

Guided Conversations

What They Are and Why They're Useful

A guided conversation is used at the conclusion of an event or experience to review the information taken in, explore our responses to it, interpret its significance, and identify how we will apply it to our own situation. The conversation takes a group on a journey from a big picture perspective to an in-depth focus – from situation to resolve or action. It creates a non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere in which diverse perspectives can be shared, honored and internalized.

When to use guided conversations

- To gather multiple ideas, get broader participation, ownership and action in meetings and training or following presentations or events
- When evaluating a project or personnel
- To assist with problem-solving
- Reflecting on a day, week, or year
- In one's personal life (one-on-one situations, family discussions, volunteer activities)

Benefits and results

- Enhances communication
- Builds team camaraderie
- Increases participation
- Affirms progress
- Enhances participants' self-confidence
- Enables constructive problem-solving
- Facilitates clear ideas and conclusions
- Generates creative thinking

The Four Level Conversation Process

I. Observe Get people to talk	FACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What did you see (objects, scenes)? ▪ What did you hear (words, phrases, sounds)? ▪ What caught your attention? ▪ What did you notice?
Questions related to the five senses - seeing, hearing, smelling, touching/feeling, and tasting – in order to share <i>facts</i> about the subject of the conversation.		
II. Reflect Get people to share	IMPRESSIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What were you reminded of? ▪ What was memorable? ▪ Where were high points? Low points? ▪ Where were you pleased? Sad? Frustrated? ▪ What was it like for you to...? ▪ Where did you experience confusion? Clarity?
Questions that surface interior responses (feelings, emotions) and associations (memories) people have about the subject.		
III. Interpret Discern broader meaning/significance	MEANING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What difference would this make? ▪ What could be done to...? ▪ Where are there new opportunities? ▪ Why does this matter? ▪ Where are patterns emerging?
Questions that create meaning, determine value, state significance and purpose, identify key learnings, create insights and new understandings, and reveal new relationships.		
IV. Decide Determine action	ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do you take with you as a result of this conversation? ▪ How will you use what you learned? ▪ Where do we go from here? ▪ What are the next steps?
Questions that enable resolution, determine action needed, decide next steps, draw conclusions, state intentions, suggest applications, or bring completion.		

Tips for Leading Effective Conversations

Setting the context

- Establish the time frame.
- Encourage brevity if time is limited.

Gaining full participation

With the first question(s), ask everyone in the group to respond.

- If the group size is 15 or less, go around the group one at a time to get everyone to respond.
- With a group larger than 15, consider giving a copy of the questions to each table to have the conversation and then have a few responses as a total group.

Dealing with challenging participants

- Overly talkative or domineering participants
Ask questions such as:
 - “Let’s hear from someone who has not spoken yet?”
 - “Let’s hear from this side of the room.”
 - “What additional perspectives do others in the group have?”
- Distracting side conversations:
Remind group that we want to have one conversation.
- Tangents:
Sometimes the group begins to have conversations unrelated to the focus of the conversation. Restating the question, reviewing the responses that have been made, or suggesting that the group can discuss the tangent at a later time can refocus them.
- Abstract answers:
“Would you give us an example of what you are describing?”
- Long responses:
Summarize what you heard. Then encourage brevity in light of the time frame for remaining responses.
- Overly silent or non-participative participants:
By having everyone respond on the first question(s), they generally feel freer to respond later. You may want to call on quiet ones asking, “We have not heard much from you yet on this topic. Would you like to share your thinking at this point?”
- Group silence:
Sometimes this is an indication that the question is unclear and needs to be rephrased. Try giving an example answer of your own to clarify the question.

Key Steps for Preparing a Conversation

- **Identify the focus of the conversation**
- **Write conversation objectives**
 - Rational objective: What does the group need to know, understand, remember or decide?
 - Experiential objective: What does the group need to experience with each other (e.g., excitement, authentic struggle, seriousness, an “aha” from new perspectives, innovative decisions, sense of connection to one another)?
- **Brainstorm questions that will achieve both types of objectives**
- **Craft the questions**
 - Open-ended: Because questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” tend to end discussions rather than open them up.
 - Big picture: Encourage responses that offer different perspectives on the topic: positives and negatives.
 - Clear and practical: Practice answering the questions yourself to check for ease in understanding and responding to them, helping to eliminate repetitive or vague questions. Reword them as needed.
 - Sequence: Organize the questions by the four levels, making sure not to leave out any level.
- **Prepare opening and closing comments carefully**
 - Opening: State the purpose and importance of the conversation. Also tell the group how long you are planning to discuss the topic to have them help support the timeline.
 - Closing: Remind group about the purpose of the conversation and how it has been met by the comments made, reviewing main points.
- **Reflect on the conversation, the group, yourself**
 - Conversation: Rehearse the conversation in your head
 - Group: What do you anticipate will be responses of the group on the topic? What questions will you use to get everyone to participate initially? Where do you anticipate breakthroughs or challenges to occur?
 - Self: Remind yourself that being a facilitator of the conversation, you intend to:
 - Be non-judgmental
 - Listen closely to each response
 - Affirm each person

Remember: There are no “right” or “wrong” answers in a guided conversation

Title:	
Rational Objective:	Experiential Objective:
OPENING	
OBSERVE	
REFLECT	
INTERPRET	
DECIDE	
CLOSING	

Learn More about Guided Conversations

The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace

Available on ICA's website: https://ica.site-ym.com/store/view_product.asp?ID=666654

Editor: R. Brian Stanfield

This is a "how-to" book put together by ICA Canada's staff and Associates. The uses of the conversation method in the workplace have been legion. The method has been effectively used for group consensus-making in:

- Problem solving
- Troubleshooting
- Coaching
- Research
- Interpretation of data

Part I is about theory and practice. It introduces the method and:

- Examines the workplace context
- Gives information on theory
- Explains the structure
- How to prepare a conversation
- How to lead a conversation
- Dealing with the common mistakes.

Part II contains 100 Samples for use in Conversations in situations such as:

- Reviewing and evaluating
- Preparation and planning
- Coaching, mentoring
- Data and media interpretation
- Decision making
- Managing and supervising
- Personal reflection Group celebrations

This book is intended to expand images of what can be accomplished through the conversation method. This is done by demonstrating how many workplace tasks can be accomplished through the medium of a guided conversation. This is a resource meant for the process and consensus oriented person who is working with organizations and businesses.