

Public Conversations Project

Important Learnings As We Take Our Show On The Road

For the past 16 years, the Public Conversations Project has worked to foster a more inclusive, empathic and collaborative society by promoting constructive conversations and relationships between those with different positions about divisive public issues. PCP has focused specifically on situations where the different positions are grounded in differing *values, identities and worldviews*. Our work of collaboratively creating frameworks for constructive conversations helps those with such fundamental disagreements to develop the mutual understanding and trust that is essential for strong communities and positive action. Since the beginning, we have also trained practitioners and provided consultation, facilitation and meeting design services. We have written about our work and made it widely available through our web site and printed materials. While most of our fieldwork has been in North America, we have trained people from 16 countries and begun to receive requests for assistance from all over the world. As we began to apply our learnings to international settings, we are aware that a number of our practices may need to be altered to accomplish the dialogic goals of those with whom we work.

The work of the Public Conversations Project is *not* conflict resolution or management and explicitly does not focus on problem solving, decision-making or “solutions.” When conflicts involve values, identities or worldviews, they are often so profound and complex that traditional solution-oriented processes, such as mediation and negotiation, are unlikely to yield the hoped-for benefits. When participants feel themselves threatened, typically there can be an upsurge in stereotyping, misrepresentation, marginalization, blaming and ultimately despair. Understanding that compromise/negotiation/mediation can only succeed when each side is prepared to yield or “give up” something of value, participants may actually dig in their heels and become more entrenched in their positions.

Dialogue is currently a word that can connote a wide variety of conversations, with a multitude of purposes. The purpose of a PCP-type dialogue is to develop or deepen human connection between people who see each other as adversaries; to enhance understanding and learning about one’s own and others’ viewpoints and how they reflect life experience, belief and identity. Since dialogue participants are not confronted with the need to compromise or “give up” something of value, paradoxically, unexpected results can sometimes take place. People can become more willing to let down their guard, to truly and deeply listen to the other, to behave in less defensive and self-protective manners. Dialogue can then lead to a shift in relationships and the formation of trust, which can serve as the basis for a different kind of action than might ever have been conceived of previously by either party.

Our approach has proven valuable in a variety of different settings that include the following:

- Pro-life and pro-choice advocates came together in single-session and multi-session conversations to learn more about each others' views on abortion.
- Representatives of industrial and non-industrial forest landowners, environmental groups, academia, state and federal agencies, citizen activists, and sportsmen groups met for five years to discuss biodiversity issues and plan for forest use.
- Leaders of national and international groups concerned with population, the environment and/or women's health convened to discuss these concerns prior to and following the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development (UNDP) in Cairo.
- Leaders of the worldwide Anglican Communion have met to discuss issues of homosexuality and faith.
- In collaboration with Harvard's International Conflict Analysis and Resolution program (PICAR), 5 Palestinian and 5 Israeli journalists participated in a public panel as well as private, facilitated dialogues.

As PCP contemplates expanding our work in the international arena, we continuously identify issues that require more intensive examination to determine how successfully our approach can be adapted to address cultural differences. A primary hallmark of the PCP approach has been to focus on issues of intention and reflection, which is also a starting point for our consideration of adapting our work to suit a particular context. We ask:

- "What is it that we hope to accomplish?"
- What is it that we hope to avoid?"
- How can we create new ways for people to be present as they discuss contentious issues about which they may have deeply differing viewpoints, values, identities and worldviews?"

It is our intention to create a reflective space, a "sacred space" in which participants can experience each other anew and have fresh conversations. We promote listening for the meaning and intentions of others; speaking from the heart; listening and being listened to respectfully; and developing deeper mutual understanding in a way that encourages reflection on both one's own views and those of others. The form these intentions ultimately take depends on how they are shaped by local contexts and cultures.

A cardinal value for PCP is collaboration, co-creating with participants the conversational structures that will be used to support the dialogue experience. Typically this includes the use of conversational agreements to support participants' overarching purposes for the conversation. Such agreements are based on what previous dialogue participants have taught us contribute to a "safe enough" context to promote a different kind of conversational experience. They are offered as starting points; as proposals to be edited and adapted by particular groups to best meet their needs. Some are more suited to a specific group; some less so. Examples of these agreements include the following:

- Participation is voluntary and one can choose to "pass" at any time.

- Confidentiality upon request, that is, an agreement to keep confidential anything a participant requests.
- Speaking for one's self, rather than as representative of a group or on behalf of others inside or outside the room.
- Allowing others to finish their statements and not interrupting.
- Sharing airtime.

Allowing others to finish their speaking and not interrupting is something that works very well for many participants. It contributes to a setting in which all voices are heard rather than just the loudest, most articulate or most persistent. Sharing airtime and not interrupting are practices that address power imbalances and work toward equalizing participants' power.

We plan jointly with participants in order to design agreements and dialogue experiences that are consonant with their values and experience. All proposed agreements are discussed with participants beforehand, to solicit their reaction, questions, concerns and commitment. Should potential participants have reservations or concerns, they are encouraged to express these and consider what kinds of modifications, conditions or revisions might be utilized to help them to feel more assured that a different kind of conversation can take place. This discussion takes place prior to anyone's ever actually meeting, usually via a telephone call. It is also reviewed as one of the first orders of business, once the group actually comes together. At this time, concerns and reservations are addressed directly and the group forms a shared commitment to endorsing a set of agreements that they believe will contribute to the success of the conversation. All group members are asked to participate in this discussion and ultimately to make a personal commitment to honor these agreements. The agreements are not a "one size fits all" approach, but serve as the basis for discussion and group determination of what will help to further their purposes in having a constructive conversation together.

It is the group who owns the agreements, not the facilitators. Therefore the agreements need to make sense to the participants and be shaped in such a way that honors their intention, to promote respectful speaking and listening, encourage fresh conversation and reflection on one's own and others' views. The particular form that agreements may take can well be different for different groups.

In our work within the United States, we have sometimes heard members from various cultures express dissatisfaction with a perceived "artificiality" and constraint that particular agreements place on them. When faced with this response, our approach is to inquire more about the speaker's concerns and attempt to create alternative structures and/or practices that will respect the spirit behind the intention of this agreement.

PCP is committed to the value of including all voices, including those who have previously chosen not to speak, for whatever reason. This may include those that have been silenced by others or by themselves, as well as those who have not found a way to enter the

conversation. Our intention is to create a “safe enough” space in which participants feel invited to respond, on a more equal basis. The first step is by involving all “sides” equally in the planning process, as well as by utilizing conversational structures that promote equal conversational power for all participants. Dialogues typically begin with anticipated, sequenced and timed exchanges, a kind of ritual that provides equal airtime for all.

One way to address the issue of equalizing power differentials at the beginning of a session is to ask each person to respond to the same series of questions, with equal time to speak. We call these “opening questions” because they are intended to “open” a conversation. By structuring a dialogue to include this opportunity for each participant to respond to the initial questions within a specified time frame, those who might otherwise dominate the conversation are constrained to respond within the same timeframes as other participants.

In the early days of PCP, we spent a full year examining the typical dynamics of conflicted conversations about divisive public issues. One theme that consistently recurred was the absence of life experience. Speakers for and against an issue routinely acted as if their own backgrounds were irrelevant to their perspectives. Yet it was quite clear that advocates of one point or counterpoint were animated by a deeply-held set of beliefs; a proud self- or group-identity and passionate commitment to values, all of which sprang from life experiences woven together across time. Omitting these factors resulted in arguments that were disembodied; disconnected from the deep humanity of the speakers. This disconnection makes caricature, enmity and stereotyping all too easy.

In our work, we are passionately committed to creating conversations that rehumanize the speaker in the eyes of the “other”, as well as themselves. One of the key elements in constructing new, “fresh” conversations of learning and curiosity is asking people to speak from personal experience. Removing the “burden” of speaking on behalf of all the others either in or outside the room, of representing a group, has a profound effect on the quality of the conversation that follows. Speaking on behalf of others who may or may not be present and representing oneself as part of a larger group contributes to a “groupthink” approach to conversation, where individual differences may be obscured.

Speaking for one’s self promotes a richer, more complex experience, in which participants’ stories may lead to surprise, reduction of stereotyping and a genuine interest on the part of others. This can be a particular challenge however, when dialogue is initiated between members of cultures where it is more common to speak of one’s tribe/people/group as the predominant mode of being in the world. In such cases, asking people to speak for themselves can be experienced as disrespectful of the culture of these participants. In such situations PCP focuses on the intentions of the structure, rather than on the structure itself. As our intention is to invite speaking from one’s own personal experience, there are a variety of ways in which this can be accomplished. One example may be to invite the expression of a preferred vision of the future first, in order to acknowledge the highest values of the group. If this opportunity to reflect and share is taken, it can honor the importance of the group and lead to a willingness to consider responding to the questions

that follow more as an individual. Another strategy might be to ask participants to first reflect on the values of their ancestors or tribe/ethnic group, prior to speaking for themselves.

The “old conversation” is frequently characterized by a “roll the tape” process, in which participants repeat old arguments, and avoid questions and new information. The premium is on adhering to the party line, rather than engaging in a spirit of genuine curiosity with one’s “opponent.” One of the key ingredients in creating new, fresh conversations is offering participants the opportunity to move from reaction to reflection, emphasizing the opportunity to choose one’s response, rather than reacting automatically.

Some of our international training has highlighted the kinds of challenges we expect to encounter as we begin to do more international field work. The following vignettes represent examples of the kinds of learning that have taken place to date. We have no doubt that we will continue to collect many others in the course of our international field work.

Much of our training is experiential and places a value on reflection on one’s own experience. Working in Finland, a colleague spoke of having done “the longest two days of training I’ve ever completed.” The extremely positive evaluations she received stood in juxtaposition to her experience that she did virtually 100% of the talking during the training and felt that it was extremely difficult to get participants to participate. After the training, in speaking with trainees, she learned that in Finnish society, there is a negative value associated with “standing out” from the group. A participant told her that “we are not supposed to stand out and when you speak in a large group, you are standing out.” From this experience, the PCP trainer realized the importance of providing a context in which people could actively participate and learn, while not having to “stand out.” When she returned the following year (having been asked back, due to popular demand, to do a more advanced workshop), she redesigned the workshop to include more small group work, which was “reported back” to the large group. In such a way, participants could accomplish their goals within culturally accepted frameworks.

The same PCP trainer unintentionally learned a different kind of lesson having to do with history and power relationships at another international training. The role play that we typically use in our “flagship” three-day training needed to be changed to speak to issues that would be more familiar and culturally relevant to the country in which she was training. In working with a group of informants to develop a case that would be better suited, she unknowingly was “inducted” into the dominant subculture of the country. When a minority member in the workshop expressed her opinion, she was dismissed by members of the overwhelming majority culture. The trainer only realized the dynamics later and has since made a point of exploring such issues in planning future workshops. She has specifically made a point of inquiring about and actively soliciting minority group involvement in the planning process. The critical nature of understanding relevant history, background and experience of the entire society, not just what is reported by the “dominant

discourse” was an unforeseen lesson, but one that will be in her (and our) awareness from that point forward.

PCP values the role of preparation in all its fieldwork and trainings. We are extremely sensitive to the importance of hearing all voices, speaking with a diverse, broad range of informants as we explore the possibility of doing more international work. Collaborative planning and a thorough exploration of the hopes, wishes and dreams of those with whom we work are key aspects of our work. Learning from past experience, what has worked and what hasn't, how we can support participants in accomplishing their goals are essential elements. Identifying ways in which we can construct new conversations that can produce changes and shifts in relationships are key components of what we will be doing in our international work. The training we have done with people from other cultures has sensitized us and provided the foundation of learning that will be critical for us to undertake more international fieldwork. There will, no doubt, be many more lessons to be learned in the future. We at PCP look forward to continuing to identify and surmount these challenges.