



## Brief Introduction to Dialogue

**Introduction:** Dialogue is a structured form of conversation that promotes understanding, fosters respect, and builds trust. When addressing a highly charged issue, it's easy to get mired in argument about who's right and who's wrong. Unlike a debate, where the goal is to win someone over to your position, the purpose of dialogue is to understand other people's perspectives on an issue. Through sharing personal experiences, dialogue helps us see that the "other" side is not a monolithic group, but instead incorporates many nuanced perspectives.

**The Challenge:** In a dialogue, it isn't appropriate to engage in a debate about the facts and different interpretations. Remember, you may NEVER agree. It's likely that you'll hear perspectives that contradict your point of view, and you won't be able to refute or challenge them. That can be very difficult, especially if the issue is core to your identity.

**The Opportunity:** However, after gaining more nuanced understanding through hearing personal stories, you may discover new options and possibilities:

1. It may be more difficult to hold an "I'm completely right and you're completely wrong" position.
2. You may be able to counter stereotypes based upon insights you've gleaned from the dialogue.
3. You may discover shared values that can lead you to joint action, in spite of your disagreements.

**Agreements:** When your chapter has decided to have a dialogue, participants agree to a set of communication agreements that encourage respectful listening and honest sharing. A complete list is available in the online Sisterhood library. Key agreements include:

1. Speak for yourself, not on behalf of a group.
2. Listen to gain new understanding, not to convince someone to agree with your position.
3. Ask questions to clarify intent.

This brief introduction to dialogue can help you decide when a dialogue is an appropriate tool for your chapter. We strongly encourage you to download Essential Partners' free guide, *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides*, found on their website: [whatisessential.org/fdad](http://whatisessential.org/fdad). It goes into significant detail about how to plan and run a dialogue and is an extremely useful and clear resource.

## Pre-Dialogue Planning:

1. **Choose your topic.** Here are two ways to choose your topic. At a prior meeting:
  - a. Brainstorm as a group (15-20 minutes). Hang a large sheet of paper on the wall and ask women to suggest topics. If there is an obvious choice, you're good to go! If not, ask sisters to share their reasons for choosing a particular topic, as well as express any concerns.
  - b. Ask each sister to write down her top two dialogue topics, then fold the paper, and put it in a bowl in the center of the room. Someone can read all the responses out loud and see if a consensus emerges. This method ensures that every sister has input in the process, not just the more vocal sisters. If there is no obvious choice, spend some time as a group narrowing your focus.

In either case, make sure you have consensus on the topic. If a sister isn't comfortable, we respectfully ask that you honor her wishes and hold your dialogue on a topic where everyone can agree. Then, sometime after your meeting, listen to her concerns. Assuming you can address them, conduct the dialogue at a future meeting.

2. **Choose two facilitators**, preferably one Jewish and one Muslim, to guide the process. Prior to the dialogue, the facilitators will:
  - a. **Develop the questions.** Remember that in a dialogue, it's critical to carefully sequence your questions. Start with a question that asks each sister to share something about her **life experience** that will help the group understand her relationship to and perspective on the issue. Then move to a question that explores **values, hopes, or fears**. Conclude with a question that explores any **areas of doubt or uncertainty**. Depending upon the size of your chapter, you may only respond to one question per meeting. Refer to the video and written resources [Crafting Great Questions](#) in the online library for more detail.
  - b. **Communicate with chapter members** about the time, place, and topic. Your goal is 100% participation of chapter members. Remember that it's important to reach out to sisters via their preferred method of communication, which might include email, Facebook, WhatsApp, text, etc. Personal outreach sends the message that each woman's presence matters!

**Materials Needed:** Index cards and pens for each sister.

## Facilitator Role at the Dialogue:

1. **Introduce the topic, goal, and dialogue structure.** It's important to clearly articulate the purpose of dialogue under the introduction on page one. Collectively read aloud your group agreements and ask if anyone has any questions or concerns. You'll find a [list of suggested agreements](#) in the online library, as well as [an exercise if you want to create your own list](#). As the dialogue progresses, it's your role to remind participants of their commitment to the principles, especially if you sense one or more is not being followed.

2. **Describe the structure.** If your group is ten women or less, continue the dialogue in one group. If you have more than ten women, you may choose to split into two or more smaller groups. If you split into two groups, you may choose to have one facilitator in each group. If you break into more than two groups, the facilitators should circulate between groups to answer any questions and support the women to stay on track.
3. **Pose a question.** Whether you are in one, or several groups, the facilitators pose the first question and then ask the group(s) to spend two-three minutes in silence. **Don't skip this step!** A brief period of silence gives everyone time to reflect upon their responses to the question and jot down a few thoughts on their index card. Then, during the go-around, everyone can give her full attention to the speaker. Depending upon the size of your group(s) and the time available, you may pose a second (and third) dialogue question.
4. **Keep track of time.** The facilitator can set a phone alarm to keep track of time, or each speaker can hold the phone in turn, and pass it along to the next speaker when the alarm rings. Either way, it's the facilitator's role to let each sister know that she has three minutes (or whatever amount of time you choose) to respond to the question. Remember the phrase: "autocratic allocation of time for democratic allocation of voice." While it may feel unnatural to speak for a set time, this structure ensures that every sister has a chance to speak. When the agreed upon time is over, the facilitator asks the speaker to wrap up her thought and cede her turn. It can be helpful for the speaker to hold a "talking stick" or other object, a reminder that when you're not holding the stick, it's your turn to listen.
5. **Manage process.** During the personal sharing, your role is to gently remind speakers to stay focused on their personal relationship to the topic and avoid talking about the "facts" or "solutions to the problem." If one or more sisters tries to debate the facts, it's your job to respectfully remind the group to abide by the parameters of dialogue.
6. **Open for Q&A.** After everyone has had a chance to answer the question, or pass if she chooses, you can relax the format and open the floor for people to ask each other questions that may clarify what you heard. Remember the purpose of these questions are to better understand a sister's experiences, not to subtly or overtly convince her that her perspective is "wrong" or "she doesn't understand your experience."
7. **Model curiosity and openness.** Even though as facilitators, you won't take part in the personal sharing, you can help create a respectful and comfortable environment by asking questions out of genuine curiosity and encouraging sharing of personal experiences, not stating positions.
8. **Conclude.** Thank everyone for participating. You can ask people to share a word or two about her experience. If time is limited, you might ask everyone to write down one thing they learned during the dialogue and place it in a bowl in the center of the room. Everyone can pick one and read it aloud.

Remember, the purpose of a dialogue is to gain new understanding that can lead you to innovative solutions. It asks you to express your certainty as well as your uncertainty through answering three types of questions:

1. What are the **personal life experiences** that shape your beliefs? What can you learn about others to help you understand their perspective?
2. What is at the **heart of the matter** for you? What are your hopes and fears for the future? Can you discover common hopes or fears among your sisters, regardless of your different perspectives?
3. Do you have any **areas of uncertainty**? As you consider the issue, do one or more of your values conflict? Do you have any concerns or gray areas that you are willing to share? How might hearing uncertainly help you understand a sister with a very different perspective?

For more detailed information on running a dialogue, download the free guide, Fostering Dialogue Across Divides, found on Essential Partner's website at [whatisessential.org/fdad](http://whatisessential.org/fdad).