



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

BUILDING BRIDGES: CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR HEALING AND DIALOGUE

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At the Y, we know that in our diverse and increasingly complex world, we are stronger when all individuals, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to be included, feel safe and access the support to reach their full potential. Recent social and political events across the nation have sparked passionate discourse around a variety of topics related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration and religion. There is no easy answer to the challenges and growing polarization around social issues affecting our nation. However, we have the opportunity – and obligation – in each of the 10,000 communities we serve, to be a catalyst for advancing social equity, build bridges between diverse communities and foster community cohesion for the greater good. This resource is designed to give Ys ideas on how to create safe spaces for reflection and discussion to strengthen community cohesion.

OVERVIEW: COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSIONS

Challenging community conversations are not easy to begin since they reflect the depth of who we are as individuals and may bring up feelings and emotions from our own complex experiences. The lens through which we see, interact with and engage in the world around us is shaped by who we are, where we were raised, the struggles we have faced, our various dimensions of diversity, and is impacted by societal context.

An important step is the recognition that communities and individuals often do not agree. There are diverse perspectives and responses to every challenging question being asked in communities across the United States and around the world. In facilitating dialogue, we recommend a pluralistic approach that acknowledges and affirms multiple viewpoints and experiences. Opposing ideals or perspectives can simultaneously be 'right', and at the same time conflict with one another. This is foundational to creating safe spaces for learning and dialogue, and working to advance social equity. In addition, as facilitators we must also acknowledge our own beliefs, assumptions, privilege, and often unconscious biases.

The following principles are recommended to help guide your approach in fostering dialogue and creating safe spaces for the exchange of ideas, beliefs and perspectives through the Y:

- Be aware of emerging social trends and/or issues being discussed within the community
- Know your community and the complexity of perspectives on challenging topics
- Be aware of how the Y is viewed, regarded or perceived in relation to the topic

- Embrace and nurture each individual for who they are
- Acknowledge structural inequities both organizationally and societally
- Recognize and value all dimensions of diversity, individual journeys and perspectives
- Acknowledge diverse levels of comfort and trust with institutions of authority
- Meet individuals, organizations and communities where they are
- Lead with empathy in all interactions and activities
- Work towards the greatest possible inclusion – for all

APPROACHES PRACTICED BY LOCAL Ys

Many Ys have experience in effectively leading community conversations and below is a selection of examples.

Have a Clear Organizational Commitment

These conversations are most impactful when grounded in a clear organizational and strategic commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity with an understanding of the changing make-up of our communities. It helps when we can point to our strategic plan or mission statement and articulate how convening these types of conversations is at the very core of who we are as an organization.

The **YMCA of Greater Seattle** has developed and permeated the organization with an ‘equity lens’. With the leadership of Jackie Martinez-Vasquez, Executive Director for Community and Global Engagement, the organization has spent over five years linking key staff and volunteers to internal and external trainings aimed at helping people recognize the power and privilege individuals may receive based on certain dimensions of diversity, specifically race, ethnicity, gender/gender identity and sexual orientation. This has facilitated the Seattle Y’s efforts to host community forums with a wide range of community participants. The questions and answers from recent forums are included in the Resources section at the end of this document.

Build Community Trust and Relationships

The **Yonkers Family YMCA** experience reminds us that it may take several years to build the capacity to foster community dialogue. Under the leadership of former CEO Shawyn Patterson-Howard, the Y committed years to getting to know their diverse communities and creating relationships with community partners. When recent tensions around police relations with the community began to grow, key leaders, including the mayor, looked to the Y and to Shawyn for guidance and leadership in pulling together leaders from the Yonkers Police Department and individuals who felt they had been mistreated, hurt or profiled by the police. Thanks to its strong community relationships, the Y was able to be a safe place for these diverse experiences to be shared and worked through towards a united, asset-based plan of action.

Following initial conversations, the Yonkers Family Y was able to collaborate with key public and private entities to create, resource and manage community-based programs in specific geographic regions of their service area that had previously not been served by the Y or any other nonprofit entity. This was a direct result of their focus on building community trust.

Utilize Existing Capacity Building Efforts

James White, **YMCA of the Triangle** Executive Vice President for Organizational Relations, was challenged by where to begin so he launched the effort using Cultural Lenses, a Y-USA training focused on engaging diverse national origins. Participants in the Cultural Lenses training were taught strategies and concepts to be used as a starting point for conversation. This has supported multiple dialogues.

Participants used the Cultural Competency Continuum, which recognizes that we often begin with ignorance, which then may lead to incapacity and blindness. Intentionality is applied to move forward, becoming pre-competent (when we have a conceptual understanding of different lived experiences), then competent (where we act on those understandings) and finally, proficient, when we can move fluidly through diverse areas, cultures and organizations. James affirmed that wherever one may be on this journey, others are willing to join together to wrestle with these questions and begin conversations.

Work Towards Collective Impact

The **YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities** convened community leaders from diverse sectors, agencies, demographics, and perspectives to help the Y build trust and credibility amongst and within key target underserved communities the Y has not historically served or supported. Under the leadership of Dr. Hedy Lamar Walls, Senior Vice President for the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities, this group grew into what is currently their 'Mission Impact Council', which meets on a bi-monthly basis. This group is directly supported by other senior leaders at the Twin Cities Y and has direct linkages to their diversity, inclusion & global (DIG) committee and association board.

In 2015 and 2016, the Twin Cities Y's foresight proved beneficial. When the Minneapolis community became a focal point of racial and ethnic tension following the shooting of Black Lives Matter activists at a local protest by individuals identified to have linkages with a White Supremacy organization, the Y and the Mission Impact Council found itself at the heart of dialogue around community healing and bridge building. This happened again after the death of Philando Castile in St. Paul, and following a group picketing a branch that took efforts towards transgender inclusion. Discussions were quickly convened at Mission Impact Council meetings and community and Y leaders engaged in individual and group discussions focused on what the Y can do to help be a catalyst for dialogue, increased community and organizational equity and healing.

Affirm All Perspectives

Each perspective brought to the table should be affirmed even when there is disagreement. Passion often inspires and connects people, but must be also be channeled effectively so as not to polarize conversation. Y leaders find that creating an affirming environment allows the sharing of diverse thoughts, opinions, concerns and perspectives. The **YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago** uses "Bridging the Divide," a program that builds relationships between youth, law enforcement officials and other community members by offering opportunities for dialogue through café conversations, peace circles and sharing stories. In addition they have created a toolkit for safe youth-police conversations that other Ys may use to expand their work. For further information see the Resources section at the end of this document.

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR DIALOGUE

Creating a safe, objective and collective space for the mutual exchange of ideas, beliefs, perspectives and identities is a critical step towards community strengthening, advancing social equity, and bridge building. While this conversation is often organizational, this methodology can also be utilized in a programmatic fashion – such as with youth, staff, volunteers or members. With the leadership of the **World Alliance of YMCAs**, a multi-national ‘safe space’ working group was convened with representatives from the Africa Alliance of YMCAs, the Latin American and Caribbean Alliance of YMCAs (LACA), YMCA Europe, YMCA Canada, the Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY) and YMCA of the USA.

This group deliberated on the structure of an effective process for creating ‘safe spaces’ within and through YMCAs around the world – aiming to create a forum for fostering empathy, meaningful and impactful dialogue, learning and shared growth. Below are key recommendations:

- Provide a clear mandate – including the Y’s sphere of influence (or lack thereof)
- Understand historical, societal and organizational issues, inequities and structural barriers
- Have an experienced facilitator with relevant personal/professional experiences
- Identify group values and a ‘social contract’ governing the group’s actions and outcomes
 - If applicable, align with institutional or community values
- Establish a clear group process and guidelines for action which will be taken (if any)
- Strive for diverse group selection, taking into account the relevant issues and diverse (and divergent) perspectives represented within the group
- Select a venue that is physically and emotionally safe – a neutral space that provides an appropriate environment for the desired depth and import of conversations and dialogue
- If applicable, gather reliable data and research to inform the group’s discussion
- Remember that it is a journey – be okay with unfinished business, and reinforce the goal of dialogue as an ongoing process without a clear destination, continually focused on bridge building

IN SUMMARY

Creating safe spaces for community conversations can be challenging and uncomfortable, especially when they address sensitive topics such as race, ethnicity, equity, gender identity, sexual orientation, income and violence. A core Y belief however, is that in a diverse world, we are stronger when we are inclusive and our doors are open to all. Being inclusive of all requires fostering dialogue, engaging diverse perspectives and building bridges across all segments of society.

This shared journey is an opportunity to learn from one another, elevate diverse community voices, identify solutions that strengthen interconnectedness and social cohesion, and advance equity. As we consider the future of the Y as a community-based organization committed to addressing the most pressing issues of our time, our ability to build trust across all communities – both in times of calm and unrest – is the most powerful way to deliver on our cause to strengthen communities. What unites us is indeed stronger than what divides us. It has never been more important for the Y to intentionally, courageously and inclusively step forward to help bring people and communities together for the common good. For a better us.

Resources:

- Department of Justice, Community Relations Service – Community Dialogue Guide
<http://www.justice.gov/archive/crs/pubs/dialogueguide.pdf>
- Education Week – Resources for Discussing Ferguson:
http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2014/11/resources_for_addressing_ferguson_in_the_classroom.html
- *How Long Will I Cry* – Book and Discussion Guide
<http://bigshouldersbooks.com/how-long-will-i-cry>
- Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network – Addressing the Orlando Shooting at Pulse at Your School:
<http://www.glsen.org/blog/addressing-orlando-shooting-your-school>
- YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, Youth Safety and Violence Prevention—Bridging the Divide
<http://www.ymcachicago.org/programs/youth-safety-and-violence-prevention-bridging-the-divide>
- YMCA of Greater Seattle Question and Answer Summary
 - Question: How do we best meet the needs of our youth who have been impacted by the deaths of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling and others?
 - o Create an outlet or a forum for youth discussions/safe place for expression
 - o Voting
 - o Proactive versus reactive leadership
 - o Speak to the youth who are affected by or involved in these events; use reflective listening
 - o Make sure our needs are met before looking to help youth; know yourself and your impact
 - o Teach youth how to interact with police and other authorities
 - o Get police to join in on a community discussion
 - o Use community providers as a road for youth voices for change
 - o Highlight black men in positions of power and influence
 - o Acknowledge institutionalized racism
 - o Educate the youth on the impact of hate
 - o Identify needs and refer to the correct providers
 - Question: When a community reacts to an incident of violence like the deaths of those mentioned above, what should the response of youth-serving organizations be?
 - o Must have follow-through, consistency; hot topic now but what about six months from now?
 - o Work with respected community leaders
 - o Dialogue should community leaders/mixed (youth teen leaders) about race/ethnicity
 - o Survival first skills needed
 - o Have round tables with our youth as soon as possible to discuss issues
 - o Need the backing of supervisors/organization to get involved
 - o Dialogue with police leaders – they need to hear how kids are being treated

- Create a safe place for kids
- Offer support (food, shelter, etc.)
- Engage area schools
- Align with youth empowerment organizations (e.g. ACLU, NAACP)
- Engage the community to be a part of the process
- Educate youth on how to respond to law enforcement; bring police in to speak with youth
- Improve cultural awareness through trainings
- Engage all communities towards a solution, not just communities of color
- Teach life skills and how to navigate social systems/structures
- Provide a forum for youth discussion
- Educate citizens on their rights