other.

4. Provide a copy of the conversation guide for each participant, so everyone can follow along and participate on an equal basis.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you want participants to take away from the conversation? How do you want them to feel about the experience? What do you want people to do as a result?

2. What are some key ideas you want to get across or key words you would hope to use to help guide your group toward the outcomes you envisioned in question 1?

3. How will you open the conversation? What will you say to set the tone and intention for the conversation?

4. How will you bring a sense of closure to the conversation at the end?
ADDITIONAL CONVERSATION OPTIONS

Whether your group is large, your time is short, or you just want some variation from large group discussion, this section offers a few ideas on how to adjust the conversation format slightly while still staying true to the overall structure and purpose.

SHARE OPTIONS

Here are a few different ways to structure the “Share” portion of the conversation. Any format works as long as it gets everyone in the room thinking and talking about personal stories that related to the Big Question you are asking.

1. Pairs or Small Groups
   Ask everyone to pair up or gather in small groups of 3-4 people. Within their pairs or groups, have them introduce themselves and discuss the “Share” question. Give them 5 or so minutes so share their stories with each other. Halfway through, remind them to make sure everyone has a chance to share. After the allotted time is up, have everyone return to the circle. If there’s enough time, you can ask for a few participants to share what they talked about or something they learned about their discussion partners.

2. Rotating Pairs
   Get the group out of their seats for brief rounds of conversation with different people in the room. Ask everyone to pair up. Give them 2 minutes to discuss the “Share” question. After 2 minutes, have them switch to a new discussion partner, and share again. You can repeat this for 2 or 3 rounds.

DO OPTIONS

You might want to vary the “Do” portion depending on what you want your group to take away from the conversation:

• Do you want the experience to be more focused on reflection and synthesis, or do you want to prompt people to move towards action?
• Do you want the group to talk about the conversation and how they felt about it? Or do you want them to talk about what they learned in the course of the conversation?
• Do you want the group to connect this conversation to other conversations they have had at other times? Do you want them to apply this experience to future conversations?
• Do you want to prompt them to do something related specifically to the topic of your Big Question?
Or, you just might want to vary the format to switch it up from a large group discussion. Here are different options you can consider.

1. **Choose One of the Two Basic “Do” Questions**

   If you want the group to focus on reflection and what they learned, you could choose to have them only answer the “What did we learn?” questions. If you want the group to focus on action going forward, have them only answer the “What will we do?” questions.

2. **Sticky Note Activity**

   Rather than simply sharing responses to the questions in large group discussion, you can have everyone write their brief responses on sticky notes, post them, and do a gallery walk so people can review how others answered.

   To do this, pass out color-coded sticky notes, with a color for every question you want them to answer. Ask them to write down, in a phrase or sentence, their answer to the questions. Ask them to use a new sticky note for each separate thought or phrase. Participants shouldn’t write their names on the notes.

   In advance or while they are writing their sticky notes, post signs or sheets of paper around the room for each question they are answering. As people are done writing, ask them to put their sticky notes up on the wall, grouped by color under the corresponding question. Once most or all have posted their responses, invite the group to do a “gallery walk” to look at what everyone has written.

   After giving some time for the gallery walk, you can either have everyone return to their seats and have a discussion about any particular responses or patterns that stood out to them, or you can have each person select one sticky note that they did not write but that resonated with them, and then have each participant share the note they chose and why they chose it. Remember to have them put their selected notes back on the wall at the end. You can collect and collate the sticky notes at the end as a form of assessment as well.

3. **Action Plan**

   The basic “What will we do?” question is designed to focus participants on how they will interact in future conversations. You can expand on the questions to have participants develop an action plan for how they will follow through on their goals. You can keep the Action Plan focused on civil conversation as a goal, or you can create questions that focus on other goals, such as something related to the Big Question topic.
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