



# Let's Talk

A Guide to Facilitating High-Stakes  
Community Opioid Conversations

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*with Darlene Nipper*

## Written by Common Ground Consulting LLC

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**PAStop** is a statewide initiative designed to educate Pennsylvanians about the risks of misusing prescription painkiller and opioids, the realities of opioid overdose deaths in our state, and which county agencies to reach out to when you or a loved one needs help. The main mission of PAStop is to create messaging materials to assist prevention workers in the field and outfit them with consistent, prominent level, up-to-date materials.

**PAStart** is a similar messaging system but designed to assist Pennsylvania prevention professionals in Primary Prevention Efforts to strengthen parent's skills and build healthy, capable children starting at age 10, and even earlier.

It is the goal of **Commonwealth Prevention Alliance** (CPA) to continually offer new types of materials in both of these initiatives, as well as identifying socioeconomic and cultural barriers preventing groups of individuals from accessing these and other relevant materials, and what we can do to better address the specific needs of those populations.

*This project was supported by PCCD Subgrant #31535, awarded by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). The awarded funds were provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP) and originate with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The opinions, findings and conclusions expressed within this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of PCCD, DDAP, or SAMHSA.*

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Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.

— Audre Lorde



## Getting Started

Over the past 30 years, the three of us have supported countless leaders as they have grown skills and taken charge in their communities—whether as parents, partners, organizers, therapists, preventionists, facilitators, or peer support counselors.

When we began this work, it wasn't that we were experts in group dynamics, or seasoned facilitators. We didn't have degrees in organizational development or adult learning.

To be honest, we didn't really know what we were doing. But, we each cared deeply about equity and justice. We wanted to create spaces that could hold joy and sadness, pain and privilege, hope and despair, laughter and anger. Over time, we became more confident as facilitators in creating these spaces, being present in them, and facilitating transformation among participants.

Participants in group spaces or projects are often quite aware that power is operating violently in the world and that some people are targeted as "less than" so that others can hoard resources and preserve their place in that order. If you've been targeted in your lifetime, or historically—in your family—as many of us have, it isn't easy to trust or guide processes when conflict arises. It isn't easy (or safe) to believe that any space could be truly liberating.

This is why we created *Let's Talk* and why we prioritize storytelling and relationship building in our work. The primary role of a *Let's Talk* facilitator is to create a space that challenges illegitimate power and helps us grow the

power of community, of influence among equals. Creating conversations where contentious, high-stakes differences are exposed means knowing why folks are coming together, what they hope to achieve, and who will be in the room. It means being prepared to create and hold a space that centers care and authentic expression for everyone.

*Let's Talk* requires asking lots of upfront questions and being prepared to define a starting point for the group. It means establishing and enforcing community agreements; creating connection through your own vulnerability; and holding the space for each participant to share and engage in the ways that make sense for them.

In order to get to this place, a *Let's Talk* facilitator has to know themselves very well. We have to have done some internal work; excavated a bit of our family story and understand where we sit in hierarchies of power and systemic violence. We have to be able to trust our own instincts. This doesn't mean we have to be an expert, or that we've got everything figured out, or even that we won't make a mistake or screw up.

Indeed, it's the opposite. *Let's Talk* facilitators understand that every day is an opportunity to ask new questions, uncover and discover more about ourselves, and learn to publicly take responsibility for our own actions—especially when we make a mistake or screw up.

*Let's Talk* is about disrupting the status quo and reimagining how we walk in the world—how we (and our organizations) operate day-to-day. In order to do that we have to really listen to one another—listen with every part of our being. We have to be present, engaged, and open to change.

The strategies, methods, and tools we use in *Let's Talk* are all designed to cultivate these kinds of moments. To do so, we must notice what's happening in the room, lift up those disruptive thoughts, adjust our process, encourage engagement, nurture vulnerability, and use the our community ground rules to maintain a just and healthy dialogue.

*Let's Talk* is not only a framework for better facilitation or a new set of tools. It represents a paradigm shift in how we think about power, equity, and justice. It reimagines what is required to have meaningful conversations and an exchange of ideas around issues that are weighted with historic violence and present-day maldistribution of resources and life chances.

*Let's Talk* is, of course, about more than *Let's Talk*.

*Let's Talk* is about changing the way that power operates in our society. It's about giving all of us the language, tools, and resources to challenge systems that were built to be unfair, and which still underpin the rules, policies, and laws which govern us today.

We've designed *Let's Talk* because we believe it is what the world needs right now. How you use this book, well, that's completely up to you. Take what you like, adapt it, change it, improve upon it. Leave what doesn't connect for you. Make *Let's Talk* your own.

*Let's Talk* won't solve every problem, but today, in communities more polarized than ever, we need more talking, more listening, and more thoughtful, determined, and collective action.

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# **The Opioid Epidemic**

## **The Opioid Epidemic**

### **What's Happening in Pennsylvania?**

**A**ccording to PA's Attorney General, the heroin and opioid epidemic is the number one public health and public safety challenge facing the state. From January 2017 to January 2018, 48,612 people died from an opioid overdose—an increase of 8.5% from the year before.

An average of 14 Pennsylvanians die every day from overdose. From January 2018 to June 2022, there were 44,111 emergency room visits for opioid overdoses. 73,450 doses of the life-saving drug Nalaxone were administered by EMS during that same period.

Opioids are often legitimately prescribed and come in many different forms with many different names—OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin, Codeine, Hydrocodone, and Morphine. Heroin is an illegal opioid. All are highly-addictive.

The opioid epidemic continues to hit Pennsylvania particularly hard. Although the U.S. as a whole is in the midst of an epidemic of opiate addiction and overdose, the rate of drug-related overdose deaths in Pennsylvania is almost double the national overdose death rate. Of the 44 counties in the U.S. with more than one million residents, Allegheny and Philadelphia rank #1 and #2, respectively, in rates of overdose death. In Pennsylvania in 2017, 1 out of every 37 hospital admissions were opioid-related.

The Commonwealth Prevention Alliance (CPA) realizes immediate action needs to be taken to prevent opiate abuse in Pennsylvania. There are research-based approaches to preventing opiate use, addiction, and overdose.

Funded through a generous grant from the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), and together with our workgroup partners, we have developed free materials about opiate addiction for drug and alcohol professionals to download and distribute, as well as information and resources for anyone looking for help. PA Stop is designed to educate Pennsylvanians about the risks of prescription painkiller and heroin use, the relationship between painkiller and heroin use, and what to do when you need help. We are working to prevent nonmedical use of prescription painkillers and, in so doing, to break the connection between heroin and prescription painkillers.

Together, we can stop opiate addiction before it starts.

This guide has been specifically developed to support prevention professionals in reducing the negative effects of opioids through community engagement and dialogue.

As the opioid epidemic affects a wide range of populations, having tools that are specifically designed to support difficult conversations among diverse participants is essential. These discussions are often quite personal and can be fraught with emotion.

*Let's Talk* offers an approach to having these community dialogues that can result in positive and productive outcomes for everyone involved.

# Chapter 1

# Chapter 1

## Why Is It So Hard to Talk?

In any conversation about justice and equity, the current state of power relations in the U.S. makes it easier for some of us to take risks and share openly. For others, the scaffolding of power relations can be constraining and even punitive.

*Let's Talk* is a collection of tools, tips, resources, and techniques to help facilitators understand our risks, vulnerabilities, power, and responsibilities in speaking honestly, openly, and with positive intent; all while trying to manage differences of opinion and experience.

Of course, not every conflict can be solved or eliminated. But *Let's Talk* helps us discover and hold differences in experience or opinion, while still respecting and caring for ourselves, first and foremost. Only then can we make room for others to be themselves.

*Let's Talk* recognizes that people and institutions that hold power over others sometimes attempt to control us, to make us stop talking. These power holders (and their gatekeepers) gain more power when we are afraid of talking or must hide ourselves to protect our emotional or physical safety.

Sometimes these power holders are governments. Sometimes they are family members, friends, employers, teachers, coaches, clergy, or landlords. Sometimes they force conversations that we are not ready to have. Sometimes they shut down our truths through judgement,

intimidation, or threats. Often, when we come into conflict with others over ideas or opinions, we cannot see the backdrop of power in each other's lives and how this impacts our ability to speak candidly.

Each one of us sits in a different place in this power scenario. Knowing where we sit and recognizing that we know very little about how our conversation partner or partners sit, is the starting place for *Let's Talk*.

## How to Use This Book

The exercises, resources, and tools in this book will help set up promising conditions for open, honest, and caring discussions at times when we seek to solve problems, work on projects, collaborate, or express differing points of view.

Parts of the book will help *Let's Talk* facilitators create optimal spaces, including preparing participants to be present, caring, honest, and self-supporting.

What would our lives and our futures be like if we could all *Let's Talk*?

How differently might our communities, relationships, and families grow and experience the world?

This guide aims to help us respect, honor, and celebrate each other, even as we struggle to communicate, care for one another, and co-create the lives and communities we long for everyday.

# **Chapter 2**



## Chapter 2

### Defining Purpose, Outcomes, and Process (POP)

**A**s a workshop presenter, facilitator, community organizer, or teacher in charge of creating the conditions for *Let's Talk*, establishing the Purpose, (**why**) Outcomes (**what**), and Process (**how**)—the POP—for those conversations is critical.

When addressing high investment issues like racism, sexism, ableism, queer and transphobias, xenophobia, religious bias, anti-Blackness, ageism, or economic injustice (to name a few), foregrounding the POP for the conversation can provide a helpful “binder” for the discussion. A strong binder or container helps build confidence among participants about the liberating potential of sharing and speaking honestly about their values, beliefs, reflections, and experiences.

We didn't develop POP. According to Suzanne Hawkes (a Rockwood Leadership Institute trainer), the POP model was created by Leslie Sholl Jaffe (a former Rockwood trainer) and her partner Randall Alford. As they describe it, “POP is a useful tool for a multitude of the daily activities leaders find themselves faced with: meeting agendas, campaigns, difficult conversations, unplanned calls and conversations... As you can gather from the list, POP can be used for large, long-term projects, regular weekly staff meetings, a meeting you attend, a call that comes in that has no agenda, even coaching and mentoring sessions...”

We didn't develop POP, but we love it and believe in it, especially when it comes to designing *Let's Talk* sessions. Feeling pressure from organizers, clients, or conveners, many facilitators want to jump right into designing activities for a future gathering. They start drafting an agenda and choosing discussion questions. Defining methods and processes is fun for facilitators (and is tangible for organizers, clients, and conveners). But, doing so before agreeing upon purpose and outcomes, is a surefire way to get it all wrong.

### **Let's look at an example of a strong POP:**

*College History Professor: Today, we are going to discuss the history and persistence of lynching in America.*

The **purpose** of the conversation is to illuminate a long period of domestic terrorism in the United States which is little studied or discussed, and to consider how this history endures and is impacting our lives today.

One of our intended **outcomes** is for participants to gain a more holistic understanding of one of the most powerful tools of terror and its use in controlling Black American after slavery; as well as how lynching is related to police violence as we observe and experience it today.

A second of our intended **outcomes** is for participants to consider what other remnants of lynching persist in our communities and the role of community historians in pursuing justice.

The **structure** for the workshop will include the viewing of a short video on the creation of the Legacy Museum in

Montgomery, AL; as well as two short clips from family members who keep the history of their lynched ancestors.

We will then lead a session where we can **process** our feelings and thoughts together after viewing the videos.

Next, participants will go into small groups with a short article on local police abuses and come back so we can **process** their thoughts and feelings about the article.

Finally, we will discuss the different roles of historians in the academy, community-based historians, and journalists in defining and supporting democracy.

We will then close the session with a two-sentence reflection or appreciation from each participant.

As you can see, when the POP is clear, there is a rhythm to the *Let's Talk* process. There is enough structure to reassure those who need it, and enough flexibility to adapt to the needs of the group.

You have also laid a foundation for the conversation—including the non-negotiables. For example, this is not going to be a discussion about whether lynching exists in U.S. history. It's not going to be a discussion about whether lynching is "good" or "bad." Everyone learning about this POP understands that the baseline for this discussion is that lynching has a long history in the U.S., and that it functions as domestic terrorism. A good POP, combined with clear community agreements (see next section), provides strong grounding in the terms and parameters of a discussion, and helps a facilitator hold and support participants.

Making the effort to develop your POP will not only save you time in the long run, but it will also help ensure that you can be fully present as the workshop unfolds and conversation builds. Your POP framework should leave you feeling so well prepared that you can make big adjustments if the situation calls for it, change the plan, and feel confident that your *Let's Talk* session will be a success.

## The Power of POP

*Let's Talk* outcomes improve when there is clarity from the outset about a challenging conversation, our purpose, and reasons for coming together.

*Let's Talk* outcomes worsen when a challenging conversation is stumbled upon, grows in the heat of an argument, or has no defined purpose.

*Let's Talk* outcomes improve when participants actively build engagement skills and practice self-monitoring and de-escalation over time. In these cases, unplanned or spontaneous conversations that involve conflict and bridging major gaps in experience and values will have better outcomes than those that occur among groups who have not worked on self-monitoring and de-escalation.



With a decision and a defined purpose,  
you can begin work.

— Lailah Gifty Akita



# **Chapter 3**

## Chapter 3

### Creating the *Let's Talk* “Container”

**A**s the facilitator of a *Let's Talk* session, every choice, every decision that you make has an impact on your participants. While this can feel like a daunting responsibility, your role is simply to ensure that every person can express themselves in the ways that they choose, so long as that does not impede on the ability of others to do the same.



Your no makes the way for your yes.  
Boundaries create the container within  
which your yes is authentic. Being able  
to say no makes yes a choice.

— *Adrienne Maree Brown*  
*in Emergent Strategies*



Creating a space in which everyone feels **safe enough** to be candid and participate fully requires thoughtful choices and deliberate action. The room set-up, stories, quotes, or music you share; even the way you dress and the way you speak will contribute to how welcome people feel in the space, and whether they feel safe enough to show up as themselves and say what they need to say. Over the years, we've discovered a host of great techniques and a few key principles when it comes to being a great facilitator. In this chapter, we'll share some of our favorites.

## A Note About Safety

***For BIPOC people in the United States, there is no ‘safety’ within the current structures of government and policing. We find it helpful to use the frame ‘safer spaces’ or ‘spaces that center care and support of participants,’ rather than ‘safe spaces’ when we create the conditions for Let’s Talk. U.S. society distributes safety based on economic status, legal age, citizenship status, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. All of us who are not white, able-bodied, male, straight-identified, and living with wealth are more vulnerable to practices and expressions of violence, marginalization and abuse.***

## Establishing Community Agreements

A crucial and under-appreciated tool for all high stakes conversations, especially for any *Let’s Talk* session, is a strong set of community agreements or ground rules. As facilitators with years of experience, we prefer to bring a set of agreements to a community gathering and invite editing, additions, or deletions from the group. This establishes the facilitator as the person setting the terms of the discussion, inspiring confidence from the outset of the process. This also helps center tried-and-true core agreements that have worked in thousands of complex conversations over decades. It’s a confidence-builder for facilitators and participants alike. It’s also—and this is no small thing—a timesaver. The sooner you can get into the actual work, rather than sitting in anticipation of the work, the better for everyone involved.

## **We Suggest You Start With These:**

1. Speak for yourself, only from the "I". (In my experience, I ...) FYI, "I think you are wrong" is not an "I" statement.
2. Don't speak for a group, especially if you aren't a part of that group.
3. One person at a time; don't speak over someone else.
4. Focus on each speaker rather than thinking about your next share.
5. Share the space: don't take over the conversation.
6. Step back if you have shared a lot.
7. Think well of each other; each group member is trying their best.
8. No cross-talk. Don't give personal advice to anyone based on another's sharing.
9. If you find yourself in a reactive place, wait and breathe before you share or speak, remember to use "I" statements. ("That was difficult for me to hear, because in my experience, I...")
10. Account for gaps between intent and impact. (See the box on page 20.)
11. Respect time and space (be on time, no cell phones, honor breaks). Be fully present.
12. Make space for laughter; laughter generates joy in our work.
13. Make space for tears; tears raise the spiritual level of any conversation.
14. Make space for anger; anger is a normal reaction to injustice.
15. When someone says something brilliant or meaningful, appreciate them.
16. Take risks and share what makes sense for you (people in the room may include your supervisor, ex- or current partner, teacher, coach, etc.).
17. Share learning with others, but never personal disclosures.



## What To Do with A Gap Between Intent and Impact

This community agreement often gets foregrounded in equity conversations, but it is rarely described in detail so that we can operationalize it effectively. In a *Let's Talk* conversation, facilitators do better when we fully describe the agreement as follows:

If I have been the creator of a gap between intent and impact—that is, someone in the group has experienced my comment or perspective as painful or even harmful—**my job is to accept that person's experience of my comment.**

In setting this ground rule, the facilitator needs to play this out: My next step, as the “gapper” is to say: “Thank you for telling me your experience.” And to the extent that it is possible in the moment: “I am so sorry that I've created this gap between intent and impact and that it's hurt you.” If you can't get that far: “I really want to take time to hear what you've said, because I don't understand fully what just happened. Thank you.”

Most people who have created a gap between intent and impact do one of two things: They tell the person that they have misinterpreted them or gotten it “wrong.” Or, they double down and re-explain the comment that has created the gap, often re-injuring the person who has experienced the gap.

These are common responses when we have created a gap between intent and impact, because we feel shame and fear we have caused harm, when our intent was to add something positive and useful to the conversation. In learning that someone has been hurt by our comment, we want to deflect our feelings of shame as quickly as possible.

As a facilitator establishing this community agreement, you might note times when you have created gaps between intent and impact, and how difficult it was for you to accept and address these gaps and sit with your feelings.

The best thing to do when there has been a gap is for the person who has experienced it to share their experience, and for the person who has created it to accept that experience as valid, thanking the person who brought it up. Addressing these scenarios promptly and carefully is essential.



When we feel bad, we often automatically decide that either we are bad or another person is bad. Both of these moves cause damage and distort the truth, which is that we are all navigating difficult conditions the best we can, and we all have a lot to learn and unlearn.

—*Dean Spade in Mutual Aid*



Community agreements create culture. They prioritize care and a caring process. They are a facilitator's first, best, and final tool for sustaining *Let's Talk*.

When a high stakes conversation starts to spin out of control, it is always because of one of two things has occurred:

### **1. Agreements are not being honored and respected.**

As a facilitator we have abdicated our responsibility to hold participants accountable to the ground rules, and we find folks saying “you, you, you” (see #1) to another participant; perhaps from a highly activated state (see #9), possibly after they have been taking up too much space (see #5 and #6).

It is our job to intervene when someone starts down the road to breaching agreements.

- “I’ve called on you twice, Cheryl, so I’m going to wait to see if someone who hasn’t spoken might want to share right now.”
- “That last share was very intense. Why don’t we all take a breath and recall our agreement to wait out our reactivity before we share.”
- “Hold on, I wanna stop you, Jamal. You’re pointing your finger at Sandra, and you’ve stopped using “I” statements. Can you take a breath and try to rephrase what you want to share from the “I”? I really want to hear what you have to say. I’ll come back to you in two minutes, after we hear from Claudia.”

When we see high reactivity happening in the room, we can also choose not to call on someone who has already shown that they are struggling, giving them some time to calm down. We should be constantly reading the room for our participants’ wellness and capacity to engage. (Please see the section on vibe watchers below).

## **2. We have not addressed a comment in the room that reinforces the biases and power imbalances that we are attempting to dismantle in our work together.**

In our many years of experiences facilitating high-stakes conversations among people and communities that have been targeted for violence—rooms that are holding a heavy burden of trauma and survivorship before we ever start talking with each other—we find that most conversations break down or devolve because the facilitator has allowed a problematic, or highly activating,

or even explosive comment to hang in the middle of the room without being addressed. This forces participants to respond, often from a place of activation.

In these cases, both the participant who has unwittingly surfaced how racism, sexism, or another violent system of domination remains embedded in their thinking or practices and the participant who “calls this out” in a manner that is generally not in keeping with the established ground rules, become stigmatized, polarizing, “bad guys” in the discussion, with the rest of the participants all jumping to side with one or the other.

The bottom line is this: As a facilitator, we didn’t do our job, and we lost the room.

So, one of the most important actions we can take as facilitators is to build our own knowledge and capacity to discuss and address racism, sexism, queer and transphobia, ableism, ageism, etc.

The best way to build these capacities is to actually work across these differences, on community projects, among diverse peers who can challenge our thinking and help us grow and improve our practices.

Then, we can meet these moments as facilitators with the humility of having made these mistakes ourselves; gratitude for having had others treat us as worthy of attention and care during our “teachable moments;” and a commitment to always intervening.

## Setting-Up the Room

One of the most important considerations as you begin the design process for your *Let's Talk*™ session is the setup of your room. Is it accessible? Will people of various body types be comfortable in the chairs, and in this seating configuration? Do you have alternatives for people who cannot sit all day or can't stand or walk? Do wheelchairs fit comfortably into the space you'll be using, or will those folks be marginalized or shunted to a less than optimal position in the room? Your set-up may never be perfect for everyone, but your attention and efforts are important and will make a difference.



The details are not the details. They make the design.

— Charles Eames



Thinking about design is hard, but not thinking about it can be disastrous.

— Ralph Caplan



## Setting-up the Ideal *Let's Talk*™ Room:

- Allow people to move between privacy and connectivity.
- Have windows and natural light and minimize fluorescents.
- Do not combine dropped ceilings and busy patterned rugs.
- Do not have harsh neon colors on the floor or walls.
- Allow participants to see each other and make eye contact as they wish.
- Do not obstruct views of the facilitator or other participants.
- Allow participants the option of moving from hard to soft seating, from writing tables to couches or solo space, especially for longer sessions.
- Have good acoustics (or sound systems for larger groups) to maximize active listening.
- Be sure the space is big enough for activities that involve movement and breakout groups.
- Hold a consistent temperature, which is easy to adjust.
- Offer access to accessible, gender neutral restrooms.

## Centering Culture

Many facilitators like to offer music or inspiring quotes in the room as people arrive. This can be tricky. Whose culture and musical traditions are being foregrounded? Whose wisdom is being centered? How might this create 'insiders' and 'outsiders' from the very start?

If this is something you like to do, perhaps ask participants to share favorite songs or quotes ahead of the gathering and then utilize them to create an opening exercise or playlist. If it's a long session, you can ask people to share their contributions for later in the session. These practices generate conversation, with the quotes and music knitting together a group culture.

Keep in mind that you are another cultural set piece in the room. Who are you? Where are you from? What is your language? How do you dress? Is your family or community culture noisy and extroverted? Is your family or community culture more reserved or deferential? Your attributes—as the leader of the conversation—create a cultural power center in the room, which you must balance through the activities that you plan, your conversation or workshop partners, your supporters (See the section on vibe watchers below), and in how you center various practices that serve as counterbalancing cultural forces.

## Facilitation Partners

Typically speaking, co-facilitators, facilitation partnerships, or teams are preferable to working solo when our purpose is to address or dismantle power imbalances, create the conditions for *Let's Talk*, and build community.

Embodied leadership matters in high-stakes conversations and guiding a process with partners or a team that embody a mix of identities and life experiences can make a big difference.

Partnering also can improve the quality of facilitation—two (or more) people bring distinct skill sets, differing life experiences and points of view, and two sets of eyes, ears, and energies to the room. Facilitation partners can also offer a more expansive canvas of identities and experiences with which participants can identify.

Leadership from facilitators of more than one race, gender, class, set of abilities, personality, age, way of being, introversion or extroversion, creates more options for participants to experience a sense of connection and belonging within the session.

When a team isn't possible, solo facilitation can work with a small group. If you are attempting a *Let's Talk* with a solo facilitator, then that singular leader must embody some of the key issues that the talk is attempting to address. If not, there is a high likelihood of the conversation get stuck on the facilitator's appropriateness in "leading" the discussion.



Never be the only one of anything in the room.

—Alice Walker





## Vibe Watchers

*Let's Talk* centers care and connection over enforcement, control, and regulation. Accordingly, we often enlist the help of experts in emotional attunement, attentive listening, healing, trauma, and growth as partners in the facilitation of complex or difficult conversations.

We call these experts **vibe watchers**. Some of them may be professional counselors and therapists. Some are spiritual advisors, energy shifters, or clergy. Some have expertise in somatics<sup>1</sup>—the ways that trauma settles in our bodies and affects our nervous systems. And while they may have been trained in different traditions of care and connection, we choose these partners carefully based on our faith in their ability to read participants' level of engagement, stress, or strain, and to connect with people of widely different identities and experiences. If and when participants become activated around trauma and need support to either continue the conversation or stop and support themselves, vibe watchers are invaluable.

Also, if we are choosing say two or three watchers for a large gathering of 100+ participants, we choose carefully around the mix of identities that the vibe watchers embody, ensuring that we have more than one BIPOC vibe watcher, at least one queer or gender expansive vibe watcher, etc.

<sup>1</sup>*Somatics describes any practice that uses the mind-body connection to help you survey your internal self and listen to signals your body is sending about areas of pain, discomfort, or imbalance. (Adapted from <https://www.healthline.com/health/somatics#What-does-that-evenmean?>)*

Since these communities are highly targeted for violence, the support team needs to reflect and embody that reality.

We introduce vibe watchers at the start of a *Let's Talk* session, when we are committing to community agreements. We explain the role of the vibe watcher this way: *"These people are dedicated to your well-being during this discussion and are here for you at any time if you feel like you need to take a minute, get grounded, enlist support, and/or make a shift."*

Vibe watchers are not in place to make sure people stay in the conversation or act a certain way. They are in the room to center the needs of trauma survivors and all of us living and working toward *Let's Talk* inside systems of violence that impede our connection to each other and impact our ability to take care of ourselves.

Vibe watchers should introduce themselves very briefly by describing their core identities, their training for serving as a vibe watcher—academic, spiritual, or community-based— while making eye contact with everyone in the room.

This moment of care and centering of the needs of survivors of violence, creates a crucial foundation for any challenging conversation. It establishes you as a facilitator who understands how extensively violence has impacted our communities. It also creates an opening for building trust in the room.



Love is a combination of care,  
commitment, knowledge,  
responsibility, respect and trust.

—*Bell Hooks*



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4

### It's All About Knowing Yourself

**W**hen it comes down to it, *Let's Talk* relies on your capacity as a facilitator to hold and guide complex, high-stakes conversations about societal inequities, structural violence, and abuses of power.

The basic premise of *Let's Talk* is that when provided with a safe and thoughtfully-designed space, a highly-skilled facilitation team, and clear ways of working, participants can consider and share how these injustices play out in their bodies, their spirits, their material lives, and in their communities.

No pressure!

First of all, though, how do we even know what our capacity is as a facilitator? How can we get better at this complex task of caring for a group of wildly different individuals as they work to educate themselves, listen to each other, and let go of destructive thinking and behaviors?

*How do I know if I'm ready?*

## Who Am I?

The most important tool we have in our toolkit as facilitators is our own self-knowledge. This involves knowing ourselves in three critical dimensions:

### **1. Our family and community history and how that history resides in the larger human story of domination, resistance, liberation, and struggle.**

When we step into a conversation about equity and justice, how are we situated? What is our familial experience with issues of self-determination, citizenship, self-expression, poverty, wealth, and the ownership of land, businesses, and/or human beings? What are my ancestral connections to present day experiences of war and displacement? What are the hallmarks of our familial and community identity? Our struggle? How did our ancestors survive?

Knowing our history helps us know where we stand in conversations about equity and justice—our ancestral stake in the conversation.

### **2. My personal involvement and the stake I have in this conversation at the moment.**

What are my present-day commitments in the struggle for justice and equity all around me? What am I doing day-today? Am I actively resisting injustice? Am I personally connected to these issues? Can I decide if, when, and how I want to be involved, or does my identity or embodiment force me into active engagement in these issues every day?

Being able to articulate your personal connection is an important tool in your facilitator repertoire.

### **3. How I respond and engage in times of stress and conflict is essential in helping me be prepared to facilitate** *Let's Talk.*

Do I know how to track and de-escalate my own reactivity so that I can stay present as a facilitator? Do I have the tools to de-escalate and ground myself? What happens in my body when I go into fight or flight mode? Will I know when I need to 'tap out' and rely on a co-facilitator or vibe watcher to take over a piece of the work?

Over and over again we have found ourselves being reminded that the key to being a great facilitator is knowing ourselves. Recognizing our strengths and weaknesses, knowing our superpowers, and being aware of our hot buttons are essential to holding a *Let's Talk* space.

*For example, one of us [Craig] is a fairly competitive person. I like to win. In some aspects of life, that's completely appropriate. As a facilitator, not so much.*

*Nevertheless, that desire to win energy can still show up, especially when I'm feeling as though there are a few people in the room with whom I'm not connecting. If those are people of color, for example, and I'm white (as I am), I find myself working really hard to try to "win them over."*

*On some level, I want them to see me as the cool white person, the one who "gets it." If I don't catch myself and recognize my buttons are being pushed, I might focus on those folks, try too hard, and start to miss other important dynamics happening in the room. In those moments, I can become more focused on what's happening for me—my insecurities—than I am on the needs of the group.*

Being a great facilitator is a paradox. On one hand, you are the most important person in the room—in charge of holding the group's feelings with respect and creating an environment of care. You are guiding a conversation or process that is important to each person for different reasons—each of them having dedicated time and energy to be in the room.

On the other hand, we are the least important person in the room. Ostensibly, our opinions don't matter. If we do our job well, participants will not remember much about what we said, because they will leave the experience filled up with the powerful insights they've gleaned from listening to the stories of their peers. They will remember the risks taken by their colleagues and the ways in which trust within the group deepened. They will remember the transformative conversations.

## Difficult People?

Early in our facilitation practice, we often found ourselves frustrated by “difficult people” in workshop sessions. Some of them we experienced as disruptive or uncooperative. We described them as “whiners” or impossible to please.

Over time, we came to realize that the issue wasn't them. It was us. In some cases, our container was inadequate. we hadn't established the group well in the beginning. We might have had confusion with venue staff, or maybe we pushed through the community agreements and people didn't really understand or commit to them. We might have rushed the introductions and people didn't get enough time to start seeing their fellow *Let's Talk* participants as complex human beings, struggling just like them.



In other cases, it was just a personal issue, though we couldn't understand why these particular people were activating our distress. The "problem" came into focus when we took a step back and did some personal work.

**This is an activity that can really help you to do that.**

Give yourself 30 minutes for this self-reflection.

**First: Reflect, remember, and record.**

Free write about a difficult person in a convening, a group, or a training. If you don't have one in terms of a trainee, use a coworker. Write for 10 minutes about how and why they are difficult for you.

**Next: Enumerate.**

Write down 4-6 characteristics that are the hardest for you to deal with in these difficult people.

**Next: Investigate.**

Now, think about the person in your family or in your caregiving history who is the hardest for you to deal with—Mom, foster mom, teacher, coach, clergy, big brother, little sister, dad, grandmother—someone who has been pivotal in your life—even as the relationship was strained or very painful. Write down 4-6 characteristics that describe them and the way they operate.

**Next: Compare.**

Is there congruence between the characteristics of the difficult people and the characteristics of the family members, caregivers, or authorities in your story? Write about this.

**Next: Reflect, consider, sift, and integrate this information.**

To what extent is your wounding from people close to you impacting your ability to meet new people, see them, and accept them as worthy community members in your Let's Talk conversations?

**Finally: Let go and remember.**

Take 5 minutes to write yourself as loving a note as is possible and appropriate to this person who has failed you or continues to make your life difficult.

This might be as minimal as: "Dad, the best way I can show my love for you is to keep my distance and prevent more abuse. My amends to you and to me is to love myself extravagantly and prioritize my health and well-being."

Or it might be as much as: "Mom, I really know you tried as hard as you could. I forgive you. I can take it from here."

At the end of the note, I want you to tell yourself that you are releasing yourself from this burden in your life as a facilitator of *Let's Talk*. You are lightening this load so you can be present when you are working with groups that need your full attention and your generous spirit.

And remember: Our people are always with us as we facilitate *Let's Talk* sessions. Our story is always alive in the room. It's up to us to ensure that both manifest through our facilitation in constructive ways.

## What are my facilitator superpowers?

- My presence in times of conflict is calming.
- I can make and hold eye contact in a way that people feel seen and affirmed.
- I am comfortable sharing my identities and survivorship and this positions me well in any room.
- I have an expansive network of collaborators in terms of race/gender/age/identity/abilities/ training for co-facilitation and vibe watching.
- I have facilitated a lot of conflicts and I don't get rattled; I can stay with hard conversations.
- I am able to recognize my own racist, ageist, sexist, transphobic, queerphobic, ableist, etc. thinking, language, and behaviors and I have improved my practices and my ability to facilitate this kind of learning as a result.
- I am always engaged and learning in the group, I'm never just going through the motions.
- I have learned how to attune my voice and my presence to the group's needs.
- I know how to pick out the core issues emerging from a conversation and reflect these back to the group.
- I know how to help the group have fun.
- I read and/or participate in trainings all the time so that I'm up on the latest thinking, language, and ideas about equity, justice, and work across differences.
- I can adapt to sudden changes well. I can shift in real time.
- I'm good at planning, mapping out a conversation, building questions, modalities, and exercises.
- I'm great at opening, and/or closing, and/or transitioning a group.

## Move Toward the Hard Stuff

As we learned through the previous exercise, our identities, history, family, and community stories are always with us as we facilitate *Let's Talk*. The big take-away from the question, Why don't I like this person? Is because they are a part of us. They are a part of our story. And sometimes, they embody the traits we least like about ourselves.

How do we deal with this? The previous self-reflection and writing exercise is a great start.

Another important tip is this: The extent to which you accept and move toward the parts of yourself that you like the least is directly proportional to your effectiveness in dealing with difficult people and their behaviors in groups.

Now, before you continue reading, if we were in the middle of a *Let's Talk* right now, we would tell everyone to take a deep breath. ***Let's breathe.***

*As a young person in recovery from child abuse [Jaime], I used to attend a meeting that started with a "feelings check in." The facilitator would begin and then everyone would go around the room and say things like: "I'm feeling a little anxious today, but I'm proud of myself because I got a lot accomplished at work." Or they might say: "I just want to give up. I am so exhausted, and I hate this group." Still another member might say: "I am so vulnerable today and I'm afraid someone here is going to hurt me."*

*I hated everyone in this group. I didn't speak for weeks. I refused to do the check in. Everyone was patient with me during this period. They asked if I wanted a hug when the group ended. I refused.*

*Then one day in group, it hit me: The most powerful survival tool I had as a child was my ability to hide my feelings. This skill literally saved my life. My ability to adapt to chaos and arbitrary verbal and physical violence was to have the toughest exterior possible. I didn't cry. I refused to be afraid.*

*The people in this room were a threat to me every time we met. They were knocking on the door to a room of a million suppressed feelings. I hated the girl inside that room. I didn't want to have anything to do with her. She was weak. She could never have survived my childhood.*

Becoming a great facilitator means we have to open the door to that room. We have to meet ourselves in there—the parts of ourselves that we've abandoned; the parts of ourselves we belittle, deny, and even hate. We have to claim our story, take care of ourselves, and heal. Our people are always with us as we facilitate. Our story—our most rejected self—is also always alive in a *Let's Talk* room.

*Once I became willing to meet the most abandoned parts of myself, people in Let's Talk conversations magically seemed to become less irritating. I realized that just like my own recovery process, my work was to move toward the people who seemed to annoy me at the outset of a facilitation, rather than back off or ignore them. Since I shifted this practice, I have often found deep connection to these formerly annoying participants. — J.*

So let's say it again:

***The extent to which you accept and move toward the parts of yourself that you like the least is directly proportional to your effectiveness in dealing with difficult people and their behaviors in groups.***

# **Chapter 5**

## Chapter 5

### Building Your Capacity to Facilitate

**C**reating *Let's Talk* spaces in which everyone can feel safe enough to be candid and participate fully requires thoughtful choices and deliberate action.

Over the years, we've discovered a host of great techniques and a few key principles when it comes to being a great facilitator. In this chapter (and in the appendix), we'll share some of our favorites.

#### Top 10 *Let's Talk* Facilitator Essentials

##### 1. Do your homework.

When it comes to designing a *Let's Talk* session, the first step is to know your community. As the person responsible for designing and leading the session, you should use every means available to you to gather the data that will assist you as you move through the design process.

As you're gathering information, you will always want to ask the basic journalist questions—Who? What? When? Where? and Why? These additional questions will help you design and deliver a successful *Let's Talk* session:

##### **How big will the group be—5, 15 or 50+ people?**

The size of the group affects the type and timing of your activities, as well as the resources and support team that you'll need. You can read more about this in the modalities section of this guide.



**What roles do your participants play in the organization or community? To whom are they accountable? How did they come to be attending?**

Having a basic understanding of participant connections and responsibilities will help prepare you as a facilitator and will help you design a solid POP.

**What do the participants already know? What do they want and need to know? Are there any specific issues they want to tackle?**

Knowing the level of experience in the group help you design your POP. It may also give you some insights into who may be more amenable to early story sharing; and the types of examples that may resonate with participants.

**What are people assuming as they come into the session? Has an issue in the community created polarizing assumptions within your group?**

Anticipating your participants' assumptions helps you make better choices about how to deliver the session. If there are polarizing assumptions in your participant community, your POP, agenda, and team should all be designed to take care of your participants in the event of significant differences of opinion and experience.

**How well does the audience know you, your team?**

If you don't already have strong relationships with the participants, you'll need to establish credibility with them early on. Consider carefully what parts of your bio and identities will be meaningful for this group. If some people know you well and others not at all, you'll want to acknowledge that as you introduce yourself.

### **Will some of the participants' goals and expectations conflict with those of others in the room?**

If there are tensions within the community, or points of contention about the POP, acknowledge that up front and point out the strengths of your team and your conversation design as a foundation.

### **How familiar are participants with your style of facilitation?**

Even if you know many participants in your *Let's Talk* session, assume that even the most seasoned among them may be challenged by the Purpose, Outcomes and Process you've presented. Take the time to lay a strong foundation.

### **Are any attendees there because they have to be?**

Obviously if folks are being required to attend, this will affect how receptive and safe people feel in your discussion.

Required attendance **is not a best practice for a *Let's Talk***, because often this structure means that people who are most impacted by the injustices at hand are forced to carry a disproportionate burden in the conversation.

### **Will there be people attending who hold positional power over others in the room?**

It's possible that you'll have supervisors and supervisees, management and line staff, even parents and children in your session. It's always helpful to know about those relationships ahead of time, so that you can be sure to acknowledge those dynamics and emphasize the community agreements that may come into play.

Centering the *Share What Makes Sense* agreement is crucial when these power relationships exist.

## **2. Arrive ahead of time, make sure your team is assembled, and your room is accessible.**

Pay attention to lighting, the configuration of chairs and tables, sight lines, patterns, audio visual requirements, access for any people with compromised mobility or other access issues, interpretation/interpreters if you have them. Be sure to greet your teammates and set up name tags or other welcoming tools.

## **3. Introduce yourself and your team, share the agenda and POP, share community agreements, and lead a group introductory activity.**

It's crucial that we do these four things, in this order, at the opening of any *Let's Talk*. This tried and true process will allow you to establish your leadership from the outset, demonstrate your values and commitment to candid and inclusive conversations, and begin to model both confidence and vulnerability:

- Who Am I (Please see #6 below).
- What are we going to do today?
- How are we going to engage and care for each other?
- Who are you?

As you are getting started introducing yourself, be sure to let folks know that they will soon have an opportunity to introduce themselves to one another as well, but that you first want to lay out the day and establish core agreements around how we are going to talk to each other, take great care of each other, and center respect for every person in the room.

#### **4. Be sure to clarify the purpose, outcomes, and process—the POP—as you begin the conversation.**

You need to be absolutely grounded in what you are going to do, why, and how. If you start and your participants revolt against or reject the POP, then there has been a breakdown in the planning and organization of the *Let's Talk* session, and you will need to start the conversation again. You will need to accept that the POP is problematic and take the time to generate a new one together.

If this happens, it is a critical moment for you as a facilitator. You want to have authority in the room to ensure everyone's well-being and you also want to demonstrate your respect for and belief in these participants. But it's important that you don't allow yourself to dig in your heels and simply resist the critical energy that is being expressed—especially if that critique is coming from those who may represent a marginalized perspective in the room.

We've facilitated many moments like these, and it's important to allow the critique to surface, watch how the conversation shifts and moves, note if and how the issues at hand may relate to the very thing you are trying to address or achieve, and make a fast decision about what to do next.

Many facilitators are afraid of looking “weak” or having the conversation devolve into chaos. But showing flexibility and responsiveness is part of the core values and skills we are attempting to help grow in our participants through *Let's Talk*. You can model a different kind of “authority” by responding in the moment, shifting your agenda, and showing respect for a legitimate critique that should guide change.

If the critical energy manifests before you've gotten to community agreements, be sure you pause and take the time to center and establish those community agreements before you undertake re-creating the POP. Also, keep in mind that depending on how this *Let's Talk* session was convened, you may also have to deal with the energy of typically less-experienced and nervous organizers. They may very well panic if the POP critique emerges early. As you were likely the final arbiter of that POP, they may also begin to doubt you. Here again, it's important for you to remain calm, be reassuring, and fall back on the trust you've already established with them through the planning process. Be sure to also check in with them during the re-creation process, as well as at the next break and throughout the session. Just don't let their anxiety get in the way of moving the group forward, even if it creates more work for you, with them, later.

### **5. Script your session down to the minute, even if you later change it or decide not to use it.**

You don't need to adhere to your minute-by-minute script, but knowing precisely how you've timed your session can help you shift or pivot on time should an important discussion arise that needs more attention (Please see #4 above). Your job is to be so grounded in your POP, so prepared with your script, that you can spend all of your time listening, observing, and taking in what is unfolding in the moment. This level of preparedness will make it possible for you to notice and respond to brilliant, spontaneous, unanticipated moments of revelation and connection—to what's happening in the actual conversation.

## 6. Your opening introduction of yourself and your team is crucial.

### Establish Yourself.

A core truth of *Let's Talk* facilitation: ***How you start is how you finish.***

As you introduce yourself, take a deep breath, make an effort to look around the room and make eye contact with as many participants as possible. Be upbeat, confident, take up space. Wear your favorite colors and comfortable clothes that you love. You are establishing yourself as the person in charge of everyone's well-being. It's important that you appear calm, grounded, and well-prepared.

Importantly, **do not apologize for yourself**, for the room, for starting later than planned, for the air-conditioning, etc. If there is problem with the room or logistics, explain it.

- “We will be starting a few minutes late because registration is held up, or people are stuck in traffic.”
- Or \_\_\_\_\_, so make yourself comfortable and we'll get going soon.”
- Or “An engineer will be here in ten minutes, and he will fix the heating system, so take care of yourself until then.”

Women, BIPOC people, LGBTQ+ people, and others targeted for marginalization or violence often apologize for ourselves at the opening of workshops or presentations.

This undermines our confidence, and the confidence of the people in our charge. If we routinely apologize for ourselves, this is a self-deprecating survival practice we must discard as we build and strengthen our facilitation skills. We must demonstrate our belief in ourselves

## **Share Your Identities.**

When I open a *Let's Talk* **[Jaime]** that is an exploration of racism, I am sure to share my racial identity. This centers where I am in this conversation, and what kind of positional power I hold. For white facilitators, it's important to specify some of your European ancestry, whatever you know, whatever it is. If you know little or nothing—perhaps because of hidden parentage, a history of enslavement or colonization that has obscured your lineage, or adoption, share that. The important thing is to place yourself in the conversation.

*I often share that I'm a native of DC **[Darlene]**, and that I grew up in Barry Farm, one of Southeast DC's core housing projects. I do this because I love my city and I want people to know that from the start. I also do it because there are such widespread negative projections on those of us who are Black, gender expansive like myself, and grew up in projects in any city in this country. I want to push back on people's ideas about that from the start and center my history as a core part of my leadership capacity. I also want people who grew up like me to know they belong in this room, that I'm here for them.*

When I'm facilitating a talk about sexual violence **[Jaime]**, I often share that I'm a survivor of sexual violence. This is my gift to other survivors in the room,

*who often feel like they need to hide, or worry that they will be harmed by the conversation, or that their needs for safety or support won't be addressed. Over many years, I've built my capacity for sharing this personal detail about me, so that I feel grounded and centered in my strengths as a survivor when I share it.*

*When I'm facilitating almost any session that involves young people [**Craig**], I make a point of sharing that I am gay and talking a bit about my coming out story in small town Ohio. I tell snippets that connect the dots for people. I talk about growing up in a very progressive, open-minded family, but still feeling the need to hide this part of myself. I talk about the early, unintentional "be safe" messages I received as a little kid that made me hate myself when I became a teenager. I talk about finding out my best friend in the world was gay—a kid I had known since kindergarten—only after we were both finished with college. Some of the snippets are sad, others are hilarious. The point is to open a door for people in the room to be themselves—to encourage (and give them "permission") to reflect upon and share their own stories.*

Having the capacity to share a personal detail that aligns with the conversation—survivor of intimate partner violence; survivor of harassment in the workplace; a person displaced by war or colonization; a person in recovery from addiction, depression, anxiety, or another mental health condition; survivor of a suicide attempt; a family member of a survivor of some kind—is a tremendous strength as a *Let's Talk* facilitator.



Your life, your story, your lived experiences are all powerful tools that you can offer as grounding for a *Let's Talk* session.

It's especially impactful if you have an identity or experience to share that aligns with the core issue(s) you have defined for the discussion.

Sharing in this way, allows us to center the belief that the core issue(s) we are discussing are not about outsiders or outliers, or people we feel superior to. We center the idea that all of our identities and experiences are sacred and that they are appropriate to share in this conversation. We open by illuminating the overwhelming violence that shapes all of our relations to each other, making it hard to *Let's Talk*. We potentially free participants to tell themselves, or others, about parts of their story they've felt shame around or have been hiding for self-protection.

If you do not have the capacity to share such a personal detail, you can work on it. In the meantime, be sure to choose facilitation partners and/or vibe watchers who have expanded their own capacity for this type of very personal sharing.

You can't succeed in facilitating a *Let's Talk* session without illuminating the embodied values of equity and justice within the team leading the conversation. How you start is how you finish.

## **7. Your introductory exercise for the group is also crucial.**

One you've introduced yourself and your team and finished all of the initial framing (sharing the POP,

establishing agreements, etc.), you'll want to hear from the participants. Designing this first introductory activity is important. It signals the participants about your values and your facilitation style. It sets the tone.

In the appendix, you will find a great “Name Tag” exercise that we love to use to help people identify three core identities or experiences that they want to center as they introduce themselves to their *Let's Talk* peers.

You can adapt this exercise or make up one of your own. The important thing is to start with something meaningful, an introduction that aligns with and begins to illuminate the issues that are going to be discussed. Remember that how you start is how you finish, so don't start with a really difficult request like: Please share your biggest disappointment or loss this year.

Instead, ask participants to please share something you are proud of in your work this year—an unexpected win, or the completion of something that you've been grappling with for some time. Give participants the option of going deep, right away, or easing in more slowly.

Asking questions like: Please share your spirit animal or please share the silliest picture on your phone are not appropriate introductions for *Let's Talk*. First, spirit animals are part of Indigenous spiritual traditions and non-Indigenous appropriation of this term as a game is the opposite of what we hope to do in *Let's Talk*.

Second, asking folks to share something random—instead of a question that creates an opening for meaningful dialogue—is a missed opportunity.

It sets the stage for other conversations that could easily veer off topic or undermine respect and authentic connection.

Keep in mind, too, that the size of the group should impact your design, even at the introductions stage. We write about this more in the next section (and in the chapter) on modalities.

## **8. Employ the right questions and the right modalities for your specific conversation.**

One of the most important roles of a *Let's Talk* facilitator is knowing what to do when and in what way. The space you create with each group will only ever happen once. In fact, this may be the only session of this kind someone may ever attend.

The good news is that there are some key basics you can rely on to improve your outcomes.

### **Questions**

In keeping with #7 above, choose your activity and reflection questions with care. As you send people into small groups, look back at your POP. What do you hope these participants will get out of this conversation? How does your question (or set of questions) guide them into the territories you hope they will explore together to reach the outcomes you've envisioned? A few key recommendations:

- Simple questions are better. Break longer questions into two or more questions.
- Language matters. Don't use jargon. Your questions should be accessible to everyone.

- Fewer questions are better.
- Options are great. If this is a complex issue, you can send participants into a group with five questions but ask them to choose one or two—the question or questions that are really calling to them.

## **Modalities**

Just as you'll take great care in choosing questions appropriate to each unique *Let's Talk* session, it's just as important that you deploy different methods for different groups, and different forms for different conversations.

Probably the worst opener in the world involves going around the room, having every one of 50 participants share their name, where they're from, their organization and something else—what they did on their summer vacation; or what they hope to learn during the gathering.

Why is this opening so bad? This particular group is too large to go around the room. This is the wrong form for an introduction. By the fifth share, folks will have stopped listening, and the next 45 shares will suck the energy out of the room. Participants will be frustrated and their confidence in your ability to hold the room will be lost.

Group openers with more than 12 or 15 people should be done in dyads or triads (pairs or trios) so that participants can begin to share even as they are meeting one another for the first time. You can do 3 or 4 quick (6-8 minutes) dyad or triad shares that shift quickly so that people come away from the introduction having met 10 or more of their peers and having talked about themselves with hopefully increasing depth and vitality.

Full group sharing—on its own, or in the aftermath of small group shares—should almost always be “popcorn” style, where the facilitator asks people to share and calls on them one at a time, hearing from 5-10 people, depending on the time you’ve allotted. Be sure you’re calling on and hearing from people that represent a variety of identities and perspectives.

Be careful to also give participants options for how they engage and account for different ways of being: introverts, extroverts; literal rule followers and free flow-ers; people who love small groups and people who hate them. The less people feel like a rat in someone’s predetermined maze, and the more they feel like an active participant in a conversation they are driving, the more likely you’ll be to achieve good outcomes.

Methods and forms largely depend on the size of the gathering and the length of the convening. Use modalities that take the best care of the group and think carefully about the length of time you are requiring people to hold their bodies, attention, thoughts, and feelings.

Don’t forget the breaks! Any gathering of more than 90 minutes should have one and longer sessions should have more. If you’re facilitating the group online, you still need breaks and they should actually be longer. We find that a 30 minute break online is about the right length of time for people to decompress and be ready to re-engage. The next chapter explores our core *Let’s Talk* modalities in greater depth.

## **9. Flex, shift, and inform.**

A hundred unanticipated things can happen in any Let's Talk conversation. These things can shift time, agendas, and even outcomes.

What is most important is that you are listening so well to the conversation as it unfolds, that you can recognize when transformational sharing is taking place. You are tuned in—listening deeply, thanking your participants sincerely as they share, and allowing the impact of these stories to grow even more meaningful for *Let's Talk* participants. Your job is to create the conditions for a conversation that you could not have anticipated. Great facilitation creates the conditions for those unexpected, special, rare moments.

When that happens, you'll need to adjust on the spot. You may decide to allow the conversation to continue. You may elect to pause and encourage everyone to breathe and take in what has been said. You may decide it's time to do a quick sharing in pairs because the conversation has been so impactful that people need a couple of minutes in a small group to process their feelings. This is where your role as facilitator becomes essential to the process. It's where your extensive preparation pays off.

As long as you keep your participants informed about how you are shifting and what you are doing, all will be well. In these moments, you don't need to ask for permission to make these shifts in time or agenda. That's your role and the group needs you to perform that role. When you can read how it's going and how the group is faring, you'll know what's necessary. Make the decision.

Take care of your participants and nurture the space so that those important moments can emerge organically.

## **10. Circle back, bring it all together, conclude, and check out.**

As the day unfolds, the group will be counting on you to pull together various threads, make sense of them, and summarize to move the group forward. This is a really important role. It requires learning about equity and justice, improving and practicing your facilitation skills, and leading *Let's Talk* conversations. With that experience, you'll learn not to overstate or editorialize, but rather to characterize and explain what is happening in the room and to conclude various pieces of the conversation so that participants can ground themselves and move on to the next piece.

Sometimes just having participants offer one-word conclusions to conversations popcorn-style can help conclude an exercise and provide great inputs as you draw conclusions and help the group move forward.

The final check out of the day is also an important concluding moment for the *Let's Talk* experience. There are so many ways to conclude a gathering and you can check out the appendix for some of our suggestions. Just remember, the important functions of a check out are to help participants have a final look at each other and a closing moment of appreciation for all of the risks, revelations, and shifts you have undertaken together.

It also helps your participants prepare to re-enter their "real world." Through *Let's Talk* you've created a unique space, a sacred space, a space that appreciates candor and risk-taking, a space that honors our various

identities, a space with rules, a space in which we are aware of and thoughtful about past trauma.

When leaving this sacred space, your participants may need to shift into a more protective persona once again. By doing a formal closing, you provide an opportunity for participants to consider what they've been through and think carefully about how they want to leave the space.

Even a one word check out will give the group as a whole and the individual participants the opportunity to ground their energy, appreciate one another, prepare for the real world, and close the conversation.



All that you touch you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change.

—Octavia Butler





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6

### Core Modalities

**W**e mentioned in the previous chapter that it is essential to ask the right questions and employ the most appropriate modalities as you lead a *Let's Talk* session. Your job is to understand the group, be clear about your POP, know your superpowers, and put together a design for your session that will meet all of those needs. Designing a good session takes patience, attention to detail, and experience.

Putting all of these pieces together is a lot of fun. Just don't let yourself become so invested in the perfect design that it becomes too complicated, or would engage your ego so much as to prevent you from abandoning it if the need arises.

There are endless activities, exercises, forms, and modalities to consider in supporting *Let's Talk*. These are a few we find ourselves returning to again and again.

### Story Sharing Panel

Often in a *Let's Talk* session, we'll include a story sharing panel, made up of a few people from within the group who we've helped prepare prior to the session. These story sharers are ready to tell their personal stories of injustice or empowerment. These stories function as one of the most powerful tools in the *Let's Talk* toolbox.

Preparing story sharers so they keep to no more than five minutes; share a story that aligns with the intentions of the POP; and take good care of themselves are all part

of your job during the planning stages of a *Let's Talk* session. You never want to have a story sharer feel like they have exposed too much of themselves or feel that their pain has been showcased for the benefit of others.

A great story telling panel will take 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the time of your full convening.

Respectfully responding to and processing the sharing of these experiences can be a powerful cornerstone for any *Let's Talk* session.

## **Experience Recall**

Another useful modality draws upon the memories and experiences of participants to generate new insights. Participants write answers to the same question or set of questions pertaining to these experiences or memories; then they are directed into a small group (usually just 2-3 people) for discussion, before being brought back to the full group for a popcorn-style debriefing.

Your job here is to listen deeply so that you can affirm, support, highlight, and provide concluding insights. Of course, you'll also be alert to addressing any potential breaches of our agreements.

## **Affirmative Inquiry**

One way to set limits on reactivity in high stakes conversations is to limit the ways participants can respond to a sharing or a learning module. The affirmative inquiry modality instructs participants that they are welcome to ask a story sharer or another participant a clarifying question about their share, or to express gratitude for something that resonated with them, or to affirm a story by talking about something they identify with as a result of the share.

This is not a time for critique or judgement.

Affirmative inquiry is an excellent modality to use when you are learning about a person's history of surviving violence, or other stories in which the speaker is extending trust and being generous in sharing their personal struggles or trauma.

## **Movement Matters**

If you are having a conversation that lasts more than an 90 minutes, movement is an important modality. Consider creating an exercise where people move randomly around the room, stop, turn to the person next to them, and share, based on the questions/insights/problem you have placed before them. We call this **"Musical Bodies"**—reminiscent of the musical chairs game many of us played as children. You can use music to start and stop the movement, or you can simply use your voice.

There are a thousand ways to adapt this exercise, but the important thing is to understand that after a lot of conversation, movement helps people sift through and settle their feelings and new knowledge. Movement combined with brief sharing with peers can help participants begin to articulate what they are learning. Movement wakes up the gathering. Invariably, laughter starts to fill the room.

Be sure to be conscious of and thoughtful about the capacity for movement among your participants. Create activities that work for people at all levels of mobility within your group. Be thoughtful about your choices and be sure to have options that work for everyone.

Adjacent to movement modalities, it might be a great time to have a vibe watcher introduce an activity that offers somatic support, exercises which tend to our nervous system and provide grounding. One that we love involves simply drawing our hands across our chests, over our hearts, over and over again in a soothing, circular motion.

This simple exercise can help participants connect with themselves momentarily, recognize whether their heart is beating quickly, provide a calming sensation, and feel cared for. If you have recruited vibe watchers with a background in somatic support, they can offer any number of brief, soothing exercises that can align with your goals.

## **Artistic Expression**

Are you spending a day or more together? After generating a lot of information through writing and talking, you could ask participants to represent their learning and insights via some form of art.

If you are working with a movement, historic, or organizational timeline, you might hang mural-sized pieces of blank paper across a wall in your room and ask participants to write or draw their memories, insights, key events, or historical references onto the timeline, whereby generating a collective piece that illuminates and shares the learning in unexpected and breathtaking ways.

For many participants, this is where and how they do their best thinking, sifting, and sharing. An art exercise makes it possible for them, and for many others, to go deeper and gain more from the conversation.

Another way to do this is to provide materials for each person to create some kind of artistic representation of their individual learning or journey for the day.

Then ask participants to hang each of their works (voluntarily, per our agreement of “share what makes sense”) and then have a walk-through of the gallery after everyone who wishes to share has hung their piece.

A popcorn-style discussion of the mural or gallery walk can be done standing, moving, or sitting, depending on the energies and abilities of your group.

### **Group Altars and Centerpieces**

When we have a multi-day *Let's Talk* convening, we often build a group centerpiece (or altar). This activity works best when you can contact your participants in advance, by writing and asking them to bring an artifact, quote, picture, piece of art, cloth, etc. that is meaningful in their justice and equity work.

Depending on the size of the group, we allot up to an hour and let participants know how much time they will each have to share about their object as they place it onto the table/altar/centerpiece in the room.

Participants are instructed to add to the centerpiece over the course of the convening as they like, but not to touch or remove others' contributions (unless given explicit permission). The centerpiece serves both as a center of gravity and an extended introduction.

We like to follow up centerpiece-building with a shared meal, or a meal time that is unstructured. The altar can also be constructed following a shared meal.

Just don't keep everyone up too late if you have a full day of conversation the following day (or build a later start into your design for the next morning).

Community agreements should be centered before the construction of the centerpiece and care should be taken in choosing the table or pedestal for the centerpiece. Be sure to ask venue staff not to dismantle, touch, or "clean" it.

## Life Stories

Ideally, our life stories activity also begins in advance of the session with a request similar to that which we use when creating an altar. This activity, however, is facilitated in a very specific way, usually at twilight, in a carefully prepared space, in a circle, and with a significant block of time (about 8-10 minutes of sharing time per participant). In larger groups, we may have have multiple circles talking at once. Keep in mind that this is a fairly high-risk activity.

Sometimes it's not possible to be in touch with all of your participants in advance, or sometimes people forget or neglect the request. That's ok. These instructions work in both scenarios:

*"Please take a few moments to think about an object or item that means a great deal to you. It should be something that represents part of your life story so far. Perhaps it is a photograph of someone close to you who is gone now; or maybe it is a book you read as a child that changed your life. Perhaps it is poem you know by heart or a piece of clothing, or a stuffed toy, or a musical instrument, or a piece of sports equipment . . . It can be anything that tells us more about who you are in the*

*world. If you don't have it with you, I'd like you to visualize this object and think about why its so important to you; I want you to prepare to tell us a part of your story—the part deep inside that speaks to your truth.”*

As for the space, we prefer a comfortable, lounge-type space for this activity. Comfy chairs or sofas, room to lay on the floor. We like doing this activity at twilight, after dinner, when our biorhythms are beginning to wind down a bit. We'll often light the space with candles and have boxes of tissues and bottles of water around the circle. All of these details support deeply personal story sharing.

You'll definitely want to review your community agreements and suggest one more: That participants who are not sharing stay silent during the entire activity. This deepens the sharing and receiving and the collective commitment to showing respect for one another.

Please note that should a breach occur during the activity, you should take the time to address it before moving on to the next person. If dealing with the breach will require significant time, note that you're adding it to the parking lot and then move on.

You'll also want to let people know that you and your vibe watchers will notice if someone leaves the circle and we'll follow to make sure you're ok. We also believe that it's important that everyone in the circle have the opportunity to participate, including members of our team. People can, of course, choose to remain silent and that must be ok.



We will usually begin by sharing a piece of poetry that invites participants to share. A great piece we've used is by Oriah Mountain Dreamer called "**The Invitation**" (Included in the Appendix). It's powerful and does a great job of setting the stage. Be sure to let participants know that when you're finished reading, anyone who feels moved to speak should begin. We won't pick the first or next person or go around in a circle. We want people to speak when they are moved to speak. Encourage people to pay attention to their bodies.

A typical life stories session can last a couple of hours or more, so you'll want a space where people can move a bit, a space near restrooms. Most of the time, the sharing is so powerful that people tell us later they were surprised that the time moved so quickly.

When most everyone has shared and the space between shares starts to lengthen, you should let folks know the activity is nearing the end and if they'd like to speak, now is the time. You may want to say this a few times, closing the gap between your reminders a little more quickly each time.

At the end, thank everyone for their participation (even if they didn't share), remind folks that people don't need fixing, and that some folks may not want to discuss their share at all. Don't debrief right away. Let people sit with what they've heard and shared (even overnight is ok). In the appendix we've included some specific suggestions for debriefing the activity when the time comes.

## Discovering Our Legacies

Again in the appendix, you will find a powerful activity called “**Discovering Our Legacies.**” This activity has five questions that begin in early childhood and progress through to the present. The questions ask about differences in identity and experience. How individuals learned about different identities, how they experienced them, how they formed their own, and where they felt joy or pain, conflict or truth.

The questions are intentionally flexible and the instructions provide small groups the ultimate authority in deciding how they approach their discussion. Some groups will take the questions one by one, person by person. Others have each participant respond to whichever question activates them. Other groups toss the questions completely and discuss what they want to discuss. There is no right or wrong approach. The important thing is to center the power in the discussion with the participants themselves.

This is especially important when the groups come back together and share their learning. You'll need to be listening to each report-back, looking for contributions that reinforce the reasons you have convened for *Let's Talk*. Be supportive of all of the approaches the different groups used, praise the creativity in the room, the willingness to be vulnerable. Note any differences you hear in terms of how people with power answered the questions versus how those with identities that are marginalized or stigmatized answered. Let the group make the connections. Support them in doing the work.

When you're finished with any activity like this one that asks for personal sharing, thank people for their courage,

their risk-taking. Remind people that this is why we're here. At the same time, be sure not to go too far with this praise. There will be people who chose not to share or chose not to share too deeply. Perhaps their particular group didn't feel safe to them. Perhaps these questions activated earlier trauma. By now in a *Let's Talk* session we will have said several times that people should share what makes sense for them and take good care of themselves.

## **Journey Maps**

A journey map is a visual representation of the path someone has taken to arrive in a particular place at a particular moment in time. Mapping activities allow participants the opportunity to explain key moments and key people in their life through an artistic medium.

For any mapping exercise, it's important to let people know that their "map" can take any form that works for them. Do encourage people to use as few words on their drawing as possible, but don't walk them through an example map as you'll find most people will then approach the activity in the same way.

For example, if you show them an example map that moves chronologically from birth to now and includes a story about their hometown, the loss of a parent, their first job or college, you'll get a bunch of maps that share the same types of things. Instead, describe a constellation, or show them concentric circles, indicate that it could be chronological, or it could be random moments. Give them some examples of particularly poignant moments from your own life. Be vulnerable yourself and it will signal to them that they can go deeper as well.

## 4x4x4s

The structure and flexibility of this activity is what we like best about it. It shares some common elements with journey mapping, but without the need to draw pictures. In this activity, participants are asked to reflect on four life changing moments in four minutes in groups of four.

Depending on time, we've done this as 3x3x3s, 5x5x5s, and even 7x7x7s. Typically we use smaller numbers for younger groups and larger numbers for older groups; though there is no hard and fast rule.

For the sharing, we want people to focus on events in their life that, here again, have brought them to this place at this moment. Powerful events, life-changing events. As the facilitator, you should give examples from your own life that are poignant and express vulnerability. If we're in person, we typically provide a simple handout with space for people to jot down a few notes. It won't be collected or shared. It's just to help them organize their thoughts. They don't have to use it if they don't want to.

It's important to give people some time to think before jumping into the sharing. You may even want to combine this with a meditation (Please see meditation below). When everyone is ready, depending on the size of your group, invite people to begin their sharing.

Be sure you let people know you will be keeping track of time and will indicate when they have just 30 seconds left. Ring a gentle bell when their time is up, but be aware of where they are in their sharing and be a little flexible. Keep in mind that others will be paying attention to the time as well, so be as fair as possible and don't be afraid to cut people off if they going on way too long.

If your group is large, you could break into smaller groups and do a few rounds of this, reconfiguring the groups each time. We've also broken this up throughout a longer session, having a few people share at different times throughout the day. You'll need to center the group and remind them of their agreements each time, but this can be a great way of ensuring consistent sharing and the participation of everyone throughout the duration of the *Let's Talk* session.

Just keep in mind that this, too, can be a fairly high-risk activity, so regardless of your structure, be sure to maintain a supportive environment whenever folks are sharing.

## **Meditation**

Pre-designed, guided meditation that connects directly to the issue(s) you are discussing can deepen individual and collective exploration. Like art work, meditation calls on different parts of our brain and different ways of being to delve into the issue(s) at hand.

You can craft a short meditation (3-5 minutes), read it slowly to the group, then prompt a free-write session directly following. Instruct participants not to “think” or edit themselves and let them know that this is private writing just for them that won't be shared.

Please note we have three serious caveats when it comes to using meditation:

**1. Mediations should always be voluntary, and facilitators should reinforce this at the outset.** It's perfectly fine for participants to pass on meditation. It is likely to take participants deeper into feeling and

memory, and this may not be something they want to do here, in this room, right now.

**2. You must read the room and decide if your participants are doing well with highly emotional shares and conversation.** Is the room anxious? Are they highly activated around trauma or when they hear really emotional shares? Can they stay grounded?

**3. Do you feel confident in your capacity to manage deeper engagement with the topics being discussed?** Will you and your team be able to take care of the group if people come out of the meditation in distress? Are your agreements holding? Do you feel confident about your process to this point so far?

If you feel good about your answers to these questions and feel that your participants are doing well and you are grounded, guided meditation is a great way to take information and insights your participants are working with and go deeper.

Be sure to debrief following the meditation. Popcorn-style, voluntary sharing of the process of the meditation or its impact and outcomes is always meaningful and can help move the group toward another level of inquiry and conversation.

## **Music**

Music can provide a wonderful avenue for joy, movement, release, and sharing during *Let's Talk*. As noted earlier, it is best to elicit favorite songs and playlists from the group itself rather than impose the facilitators' musical tastes (exclusively) on the group.

In this way, music becomes another way for participants to introduce themselves, share things that matter, create a group vibe, and enjoy each other. Music can build culture, connectivity, and community. (Please see Movement Matters above for how to conduct our Musical Bodies activity.)

## Handouts and Posters

People love having something in their hands during challenging conversations. While we don't recommend providing a lot of complicated handouts that might be distracting or cause people to check out of the conversation, a list of the community agreements and suggested self-care tips are an excellent resource for participants to doodle on, glance at, crumple, or just hold in their hands.

If you are not using handouts, hang agreements and self-care tips in large lettering in plain sight throughout the room. Be sure they are legible at a distance and can be seen by everyone in the room. Hang a few copies.

## Case Studies

Case studies offer a great teaching modality for a *Let's Talk* session. By using actual, historical events—especially events that have particular meaning to the community in which your *Let's Talk* is happening—participants will have a concrete example to consider and explore together. Case studies can also be constructed based on the specific needs of the group, world events, or any situation that centers equity and justice issues.

## Parking Lots

Sometimes a conversation topic or a breach in agreements is too big to manage in the time allotted, or is best facilitated among two or more participants in conflict. In either case, resolving the issue requires a different conversation. Complex and time consuming issues should go into a parking lot to be discussed and processed later.

Depending on the nature of the conflict, it may not be possible to share the outcomes/resolution with the full group. In this case, it is still important to acknowledge the issue was addressed. Transparency in these matters is our preference, of course, but not at the risk of re-traumatizing someone, engendering legal implications, or creating an unsafe environment for participants.



# **Chapter 7**

## Chapter 7

### Navigating Challenging Moments

In this chapter, we want to explore a range of situations that commonly occur during a *Let's Talk* session. We'll define scenarios and offer suggestions for how you might navigate the moment. It's important to keep in mind, however, that while these may be ways that we have found to work consistently, you need to know yourself and your hot buttons, and respond in ways that draw upon your strengths to bring resolution to the situation.

It may seem like magic when a skilled facilitator navigates a conversation through a rocky passage that involves conflict, raised voices, hurt feelings, or polarized values and beliefs. But, it isn't magic at all. Strong facilitation is a skill built on the many core tools discussed throughout this guide.

If we've created a strong facilitation team; informed participants of the purpose, outcomes and process we are undertaking; affirmed community agreements; and taken care with our introduction of the team and the group to each other, we have laid a solid foundation that we can draw upon should a participant share something that reinforces the injustices we are seeking to address or in the event that a participant becomes angry or hurt by the process or content of *Let's Talk*.

As we strengthen our skills as facilitators, we will be able to observe this distress even as it starts to form. We will be so attuned to the participant experience, that we can anticipate the conflict and see it building.

But, it takes work and focused attention. Here are a few crucial tips to help you hold onto the thoughtful container you've built for *Let's Talk* and take care of your participants.

### **1. Intervene early.**

Taking a deep breath, noticing the distress in the room, and slowing down the conversation when you can feel conflict escalating is the start of an important intervention. "Let's take a few deep breaths, because the last few shares have been powerful, and I can sense that we need to slow things down a little in order for us to reflect on what we've heard."

If you notice that one or two people are struggling, you can (privately) ask one of your vibe watchers to check in with an attendee. Vibe watchers should never force conversation, but they can make themselves available. This also might be a good time to ask a vibe watcher who has training in somatics to share a quick self-care exercise that can help people connect to their bodies as they integrate what they are learning and feeling in the moment.

### **2. Help prevent the breaching of agreements and always interrupt if agreements are violated.**

The most common harm that occurs in any conversation about justice and inequity is that a participant gets activated by another person's share and attacks them or attempts to make them the "bad" person in the room.

For example, after a vulnerable story shared by a survivor of sexual abuse, a participant says: I can't believe Jack said that "anything goes!" As a survivor of sexual violence, I'm deeply offended.

Facilitator: “Let’s take a breath, Sasha, because I can see this conversation is bringing up a lot for you.” Stop. Take three deep breaths with the room.

“What I heard Jack say is that he is socializing with many survivors who are experimenting with their sexuality in recovery, and the vibe among some of them is “anything goes.” He was not expressing his values or practices. He was talking about what he is observing among people he loves and is in recovery with right now.”

Then, slow down some more. Have the room take another breath. Tell Sasha you will come back to her before you move on to the next exercise, but that you want to bring other people into the discussion.

Remind the room that there is no “cross talk” or advice giving per your community agreements.

Remind everyone to speak from the “I” and that “you” statements are not useful to our process.

Choose your next responders carefully. Do not choose someone who appears in deep distress as Sasha does. Use your intuitive skills to help bring other perspectives, and other experiences of what was shared into view.

If your next respondent attempts to pile on to the Sasha comment, stop them. Remind everyone that there is no crosstalk and ask if someone else wants to share how they experienced the story sharing panel (where Jack was one of three).

If you choose well, and hold to agreements, additional experiences of Jack’s share, and the stories offered by

his peers on the panel, will be offered. Some people will have felt seen by Jack's share and will be grateful that they don't have to be ashamed of their own "anything goes" perspectives.

Sasha may have decided to "tap out" with a vibe watcher or she may have worked on de-escalating and been able to listen.

As you close the conversation, say, "I'm going to close out this conversation, but I want to ask if anyone else has anything they want to add." At this point, you should make eye contact with Sasha (if she is in the room) and see if she is interested in sharing again.

This gives Sasha the opportunity to re-engage. But, you have to be careful here. Sasha may still be in deep distress and say something to the effect of: "I don't think survivors are taken seriously here. I don't feel safe." Here's where you attune to the distressed person's needs in the room, and use your parking lot (Please see chapter 6).

"Thank you so much for staying present and speaking your truth. I'm going to put "survivors needs" in the parking lot, so that we can have a clarifying conversation about this. I also want to invite anyone else who wants to join us for this conversation to see me at the end of the session and we can discuss how to improve this environment for survivors."

Sasha may say something like: "I don't want to have that conversation. It's your job."

**Facilitator:** “You’re right. It is my job, and I am going to take time with your feedback. Anyone here may join me. You do not have to spend your free time on this.”

“In keeping with our agreement on process today, I’m going to keep us moving.”

Alternatively, in many of these cases, Sasha has had a minute to regroup, has listened to other shares, and can see that she was in fight or flight mode the instant she heard “anything goes.” She might say: “I’m sorry for misinterpreting Jack. That was a trigger for me.”

Facilitator: “I appreciate that you are working hard here. And I’m grateful to you for sharing your process. Thank you.”

### **3. Note what the breach is—language, concepts, crossing a line.**

Probably the second most common distress-activating event in *Let’s Talk* conversations is that someone uses language or reveals practices that align with colonizers, enslavers, patriarchal enforcers, queer and transphobic people, etc.

A facilitator’s job is to stop immediately and note the breach for the room. The longer the comment hangs in the air unaddressed, the more activated your group will become. If you are facilitating a conversation and this has come from a participant, wait until they finish their sentence or thought. With a story sharer, this might be a little trickier depending on the vulnerability of the content.

You may have to wait a few minutes for the completion of the story. Don't wait longer though.

The following are some examples from story sharers (Please see more about the role of these people in chapter 6) and *Let's Talk* participants. They are followed by some facilitator interventions you might try:

**(Able bodied participant) “I was trying my best, but it was really lame.”**

**Facilitator to (Able bodied participant):** Thanks for that insight. I just want to remind us all that one thing we are trying to do together is to counter language that has been used against us and our communities. People may or may not know that “lame” is an ableist term. So let's retire that one.

**(Able bodied participant):** Oh, my! I'm so sorry.

**Facilitator:** Thank you. (Warm comportment toward them). Let's all keep helping each other learn about where some of our language and expressions come from. (Call on the next person.)

**(Cis male participant) “My rule of thumb in this situation is...”**

**Facilitator to (Cis male participant):** Thanks for that insight. I just want to remind us all that one thing we are trying to do together is to counter language that has been used against us and our communities. People may or may not know that “rule of thumb” comes from a law that affirmed men's right to beat women. It's been around so long, many of us don't know the origin. So, let's retire it.

***(Cis male participant): What?! You're kidding?***

**Facilitator:** I'm not. I know we are all trying our best. This is why putting ourselves in positions to learn, like in this conversation, is so important. So many aspects of our language and practices have been impacted by white supremacy, sexism, and ableism, that we often don't even know what we are reinforcing. (White queer panelist) "Let's have a pow wow afterwards and figure it out."

**Facilitator to (White queer panelist):** Thanks for your share. I just want to remind us all that one thing we are trying to do together is to counter language that has been used to enforce racist values and structures. White folks using "pow wow" (a sacred form of gathering among Indigenous people) in casual or offhanded conversation is dismissive of that tradition and harmful. In my childhood, we used this term all the time, and we see this harm carried further in the use of racist mascots for sports teams.

We also see this practice carried out in the theft of Indigenous sacred objects and the appropriation of spiritual traditions. So, let's keep learning together about how to improve our language and practices and let's have white community members refrain from using that term.

**(White queer panelist):** I'm not racist! I didn't mean anything by it!

**Facilitator:** (Nodding) Thank you. If we look back at our agreements, one thing we noted was that we committed to accounting for gaps between intent and impact. We are experiencing that right now. What I hear in your



distress is that you have respect for sacred Indigenous traditions and that you had no racist intent in using that language. Yet, there is a gap between that intent and the impact of this language. That's what we are exploring right now.

Let's all take a breath because this is important.

Here, we might tell a story about another intent/impact gap that we've helped groups to navigate; or

We might talk about the shame we feel when we have our own intent/impact gap. If we do, We'll also point out that shame doesn't really help us understand what is going on.

**(White queer panelist):** I mean, I'm queer! I fight racism every day!

**Facilitator:** Let's keep breathing. Thank you. I know for myself, it's painful to face the reality that as a white, queer person fighting racism, I can still come upon my own racist thinking and practices. What has helped me is to develop a community of white, anti-racist practitioners around me to help support my growth. I'm going to put this in the parking lot right now in case any of our white community members here are interested in pursuing resources in this arena later. And it's time to move on, so thank you.

Does anyone else have a response to the story share, the issues we are discussing now, or the panel?

Choose your next participant wisely. Do not choose someone who is visibly distressed.

**( Joking cis white panelist) “So, I was like, oh my god, let’s call the police!**

**Facilitator to:** ( Joking cis white panelist): Thanks for your share. I just want to remind us all that one thing we are trying to do together is to counter practices that have been employed to enforce racist terrorism and violence. White folks talking about “calling the police” as a joke is extremely harmful given the historic and current state of police violence in Black and brown communities. So, let’s keep learning together about how to improve our language and practices and let’s have white community members refrain from talking about policing and incarceration in any kind of “joking” manner.

Let’s breathe because this is an extremely distressing issue. If people need vibe watcher support, I hope you will signal one of them. They are here for you today. Can vibe watchers please raise your hands?

**(Joking cis white panelist):** I mean, I was kidding! I wasn’t talking about violence!

**Facilitator:** I know for myself, it’s painful to face the reality that as a white person fighting racism, I come upon my own racist thinking and practices regularly. What has helped me is to develop a community of white, anti-racist practitioners around me to help support my growth. I’m going to put this in the parking lot for now. If any of our white community members are interested in pursuing resources in this arena, we’ll make that happen.

I’ll also create a parking lot for survivors of police violence or folks who want to talk more about their support needs around racism in this discussion. See me at the break.

JCWP, I can see that you are having a hard time, and I want to suggest you breathe and listen for the next stretch. Let's hear from some other folks right now.

As the facilitator, your general rule during a breach is to not allow the time to be eaten up by the breacher's defensiveness, and to protect time so that other inputs can come into the room: other people's experiences of the breach; the needs of people whose community is targeted by the breacher's comment; feedback about the conversation that also takes us beyond the breach. You want to build the conversation by allowing others to use "I" statements and discuss their experience of the full share that just happened, as well as the breach.

### **(Cis panelist) Misgenders a gender expansive panelist in a conversation.**

**Facilitator to: (Cis panelist):** Thanks for that insight. I just want to remind us all that one thing we are trying to do together is honor our identities. Elizabeth goes by He/Him.

**(Cis panelist):** Oh, wow! I'm so sorry!

**Facilitator:** Good work. I encourage any of us who have had missteps in our practices to do what (Cis Panelist) just did, which is to take in this information and apologize. Let's keep learning and using each other's pronouns.

Move on. Keep building the conversation. Check for distress. Do you need to remind people to breath? Is it time to get up and move a bit? What's happening in the room and how can you support participants?

#### **4. Draw upon your team during a breach.**

When we are facilitating a breach around racism, a multiracial team of facilitators and vibe watchers is crucial to taking care of the room. Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color (BIPOC) in the room need to see leaders of the conversation processing what they are processing in real time. A BIPOC co-facilitator can do a lot to attune to BIPOC participants' distress and affirm their realities, while a white facilitator is much more limited in their capacity to do this, regardless of their skill or intention.

#### **5. Help those responding to breaches stay in the “I.”**

It's likely that you will have to remind participants over and over to speak from the “I” during the processing of a breach. But please note, “I think you are a racist jerk.” Is not an “I” statement.

Instead: “I am so upset that I have to hear (racist) (sexist) (ableist) (queerphobic) language and thinking in a room that is supposed to be safe for me.”

#### **6. Take breaks when there is a breach or spiral.**

Watch the group's energy. A brief stretch, a bathroom break, and water can be very supportive to people when they are in distress.

#### **7. Be sure that when breaches happen in public; the processing and apologies do as well.**

All of the examples above involve shining the light on the breach and processing it together. When racism, sexism, ableism, ageism or queer and transphobic language or practice enters into the community, don't hide it, minimize it, or facilitate a private resolution.

When the breach happens in public, it needs to be addressed (if not resolved) in public as well.

# **Activities, Worksheets, Tools**

# Activities, Worksheets, Tools

## Self-Reflection and Self-Monitoring Tools

1. What are my core values? What matters to me most about who I am to myself, in my family and in the world? How do I live out my core values?
2. When have my core values come into conflict with friends, family members or systems and institutions (like teams, school, or a government program)?
3. What do I generally do when I experience conflict between my values and individuals, groups or institutions? What happens in my body? How do I respond?
4. How do I take care of myself when I come into conflict with my values among people and institutions that I care about? Who is in my support system and how do they care for me? What practices do I have in place to care for myself?

## Noticing Myself at Work, Play and/or in Organizations

1. Does the team, organization, or company I'm involved with or work for respect, reflect or live out my core values? How or how not?

2. How do gaps between my core values and living and working within this team, organization, or company impact my daily life? My mental health? My physical health? My vitality? My safety?

## **My Team, Organization, or Company's Mission**

1. Does my team, organization or company pursue values and outcomes that align with mine? Am I proud of them?

2. Do our current practices live up to our stated mission? How or how not? What work can be done here?

3. Is there a way for me to influence reconsideration or revision of my team, organization or company's values while protecting my well-being – social, emotional, or material (grades or paycheck)? What could I do?

4. What conditions would need to be set or in place for me to pursue challenging conversation and a process of change while taking care of myself as well?

## **Pod Maps:**

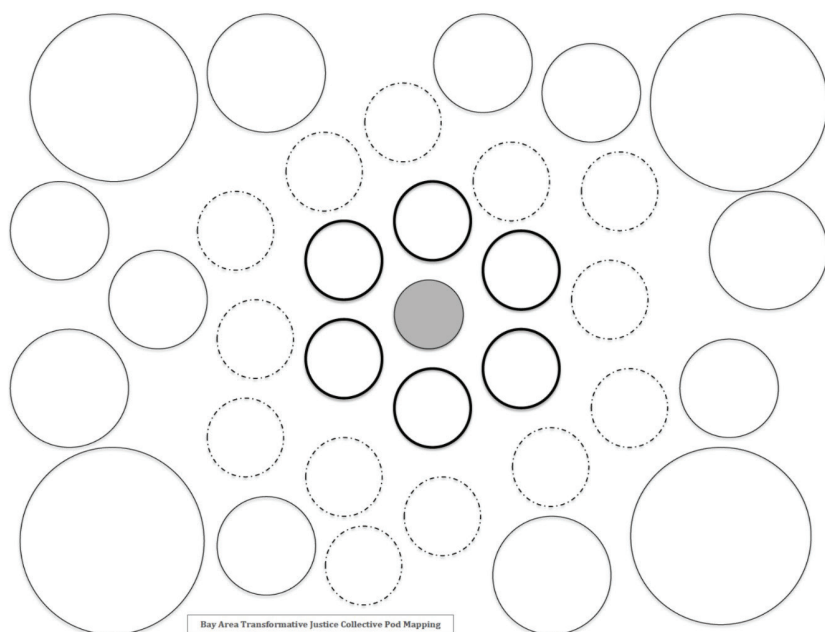
### **Creating Self-Reflection and Self-Support Teams**

Transformative Justice visionary Mia Mingus has given us a great resource for supporting our journey in skills-building for *Let's Talk*. At the center of your Pod in this Pod Map is you. And the six darker circles outside of you can be filled in with the names of people you trust; people who engage in or observe you in groups and in difficult situations.

These are friends, colleagues or loved ones who can provide their impressions and feedback about how

you are supporting yourself and staying present when moments that spur us into fight or flight thinking and reactivity occur.

These are people you can count on to help problem solve sticky or difficult interactions, who don't always tell you what you want to hear but share your values and believe in your ability to grow and stretch yourself.



The dotted circles are people who are secondary, or who know you less intimately than your group of six, but perhaps may be more connected to a situation or conversation that you are engaged in and can provide feedback or support.

Finally on the outside, in the larger circles, you can pencil in trainings, resources or practices that you can rely on to build your skills and stay grounded.



## **Name Tag Exercise**

As participants gather, show them to a name tag table and ask them to write their name, pronouns, and three descriptors that tell us something important to or about them. Let them know we will share these descriptors with each other in our opening getting-to-know-you exercise.

On the wall, post a series of possible descriptors based on identity, geography, religious practices, fandoms, hobbies, survival experiences, etc. People are often nervous doing this activity—it's their first step toward taking a risk and sharing something personal, and they don't yet know whether you will take care of the group.

You should have your name tag on with your descriptors already. This is grounding for participants. Encourage people to choose something meaningful that they are willing to share.

Here are some lists we often use:

### **I'M A FAN**

Use a local and national list – list fandoms across more things than sports. Music, Literature, Fashion, etc.

### **MY RACE OR ETHNICITY**

Create a comprehensive list. Leave “Another race/ethnicity” as an option

### **WHERE I'M FROM**

Craft a local list if you are local; national if national; global if global. Use geographies that are connected to your participants, always leave “another place” as an option.

## **MY HOBBIES**

- Reading
- Dancing
- Cooking
- Arts and Crafts Making
- Art Viewing
- Gaming
- Sewing
- Cricket
- Football
- Soccer

## **MY ACTIVISM**

- Climate change
- Social Equality
- Economic Equality
- Feminist Activism
- LGBTQ Rights
- Human Rights
- Racial Justice
- Education Access
- Health Equity

## **MY SURVIVAL**

- Family Violence
- Dating Violence
- Stalking
- Sexual Violence
- Hate Violence
- Civil War / Conflict
- State Violence
- Police Violence

## **MY GENDER and/or SEXUALITY**

- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Gay
- Pansexual or Queer
- Asexual or Aromantic
- Gender Fluid or Genderqueer
- Androgynous
- Transgender
- Heterosexual
- Another Gender or Sexuality

## **MY FAVORITE SUBJECTS**

- Art
- Mathematics
- English
- Science
- History or Social Studies
- Accounts
- Business
- Office Administration
- Biology

## **MY TALENTS**

- Poet or Writer
- Singer or Rapper
- Football Player
- Writer
- Dancer
- Actor
- Visual Artist
- Social Connector
- Networker
- Empath or Emotional Supporter

After participants have chosen three meaningful identities for their tag, send them into dyads or triads for brief introductions. Depending on how much time you have for this activity, you can allow for 2-3 minutes or up to 10 minute shares per person. Switching to a new dyad or triad once or twice increases the number of participants who have met and begun to know each other more deeply from the outset of your *Let's Talk*, which is always preferable.

Remind the group to take care of themselves and share what makes sense in this first, important, small group meeting space. Remind participants that they can always share process if they would prefer not to share content in any small group situation.

Do a full group share out after your dyads or triads have introduced themselves to each other, give your participants options about how to share: How was that process for you? Did anything interesting come up for you as you chose your identities? As you shared them? Who would like to share?

### **Discovering Our Legacies**

This activity has five questions that begin in early childhood and progress through to the present. The questions ask about differences in identity and experience. How individuals learned about different identities, how they experienced them, how they formed their own, and where they felt joy or pain, conflict or truth.

The questions are intentionally flexible and the instructions provide small groups the ultimate authority in deciding how they approach their discussion.

Some groups will take the questions one by one, person by person. Others have each participant respond to whichever question activates them. Other groups toss the questions completely and discuss what they want to discuss. There is no right or wrong approach. The important thing is to center the power in the discussion with the participants themselves.

This is especially important when the groups come back together and share their learning. You'll need to be listening, looking for contributions that reinforce the reasons you have convened for *Let's Talk*. Be supportive of all of the approaches used, praise creativity and the willingness to be vulnerable. Note any differences you hear about in terms of how people who had power answered the questions versus how those with identities that are marginalized or worse answered. Let the group make the connections. Support them in doing the work.

When you're finished with any activity like this one that asks for personal sharing, thank people for their courage, their risk-taking. Remind people that this is why we're here. At the same time, be sure not to go too far with this. There will be people who chose not to share or chose not to share too deeply. Perhaps their group didn't feel safe to them. Perhaps these questions activated earlier trauma. By now in a *Let's Talk* session we will have said several times that people should share what makes sense for them. We even have an agreement to that effect. In reinforcing the positive aspects of the sharing, don't go so far as to introduce shame or resentment among those who took you at your word and kept our community agreements.

## Discovering Our Legacies Questions:

1. What is your earliest memory of recognizing that people were [racially, ethnically, sexually, physically, religiously, or financially] different from you?
2. While growing up, what messages did you receive from your family, friends, and community about racial or other differences? Were the spoken and unspoken messages consistent?
3. When was the first time that you became aware that your identity affected the way you would be treated by society?
4. Identify a recent experience where your assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors were questioned, challenged, or otherwise tested.
5. What do you feel is your greatest personal challenge when it comes to issues of difference?

As a *Let's Talk* facilitator, our role here is to illuminate and appreciate differences, hold them up so that we can see that these divergent experiences mean we are in very different places in conversations about equity, and we have different stakes in them, depending on what we've survived.

"We have all survived hardship." Is not a great frame for these conversations — that kind of frame has a flattening effect that suggests all identities or structures of injustice are the same when they are quite distinct, and play out on our bodies, our families and our communities in specific ways.

## **Closing Circles**

Make sure that everyone can see each other.

Make sure you've created a physically accessible circle, so that all participants can fully participate, or choose a different form for your closing.

Invite people to hold hands, to feel each other's energy. (Optional.)

Go around, and do a one word checkout.

Do a one sentence checkout (size of the group matters—small groups can do a sentence or more. Large groups, no.)

We like initiating a round of applause at the end of the closing circle/checkout, some groups will make a lot of noise, some will be celebratory. Then the noise will dissipate, conversations will ensue, and people will check out and disperse.

## **Closing Intentions**

A simple yet powerful closing intention exercise is this: Based on all of my learnings today, what is one thing I'm going to STOP doing? And what is one thing I'm going to START doing—to grow myself as a leader, to support this leadership path I'm on, to improve my work/life balance, to gain skills in a particular area, to improve my health, etc...

Depending on the size of the group: do a popcorn share, do a pair-share, do a musical bodies share, or have everyone share.

# **About the Authors**



## About the Authors



**Craig A. Bowman** has served as executive director and board member of several social profit organizations. He is also the founder of Common Ground Consulting, a small business consulting firm working in more than 40 countries globally to create spaces for people from diverse backgrounds

and experiences to come together, build trust, define areas of shared interests, and achieve transformational outcomes. Craig and Common Ground have been prioritizing issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) as a central element of its approach to building strong communities, organizations, and networks since its founding. Craig has called Washington, DC home for more than 30 years and is currently experiencing the joy of raising two silver lab puppies.



**Dr. Jaime M. Grant** is author of *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report on the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, is an equity expert, researcher and trainer who has been active in LGBTQ, women's and racial justice movements since the early 1990s. Dr. Grant's research

has been used nationally and globally to help define and advocate for gender-affirming and culturally appropriate

health care; gender recognition laws; housing; employment and educational opportunity for gender expansive and transgender youth and adults. Grant has served on the Mayor's Advisory Council for LGBTQ Affairs and on the board of Mary's House for Older LGBT Adults. DC's Office of Human Rights and LGBTQ Affairs have drawn upon her research to design community engagement strategies and improve outcomes for the city's gender expansive LGBTQ residents.



**Darlene Nipper** has more than 25 years of leadership and advocacy experience, and has served as CEO of the Rockwood Leadership Institute since 2018. She previously served as deputy executive director of the National LGBTQ Task Force, executive director of the BET Foundation, chief operating officer at NAMI and founder of its Multicultural and International Policy Center, and director of LGBT affairs in the Executive Office of the Mayor of D.C. Darlene, a native Washingtonian, is also an ordained interfaith minister, practices mindfulness meditation, deep presence, and living joy.