

Questions That Can Support Civil Discourse

Perhaps one of the most important jobs of a deliberative facilitator is to ask good questions. Every time a facilitator intervenes in any way, she or he is essentially taking some power and control from participants, so each intervention should be important, one that helps the group deliberate and learn from each other. Questions should serve specific, intended purposes and should push participants to engage more deliberately.

Questions that connect the policy issue to the lives and concerns of real people:

- Could you please share a story to illustrate that point?
- Can anyone envision how their life or the life of someone they know would change if this approach became policy?
- How has this issue affected you personally?
- (FOR NATIONAL ISSUES) How would changes in the way we address this issue affect our community and our state?

Questions to ensure a fair and balanced examination of the options and proposals:

- What would be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting? How would it affect different people in your community? What would be the short-term and long-term effects?
- Can you think of any ways this course of action might backfire? Could there be unintended consequences we need to consider?
- Do you know anyone who would like (or dislike) this option? What would that person say?

Questions that ask participants to weigh the costs they are willing to accept in order to achieve the results they want:

- Why is _____ an acceptable trade-off for you?
- What trade-offs are you not willing to make? Why?
- Would you give up ____ in order to achieve ____? Why?
- Is this one of the most important steps we can take in your view? How much would it do to solve the problem?

Questions that probe each participant's statement until others can understand what she or he believes should be done and why she or he thinks it should be done:

- Why does that choice appeal to you?
- What is important about taking this direction?
- Can you give an example of how that might work out?
- What is most valuable to you or to those who support that action/option?

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Questions that discourage groupthink and that can draw out different perspectives in homogeneous forums:

- What seems to be most important to those who are attracted to this approach?
- For those who dislike this approach, what seems to be their concern?
- Can anyone think of something constructive/negative that might come from this approach?
- How might this conversation be different if _____ were in the room?
- How might this conversation be different if we were in _____ instead of _____?

Questions that give the participants an opportunity to identify what they have heard and/or acknowledge common ground for action:

- What actions did you hear about that you think we could not accept or live with?
- What trade-offs are you unwilling to accept?
- Are there some actions we could all live with?
- Can someone suggest areas that we seem to have in common?
- Are there any tensions or areas of disagreement that we need to talk or think more about?
- Are there any questions we need to answer? Any information that would help us make a better decision? Are there other people we need to hear from?