United Way Campaign for the Common Good

Community Conversation Workbook

The Power and Potential of Community Conversations

As part of the Campaign for the Common Good, local United Ways across the country will be holding Community Conversations. While these conversations will take place across the country they remain uniquely local - focused on helping United Way gain a stronger sense of people's aspirations for the community, a window into how they talk about their concerns and lives and create a way to develop or deepen partnerships with non-traditional groups. With this knowledge United Way's can be more effective, more relevant, better mobilize people around education and ultimately have greater impact in their communities.

In Community Conversations you'll be learning a lot about people's aspirations for your community. These are also a powerful tool for engaging people beyond the "usual suspects," and building your United Way's reach within the community.

The conversations will help you locally, and because of the breadth of United Ways participating, your local results will inform a national report that United Way Worldwide is compiling. You'll be able to learn locally and benefit from a national effort to mobilize people around creating change on education. That report will hopefully shape United Way's national policy approach moving forward. At a time when so much public and political discourse is acrimonious and divisive these conversations are a place where people are talking about their aspirations.
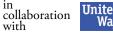
Getting started

This workbook contains everything you need to hold a successful Community Conversation. Drawing upon The Harwood Institute's more than 20 years of work with communities across the country, this workbook lays out:

- How to recruit participants (pages 4 and 5)
- How to identify a conversation leader (page 6)
- Where to hold Community Conversations (page 7)
- How to set up the room (page 8)
- Tips for Leading Conversations (pages 9 and 10)
- What to ask - Community Conversation Guide (pages 12, 13, 14)
- Figuring out what you heard- Note Taking Tool (pages 15 and 16)
- How to identify themes (page 17)
- How to share what you've learned (page 18)

On the next page you'll find a work sheet that helps guide you through the steps so you can be sure you're ready for your first conversation. If you follow the instructions and questions in these pages you'll be able to conduct a successful Community Conversation that yields new insights into the community, repositions your United Way and builds up your capacity to engage the community in a new way.

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Community Conversation Work Sheet

After you've looked through the other materials use this worksheet to pull the key details behind hosting conversations into a single place.

The conversation will be with:

We are reaching beyond "the usual suspects" ☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**

The conversation will be held:

Time

Place

We are leveraging partners by:

The conversation leader is: _____

The note taker is: _____

We are prepared to gather contact and demographic info from participants ☐

These people need to be in the meeting where we discuss what we learned and the implications for our work:

How to Recruit Participants

There are four steps to recruiting participants:

Step One - Decide whom to recruit
Step Two - Develop a list of people/partners who can help you reach out
Step Three - Invite people personally
Step Four - Tell people the value of these community conversations

Step One: Decide whom to recruit

Remember that the purpose of these conversations is to reach out to a diverse group of people.

Think about these questions as you decide how to focus your recruiting efforts:

- Who do we need to include to hear different perspectives? (Think expansively about those with various perspectives from high school drop outs, to grandparents to current or retired teachers to folks from different faith traditions or different parts of town. (See page 21 for other potential stakeholders)
- Do we have a shared sense of what a cross–section of our community looks like?
- What initial assumptions that we had at the start of this do we need to revisit?
- As you think about who to recruit, remember you want to hold conversations in different locations around the community.
- Remember both parents AND children have contributions to make.

Step Two: Develop a list of people/partners who can help you reach out

Think about your community as a web of people and organizations connected to each other through other people and organizations. To get a broad cross–section of the community, it is important to reach out to all parts of this web — not just the people and organizations that you already know.

Think about these questions as you make a list of people and partners to help you reach out:

- Who knows the part of the community we want to go to?
- Where do people from different parts of the community usually get together?
- Who already brings people together?
- What are some of the ways that people get information on a regular basis? (Think about church bulletins, local publications, local coffee shop)
- Which civic leaders — such as pastors or neighborhood association presidents could help us get the word out to different groups?
- Who would give us more credibility?
- If we do not know the answers to some of these questions, who can help us?

Consider some of the following types of people:

- Religious leaders.
- Members of community or neighborhood groups like Rotary, NAACP or volunteer centers.
- Barber shop or beauty parlor owners.
- Community or recreation center leaders and volunteers.

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How to Recruit Participants

Step Three: Invite people personally

- Spend time in places where members of the community frequently gather such as a local diner or sporting event. Make and bring flyers with information about the conversations.
- Ask partners to make personal invitations to potential conversation participants.
- Ask partners to publish information about the conversations on their site or eletter.
- Get in touch with individuals, organizations, or publications on your contacts list.
- Personally invite your contacts to attend a conversation.

Step Four: Tell people the value of these community conversations

Because this is a different type of conversation and you are trying to reach out to people who might not typically be involved in the community, it is important to explain why you want them to attend.

Potential Participants Want to Know:
- *What this meeting is about.* Emphasize this is an effort to engage the community about their aspirations and concerns. Let them know that the conversation is a chance to help the community move forward by understanding how it thinks about these topics.
- *What it's not.* It is not: sponsored by a political party; a business development effort; a complaint session; or a session to sell a particular solution or approach.
- *The importance of their role.* Let people know that the purpose of these conversations is to hear from them. It is the most important step in shaping the future of the community.
- *Logistics.* Not only where and when, but specific instructions on how to get to the location, the name and phone number of at least one contact person, and, if applicable, information on how to get to specific room for the conversation.

Identifying Conversation Leaders

Leading a Community Conversation doesn't require a professional moderator or facilitator. But that doesn't mean you want just anyone leading the conversation. This sheet outlines some of the traits you want to find in a Conversation Leader, as well as suggestions for how to find such a person.

What's the main responsibility of a Conversation Leader?
The main responsibility of a Conversation Leader is to guide discussion. They must be focused on helping create a discussion that enables the United Way to learn about the community and people's aspirations.

NOTE: In addition to a Conversation Leader each conversation needs a note taker. This person should use the note taking tool on pages 15 and 16 to track the conversation.

What type of person are you looking for?
Conversation Leaders need to be able to engage participants in a different kind of conversation. You need someone who can do more than just run a meeting. Look for people who share your commitment to engaging citizens in new ways of working together and talking about tough public issues. Remember, this may often be someone beyond the traditional United Way volunteer or partner.

An effective Conversation Leader:
- Remains neutral about the topic under discussion — and is not seen as having his or her own agenda or siding with one group
- Explores ideas with people — displays a genuine sense of curiosity.
- Listens to people and builds trust.
- Pushes people to consider different perspectives — helping folks to understand why others think in different ways.
- Helps people to reconcile conflicting remarks they or the group make in a non-confrontational manner.
- Has experience leading or facilitating group discussions.
- Stays focused on the goals for the conversation - remember this is about *learning* and helping United Way to mobilize for action on education.
- Prepares for each conversation, reading the guide, going over notes from previous conversations.

NOTE: Conversation Leaders do not need to be expert on education issues. They are there to guide, not participate in, the conversations. In fact for these conversations it's best to avoid having educators lead.

Where to find good Conversation Leaders:
- Partners, trusted community/neighborhood groups, nonprofits, or religious organizations.
- Civic groups like Rotary Club, Urban League, League of Women Voters.
- Colleges, community colleges, and technical schools. Avoid Conversation Leaders affiliated with the local school district as this could skew the conversation.
- Your own staff.
- Local businesses.

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Where to Hold Community Conversations

Site location can have a big impact on the success of your community conversation. The setting can affect who attends each community conversation, the quality of the conversation, and the group's ability to get its work done. It is likely that the most desirable sites are the hardest to reserve. Find a site and reserve the dates as soon as possible.
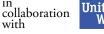
When looking for a place to hold discussions consider:
- A place folks are familiar with and use frequently.
- A place that is considered to be part of the community – that is usually not a government or "official" place, nor is it a school.
- A place that has a second or third room available if you need to divide up a large group.
- A place available in the evenings and/or on weekends.
- A place that offers a comfortable environment.
- A place where the Conversation Leader and participants can get work done –not too noisy or full of distractions.
- A place that is easily accessible to all participants: plenty of parking, centrally located, safe, near public transportation, accessible to those with disabilities.
- A place that is affordable given project resources.

Good and Less Desirable Places to Look for Sites

Here are some examples of both good and less desirable places for the community conversations. This is not an exhaustive list — think about other potential good sites for the community conversations in your area.

Good	Less Desirable
Public libraries	City hall
Community centers	Government buildings
Places of worship	Schools
Community organizations (YMCA, etc)	Private clubs
Community colleges	Office buildings (especially after hours)
	Fancy hotels

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How to Set Up the Room

For each community conversation, someone needs to be responsible for coordinating logistics, setting up the room, and getting participants settled. You might want to consider recruiting some volunteers to help you out.

Logistics

- Arrive one hour early. Leave time to set up the room before people arrive. The room is never what you expect; you'll probably need to rearrange it.

- Put up signs to direct people from the main entrance to the meeting room.

- Have a sign–in sheet for participants (page 19.) Have people fill this out before the conversation. Use this to build your network of people in the community who are interested in staying involved. *Remember collecting this data and contact information is critical.*

- The room should be well–lit but not too bright. Make sure the temperature in the room is comfortable.

- Make sure the room has tables. Tables tell people "work" is going to be done; that this is not just going to be another "nice" discussion. It also makes it easier to take notes.

- Provide blank name tents and name tags for people to write in their names. Encourage folks to call each other by their first names. Fill one out for yourself.

- Put refreshments in a location easily accessed without interrupting the discussion.

- Find the rest rooms so you can tell people where they are before the discussion begins.

Supplies to Bring with You to the Site

- Extra pens/pencils
- Name tags and table tents
- Sign–in sheets
- Paper to make signs
- Charts and easels (if needed)
- Refreshments
- Copies of the Ground Rules (page 11)
- Copies of the Note Taking Tool (page 15 and 16)
- Copies of the post-conversation survey. (Find this on page 20 of this workbook)

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Tips for Leading Conversations

To get the most out of the conversation you want to go beyond people's surface reactions. This means creating the opportunity for people to discover and learn from one another and to explore their own ideas. These tips are essential for Conversation Leaders to know, they're also really useful to share with your staff so that they're able to go deeper when working with people in the community. (They're great for staff to use in the office as well!)

Here are several rules of thumb to use when leading authentic engagement conversations:

Take nothing at face value.
Notice what words and phrases people use. Probe by asking, "What do you mean?" and "What are you getting at?"

Listen for where people get stuck.
Watch for when people want more facts or if a perception blocks them from talking more about a concern.

Ask people to square their contradictions.
Illuminate what folks are struggling with. Ask, "I know this can be a really tough issue, but how do the two things you said fit together?"

Keep juxtaposing views and concerns.
Pointing out contrasts will help people articulate what they really believe and give you a deeper understanding of what they think.

Piece together what people are saying.
Folks don't usually make one all–inclusive statement about what they think or how they feel. Say, "This is what I'm hearing. Do I have it right?"

Keep in mind the "unspoken" rules.
Different conversations and spaces have their own sets of "rules." Check out the level of trust people have and what that means for how you should interact.

Watch out for your own preconceived views.
Everyone has biases that can serve as filters when asking questions and interpreting what you hear. Be alert to them.

Tips for Leading Conversations

Troubleshooting Guide

IF	THEN
A few people dominate the conversation	Engage each person from the beginning. Make sure everyone says something early on. Ask, "Are there any new voices on this issue?" or "Does anyone else want to jump in here?" Be direct and say, "We seem to be hearing from the same people. Let's give others a chance to talk." Call on people by name to answer.
The group gets off on a tangent or a person rambles on and on	Ask, "How does what you're talking about relate to our challenge?" or "So what does that lead you to think about (the question at hand)?" Ask the person to restate or sum up what they said in a few words. If you can't get a person to focus, interrupt him/her when they take a breath and move to another person or question. Then bring him/her back into the conversation later.
Someone seems to have a personal grudge about an issue and keeps talking about it	Remind the person where the group is trying to focus. Ask him/her to respond to the question at hand. Acknowledge the person and move on. Say, "I can understand where you are coming from, but we need to move on." If the person continues to be disruptive, interrupt them. Say, "We heard you, but we're just not talking about that right now."
People argue	Don't let it bother you too much — it's okay as long as it is not mean–spirited. Find out what's behind the argument — ask why people disagree, get to the bottom of it. Break the tension with a joke or something funny. Stop to review the ground rules. Take a break.
People never disagree or are "too polite"	Play devil's advocate. Bring up or introduce different or competing ideas and see how people respond. Tell the group you've noticed that they don't disagree much and ask if everyone is really in as much agreement as it seems.

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Community Conversation Ground Rules

To have a productive conversation people want to know what's expected of them — what are the norms for interaction. Print out or write on a flip chart these ground rules and walk through them with participants before the conversation. Ask people if there are any rules they'd like to add. Going over the ground rules up-front helps put people at ease and enables them to participate productively.

Have a "kitchen table" conversation
Everyone participates; no one dominates.

There are no "right answers"
Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs- you do not need to be an expert.

Keep an open mind
Listen carefully and try hard to understand the views of those who disagree with you.

Help keep the discussion on track
Stick to the questions: try not to ramble.

It is okay to disagree, but don't be disagreeable
Respond to others how you want to be responded to.

Have fun!

Community Conversation Guide - Education

Expectations: Share with participants expectations for the conversation:
1) We're here to listen and to learn.
2) We want to better understand people's aspirations for the community.
3) The sign in sheets are so that we can follow up with you later - and share with you what we've learned.
4) We can't promise any new initiatives or programs will emerge from this, but we'll get back with you and share what we learned and how we're going to use it to move forward.

Note Taking
We are going to have someone (point them out) taking notes during the conversation. The notes won't include anyone's name or be made public. They are to make sure we're able to learn from this conversation.

Ground Rules
Kick-off the conversation by reviewing the ground rules (page 11).

Ask people to introduce themselves – go around the table and ask people to tell everyone their first name, where they live and what they like to do in their free time.

1. What kind of a community do you want?

- Why is that important?
- How is that different from the way things are now?

2. Given what we just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?

(Let people talk about all their concerns even if education comes up. If education does not come up, after people talk about their concerns, pivot to question 3)

3. Given our aspirations for the community, what do we want education to be like in our community?

- Why is that important?
- What difference will that make?

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Community Conversation Guide - Education

4. How will what we just said about education help us to get the kind of community we want?

5. Overall, how do you think things are going when it comes to education in our community?

- What makes you say that?
- What's going well?

6. How do the issues (on education) we're talking about affect you personally?

- What personal experiences have you had?
- How about people around you – family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, others – what do you see them experiencing?
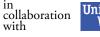- Are some people affected more than others? Who? In what ways? Why?

7. When you think about these issues, how do you feel about what's going on?

- Why do you feel this way?
- How do you think other people (in other parts of the community) feel about this?

8. What kinds of things are keeping us from having the education we want for kids?

- Why do you say that?
- How do you think things got to be this way?

Community Conversation Guide - Education

9. When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

- What do you think these things might accomplish?
- How about in terms of individuals: What are the kinds of things that individuals can do to make a difference?
- What do you make of what other people say should be done?
- What's important for us to keep in mind when we think about moving ahead?

10. Thinking back over the conversation who do you trust to take action on the issues you've been talking about?

- Why them and not others?

11. Now that we've talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?

- What do you feel you'd like to know more about that would help you make better sense of what's going on and what should be done?
- What kind of follow-up would you like out of this discussion?

Remember after the conversation to pass out the demographic survey.

Note Taking Tool - Figuring out what you heard

Use this note taking tool during conversations or immediately after to capture the key points voiced. Take the time to do this carefully. It's critical to understanding and getting the most out of the conversation. You can figure out the most important things you heard by asking yourself the following questions.

1. **What kind of community do people want? What are their aspirations?**

2. **In talking about their concerns, what do people really care about? What words do they use? What issues do they connect together?**

3. **What's going well and not so well in the community?**

4. **What do people want education to be like? What are their aspirations for education?**

5. **How does education help to get the kind of community people want?**

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Note Taking Tool - Figuring out what you heard

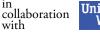**6.** What's going well, or not so well in regards to education?

7. How do people talk about education? What words do they use?

8. How did education touch these people personally? What gave people a sense of possibility that things can be better, or different?

9. What did people believe could be done to improve education? Who do people believe needs to act to improve education? Whom do they trust?

10. What questions do people still have? What follow up do people want?

Identifying Themes

After a couple of conversations (2-3) pull together a small group of those who led or listened to the conversations. You want to look for patterns, and listen for themes across the conversations. Come back together after every couple of conversations to check your thinking.

NOTE: Before you search for themes, make sure to answer the questions on pages 15-16. Having different people answer those questions will build a stronger conversation.

Identifying Themes

- Identify someone to lead this discussion based on the questions below.
- Use examples from conversations to provide concrete examples as you talk.
- Have the "Note Taking" sheets handy for this conversation.
- As you talk record your thoughts. Label your findings under: Themes, Tensions, Ambivalence, Language.

Questions

What, if any, common themes do you see across the conversations?
- How are people's comments connected or related?
- Around which areas does agreement seem strongest? Why?

What, if any, tensions are emerging?
- Why are these tensions important?
- How do people in the conversations resolve them, if at all?

Where do people seem ambivalent, or torn?
- Why are they torn? What are they torn between?

How do people talk?
- What language do people use?
- What emotions do they convey?
- What quotes or anecdotes capture the flavor of what people are saying?

How to Share What You've Learned

After holding your Community Conversation it's important to capture and share what you've learned. The Note Taking Tool on pages 15 and 16 is a great way to capture what you've learned. After you and others who attended the conversation have answered those questions it is critical that you share with others in your organization and beyond. Here are some strategies for sharing what you've learned.

Sharing what You've Learned with Others in United Way

- Make sure that the meeting where you share what you've learned includes decision makers.
- Include people in the meeting beyond just your department — you want to spread what you're learning across the organization.
- Focus on what you learned – not the process.
- Give yourself enough time to talk through the implications. Don't make this the very last item on the agenda or it'll get pushed into very little time, or treated as an afterthought.
- Share the 2-3 most important things you learned. You can't have 30 findings — just a couple.
- Ask: What are the implications of what we learned for our work?

Sharing what You've Learned with Participants

These conversations are a great opportunity to build relationships. You'll want to collect names and contact information (use the sheet provided on page 19 as a starting point). After the conversation you'll want to follow up with people. Share what you learned and how you're going to use what you learned. This can be as simple as telling people that the conversation prompted you to think of new questions about your work, or as weighty as sharing that through these conversations you're considering a new initiative. Whatever follow up you choose be clear with them about expectations and thank them for their time and for sharing.

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Sign-in Sheet

Name	Address	Phone	Email

Post Conversation Survey - Thank you for participating!

We are committed to involving the diversity of our community in our conversations. We'd also like to learn what you think about this experience. Please help us see how we are doing by filling out this brief survey. This survey is completely confidential and you will NOT be asked for your name. If you do not wish to answer the questions about yourself, please feel free to skip that section and go right to the questions about the community conversation.

About yourself

What zip code do you live in? _____

Please identify your age.
____16-34   ____35-54   ____55-74   ____ 75+

How do you describe your race or ethnic group? (If multi-racial, please check all that apply)
___Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander;
___Black, African American or of African descent;
___American Indian, Aleut, Native American or Alaskan Native;
___White, Caucasian, or of European descent;
___Other

Do you consider yourself Latino or Hispanic?   ___Yes   ___No

How do you identify yourself? ____Female   ____Male

What is your primary language?
___English
___Spanish
___Other (please write in) _____

What is your family income?
___$0-20,000
___$20,001-40,000
___$40,001-60,000
___$60,001-80,000
___$80,001-100,000
___$100,001+

About the Community Conversation

How would you rate the quality of the discussion tonight?

___Excellent   ___Good   ___Fair   ___Poor

As a result of this experience, how likely are you to get involved in other conversations and activities about important community issues?

___Less likely   ___Equally likely   ___More likely

Please indicate your relationship, if any, to United Way: ___None ____Volunteer ____ Other

Please use the space on the back to write any additional comments about the discussion. Thank you.

Educational Stakeholders

As you think about whom to engage within your community around education it is essential to keep thinking beyond the usual suspects. Each of these groups, or stakeholders can make for great participants in a community conversation and can help you recruit people to be in your conversation.

- Children's museums, theatre and arts organizations
- Civic groups (Rotary, Jaycees, Kiwanis clubs, as well as Junior Leagues, Urban Leagues, etc.)
- Colleges, community colleges, universities and training centers
- Community centers and settlement houses
- Cooperative extension services
- Early childhood education teachers in early learning settings (pre-school, pre-K, child care centers etc.)
- Ecumenical partnerships
- Educator associations (state/local chapters of NEA, AFT, principals and superintendent groups etc.)
- Educators, including teachers, local & state school superintendent, current and former members of local & state school boards
- Faith and cultural communities
- Families
- Family support centers, programs and coalitions
- Foster care organizations
- Funders
- Government (state, county and municipal)
- Grandparents
- Hospitals, clinics and health outreach programs
- Housing authorities
- Housing developers
- Libraries
- Local businesses (including Chambers of Commerce and major employers)
- Media outlets (print, broadcast and Web-based)
- Mentoring groups (Big Brothers, Big Sisters, etc.)
- Museums
- Parks and recreation facilities
- Pediatricians
- Policy makers
- Professional and business associations (Assn. of Bankers, etc.) representing major industry sectors in your community
- PTAs, PTOs and Parent Councils
- Public health departments
- Retailers
- School foundations
- Schools (principals, faculty, staff, student leaders)
- Senior citizen centers or organizations (AARP, retired teachers, state employees, corporate retirees)
- Shopping centers
- Transportation authorities and programs
- Volunteer centers
- Youth groups (Girl & Boy Scouts, YMCAs, YWCAs, Campfire, Boys and Girls Clubs, school groups)

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