



# **Webinar: *Connected & Directed: A Discussion for Managing Conflict in the Participatory Process - July 2023***

Question & Answers

## ***Featured Speakers:***

**Rosanne Lubeck**, Connect the Dots

**Pati Codina**, Impact Services

**Amir Richardson**, Community Conversations Convener

**Cindy Light**, City of Orlando

**Q1. How do we get public agencies to be okay with discomfort or hard questions during meetings? Also, what value do you find in allowing individual attendees to speak to everyone in attendance at a meeting (can get aggressive or accusing) versus breaking out into smaller groups to avoid grand-standing?**

**A1.** Try to have participants understand that misunderstandings are okay because they add to the discussion. Bring the community along the way of the project in order to enable a level of partnership.

On the topic of small groups, open houses can be good for that. Additionally, utilizing tactics like sharing back in smaller tables to confirm information has been received and recorded can help eliminate the grand-standing opportunity you may get with public meetings that are presentation style.

**Q2. Does anyone have a favorite brand, store, or list/checklist for affordable community meeting facilitation supplies (e.g. butcher paper easels, clear jars for public comments, pens that don't run/smear, etc)?**

**A2.** Blick Art Materials and Staples generally have good materials.

**Q3. How do you break down barriers that are deep rooted?**

**A3.** Ground rules first and foremost. Reinforcing team members' continued commitment to



working towards solutions.

Consider providing language translation services and locally-based facilitators to help guide conversations and break down barriers. Try to establish key relationships with local leaders, and having them in the room also builds trust for the community.

**Q4. How do you respond to a racist/biased comment in a way that takes a clear stance in support of those who may be personally hurt by the comment, but doesn't create more conflict and keeps the meeting moving?**

**A4.** In those situations, it's important to reinforce the ground rules that were set for the gathering. Sometimes a response to the comment is not the best option, but rather a redirection to the purpose of the meeting. If the comment seems far too inflammatory, it might be best to separate that person from the group to not disrupt the main meeting goal, and then proceed with tactics such as CLARA or SELF to redirect the conversation with the individual.

**Q5. Does the SELF approach work as well in larger-format community meetings, where maybe some people are brand new to the project and some have been paying attention for a long time?**

**A5.** SELF works best in groups, Pati mentioned she has had successful sessions with groups from 4 people to about 20-25. If there is a larger group, it is recommended to split the room. Even if people have not been paying attention, it is a great learning opportunity, not only about the issue but to also gain a deeper understanding of other people's thoughts and feelings about it.

**Q6. How do you create an expectation among attendees that conflict and intense emotions can be productive and not to be shied away from?**

**A6.** Discomfort is temporary and finite. Remind people that we can get through it, and then come back and process what, how, and why it happened. A better outcome can be achieved through tough discussions. Enter with an open mind and empathy.

**Q7. Have you ever encountered groups that return to different meetings solely to hash up old fights or continually target and attack teams? Any tips on how to de-escalate or not continually need security hired to prepare for this type of group?**

**A7.** It is difficult to answer without knowing the specifics. Rosanne shared that in the past, she had people sign the meeting guidelines when they walk into a meeting. If the meeting is an open house, there will be less opportunity for attention that it sounds like this group is seeking. Being clear on the meeting goals upfront gives you the opportunity to keep things on-topic later.

The parking lot/loading zone tool is a good way to redirect if what they are trying to bring up is not relevant to what is happening in the specific meeting goals. Never try to change anyone's mind in that situation, but rather, redirect the conversation and stay solutions-focused. Invite them to solve the problem with you. Here are some examples:



- “We hear you want these vacant houses boarded up - please give my colleague at the sign-up table all the details to report to L&I. In the meantime, what kinds of programs would you like to see in the park this summer?”
- “We have added concern X to our list for your council person. In the meantime, how do you think this new development will affect traffic on your street?”
- “We’ve noted your opposition to this development. Are there any uses for this vacant lot that you think might be good for your community?”

Another suggestion is using a local facilitator who would bring a different tone to the meeting. For groups that are continually disruptive, it might be helpful to create a separate meeting entirely with them to understand their concerns so they do not use the public meetings to draw attention/energy from the facilitators.

**Q8. How do you de-center the voices in the room (often older, wealthier, white people) who are used to being heard so that you can make room for systematically marginalized voices? Similarly, how do you get/encourage persons in groups who don't normally participate to engage in the public conversations, so we can take their POV into account?**

**A8.** It’s important to consider the format of the meeting and recognize that a public meeting may not be the right tool for the type of gathering or input you need, and in those cases of reaching marginalized or often excluded voices, to consider a format that would work best for listening in smaller, more intimate ways.

Sometimes including passive ways to provide input like index cards for those who are less comfortable speaking up is a way to ensure voices are still captured, but just in different ways.

Additionally, meeting people where they are, in their neighborhoods, at their usual everyday activities like after-school activities/programs is a way to reach people that may not attend public meetings.

**Q9. Public participation events/townhalls sometimes become composed of the most interested (or available) but least vulnerable members of a community (like a townhall for a proposed apartment complex in a neighborhood being primarily attended by homeowners who primarily perceive risk to their home values. How can we 1) make sure a public participation process actually involves the most vulnerable or marginalized community members, or 2) go about bringing people with ingrained viewpoints to consider other viewpoints?**

**A9.** You have to consider that the person you are describing is probably not going to 1) have/take the time to attend something like this to begin with and 2) stand up and share their perspective in a room full of people they feel are against them.

Rosanne suggests layering the engagement tactics - including aspects like focus groups, pop-ups or attending existing community events, and intercept surveys - to better reach under-recognized populations. If you do these prior to the town hall, you can carry the results



and perspectives of those not present, or invite a community member who is comfortable and confident to co-present with you.

Additionally, identify if there are any barriers to engagement that you *can* control:

- Childcare: Are mothers not coming because they need childcare? Is this something you can arrange? Can dinner be provided?
- Schedule: Are working adults not able to attend because the meeting is too early in the day? Are we giving people enough time to commute after work? Is Saturday/Sunday a day of worship in this community and therefore not a good day to schedule a meeting?

To bring vulnerable/marginalized community members into the conversation, identify the groups/groups that are missing from the table and meet them where they are:

- Join a meeting/event/activity they are already participating
- Convene a meeting in a place that feels welcoming to them or they are familiar with (school, soup kitchen, shelter, church, etc)
- Tailor your language to make sure you are able to effectively communicate with the target audience (do you need a translator? Are you speaking at the right literacy level?)
- Make sure you are framing the conversation around what people care about and want to talk about

To help people consider other viewpoints, first check your own emotions - don't think "what's wrong with you?!" Pause and consider, "What happened to you that is making you react this way?" Understand that they may not be coming from a place of ignorance, defiance or stubbornness, but more likely it's from a place of fear or pain. Practice empathy and you will be able to handle the situation more calmly. When dealing with obstructionists, don't contradict them and instead:

- Validate their feelings and voice. - "I see you have strong opinions about this topic, you must love this neighborhood very much and want the best for you and your neighbors."
- Invite them to solve the problem with you. - "What would you do if this was your problem to solve?"
- Have an asset-based/solutions-focused approach. Highlight the successes: "Planting a garden worked really well in [x] part of the city, with similar problems - how could we try something like that here?"

**Q10. If there have been any moments of discomfort or misunderstanding or triggering (like Amir mentioned), what are ways to heal or solve the situation?**

**A10.** Create a space to listen and reflect. For example, Amir went out of his way to check on that person [mentioned in the Webinar]. If a conversation has been particularly heated or intense, staying after for casual conversations with smaller groups or 1:1 is helpful to decompress. This is another reason why Rosanne says her team serves food and has people eat together.



Some conversations may lead to very difficult moments, such as Pati experienced this when handling community-police relations, for example. In cases like these, healing may not be a reasonable expectation, but you can direct the room in some grounding exercises (like block breathing, chair yoga, visualization exercise). These can help lower the temperature in the room and hopefully leave people less triggered.

Grounding techniques help you to stay “in the present” when your mind is turning to unwanted memories or negative emotions. Examples (from pg 38 of the [Connected Community: Trauma Informed Community Engagement Curriculum](#)):

MENTAL GROUNDING: describing your environment using all your senses; play a categories game; say a safety or coping statement; say kind statements to yourself (as if you were talking to a friend in distress); remember the words to a song, quote, poem or prayer; visualize a calming/safe place

PHYSICAL GROUNDING: touch various objects around you; breathe deeply; carry a grounding object; stretch; eat or drink something; put your hand in cold water

***Anecdote from Pati*** - Sometimes meetings get completely off track. I learned in Kensington that sometimes the meeting you have, may not always be the one you planned... and sometimes that's not so terrible. We had planned a meeting to introduce an artist to the community and start engagement for a new creative placemaking project. Two nights before the scheduled meeting, a deadly shooting happened on the block. Only 7 people showed up to the meeting, mostly for the pizza. People had little interest in talking about art - they shared about their fear, frustration, sadness and stress. At the end of the meeting, the pastor, whose room we were using, invited everyone to join hands in prayer for the lives lost that week. The artist's wife was a great singer, and sang a beautiful hymn. We didn't talk about art that day, but people had an outlet for very strong feelings and left the room, if not healed, a little lighter than when they came in. They did show up to the next meeting though, and brought their neighbors - we had established a connection and started to develop trust.

**Q11. How should I react when a group of neighbors start being rude with the team in charge of an activity? Is it ok to stop the meeting, postpone it and activate another kind of approach afterwards? Or is it better to try to calm the situation?**

**A11.** Rosanne does not suggest rescheduling, because you are not likely to have the opportunity within most timelines and budgets. Preparation for the community event that uses the tactics listed, especially having a strong staffing plan in place and staff ready to redirect any disruptive members of the public, is key. You may consider including security staff if you expect the topic to be very divisive or sensitive.

Redirection may be the best tactic in the heat of the moment of conflict, and reinforcing the guidelines is key. Every situation is different - but if there is any threat of physical violence or the



hostile subjects vastly outnumber the rest, it might be best to pivot or wrap up. Engagement is not a one-time event, but a process. Keep the end goal in mind and prepare differently for the next meeting. See Q9&A9 for additional suggestions.

***Additional Resources:***

Impact Services's **Trauma Informed Community Engagement Toolkit** - <https://www.traumainformedcommunity.org/>

City of Orlando's bank of downloadable **Community Connections Training Guides** - <https://www.orlando.gov/Our-Government/Get-Involved/iLead-Neighborhood-Leader-Training>

