

Hi everyone,

I'm Katie Knobloch, the Associate Director of the Center for Public Deliberation. This lesson is going to focus on how we can center equity in our conversations. You'll be introduced to a few of our CPD student associates, who will talk about ways to ensure that we're respectful of our community members and some ideas to make them feel comfortable sharing their stories with us.

The first thing to remember is that diversity makes us stronger. We will make better decisions if we bring more people to the table, if we learn about the ways that different people experience these issues, and if we incorporate those differences into our decision making. Hearing from diverse residents helps us understand our community better. By bringing a wider variety of community members to the table, we have the chance to create policies and opportunities that better meet the needs of our whole community and which are more sustainable in the long run. So remember, our goal isn't to overcome our differences but to see that diversity as a strength.

One way to do that is to acknowledge that we all hold multiple identities, and we bring those identities into our conversations. This doesn't mean that things like our race or our gender determine what we think or how we talk, but they do influence us. They influence the ways that others see us; they influence the opportunities that we have, and they influence how we think about ourselves. So in that sense, they shape our understanding of the world and of our community. Our identities influence how we relate to, interpret, and interact with others, and we need to be respectful of an open to the ways that people express their many identities and use them to interpret the world.

At the same time, no one should have to feel like they represent an entire community of people just because they share the same skin color or gender identity, so try not to ask your participants to speak on behalf of others. Everyone you talk to is an individual with their own experiences and perspectives, so we shouldn't ask them to speak for or explain the opinions or actions of others. It's okay to talk about our identities and the ways that they impact us, but don't assume that someone's opinions represent the perspectives of others, even if they share some of the same identities.

Building on that knowledge, our job is to create a space in which people feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and their opinions. We want to create a space where they feel comfortable being honest with us and allowing us to learn about their lives, even if those lives look pretty different from our own. One way to do that by avoiding assumptions. It's important in these conversations that we don't assume we understand someone else's circumstances or their beliefs. Whether you can identify with the person and think you have a lot in common or not, make sure that you don't assume how they are going to feel or what they are going to say.

Another tip is to realize that everyone is an expert in their own lives. Just because someone isn't a technical expert on something doesn't mean that we can't learn from them. These issues are big and they impact us all in different ways. We're going to make better decisions if we learn from other people about their experiences, and there's no one who knows more about the challenges our communities are facing than those who have to face those challenges every day. So even if someone doesn't always have the right words, or they don't use perfect grammar, that doesn't mean that we can't learn a lot from them. In fact, these conversations are designed so that we can learn from our community, and our first step in doing that is making sure that we give our community members the space to tell us about their experiences and perspectives.

In line with this, we want to make sure that we are really listening to our conversation partners. One way that we can make sure we're listening is by just asking follow up questions. These help us process what others are saying and they make other people feel heard. Ask them why they feel the way they do. What experiences shaped their beliefs? We all like being listened to, and listening is one way that we can both learn from and respect other community members.

Avery: In addition to listening and asking follow up questions, it might be helpful to share your own stories. This doesn't mean that you should spend most of the time talking about yourself or feel the need to share stories that you aren't comfortable sharing, but sharing our stories can show people that they aren't alone. Think about your own experiences with these issues and the stories that you might feel comfortable sharing. When someone else shares their story, think about how your own experiences might relate to theirs. By sharing our stories we can both provide a moment of solidarity and make people more willing to share their own. On the flip side, let people share the stories and opinions they feel comfortable sharing, but don't try to force them to talk to you about something that makes them uncomfortable. If someone doesn't feel comfortable sharing some parts of their lives, that's okay. Tell them that you understand and move on to the next question. It's not your job to make them tell you everything. Your job is to listen to them, to make sure that we have a record of your conversation, and to pass that information along so that their voices can be included in the decisions our community will make.

One more thing to keep in mind is that different people have different needs, abilities, and constraints. You want to make sure that your participants can access and contribute to the conversation. This might mean helping someone out with a new technology or speaking slowly so that folks who are hard of hearing or who speak a different first language can understand you. You might need to schedule a conversation to accommodate naptime or fill out a survey for someone who has difficulty typing on the computer. Think about what might prevent your conversations partners from being able to fully participate in the discussion and then come up with some plans for addressing those barriers.

: Finally, consider the ways these issues impact your own life. How do your identities influence the ways that you engage in conversations or the ways that you think others see you? What makes you feel included in a conversation? What makes you feel excluded or prevents you from sharing your own story? You're never going to have a perfect conversation, and you might sometimes say the wrong thing, but focus on being kind to yourself and to others. Though these conversations might not always be easy, they do get easier the more you practice, and you're already doing good work by bringing more community members to the conversation.

From all of us at the CPD, thank you for all that you do for our community and for your work as a Community Guide. We are so grateful for your help in raising the voices of our community members, particularly those who don't always feel that they have a voice.