



## Leading Symposium Conversations

### Who Should Lead?

If you are thinking of leading – or facilitating – a symposium conversation, you should ask yourself the following questions:

Are you prepared to be publicly uncomfortable and hear difficult (even untrue) statements?

Can you listen to comments and continue probing for understanding without getting defensive and responding to every comment?

Can you be fair and even-handed in asking questions and listening?

If you can't answer YES to all of these questions, then perhaps facilitating symposium conversations is not the best role for you to play. If you aren't sure, our experience is that practice – role playing conversations before the actual event – is a good way to gain the confidence to lead conversations.



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Here are tips for conversation leaders to help make your symposium a success.

**Create Clear Learning Objectives** – Be sure you know what you want to learn from symposium participants and what you want participants to learn from each other. Design questions that will help you achieve these goals.

**Develop a Discussion Guide** – The best conversations do not follow a script. Facilitators should not rattle off questions survey style asking each person to respond one by one. Rather, create a set of question or topic areas to help *guide* conversations.

**Use the Ground Rules** – The ground rules should be part of the conversation so everyone can use them. Put them on a flip chart or duplicate the ground rules page and hand it out to the people in your conversations.

**Take Nothing at Face Value** – Notice the words and phrases people use. Ask, “What do you mean?” when they make an assertion or use a “short hand” phrase. Often, people’s words, phrases and entire thoughts mean something quite different from what you might think.

**Listen for Where People Get Stuck** – Watch for when people seem to want more facts or if a perception blocks them from talking more. This insight can help you learn where people need more information or need to hear more perspectives on a topic.

**Ask People to Square Their Contradictions** – Throughout a conversation, you will hear people contradict themselves. Set up the contradiction, saying first: “I’ve heard you express two different ideas A and B.” Then ask, “I know this can be a tough issue but what do you make of these two different ideas?” Or, “How do you square those?” The goal is not to “catch” someone as a hypocrite but to illuminate what they are struggling with so as to learn more.

**Piece Together What People Are Saying and Test It** – Usually people don’t make one all-inclusive statement about what they think or how they feel about a concern. Nuggets of insight emerge over time and you will need



to piece those nuggets together. Test this by saying: “This is what I’m hearing, do I have it right?” Or, “Is this what you are saying?”

**Watch Out for Preconceived Views** – Everyone has what might be called “biases” or preconceived views. Each of us grows up with our own set of experiences, values and notions: all serve as filters when asking questions. Beware of possible preconceived views when leading conversations. Otherwise, it may be hard to hear and learn what people have to say.



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Here are some tips for conversation leaders to deal with difficult situations.

IF	THEN
A few people dominate the conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage each person from the beginning. Make sure everyone says something early on.</li> <li>• Ask, "Is there anyone else who has some thoughts on this issue?" Or, "Does anyone else want to jump in?"</li> <li>• Be direct and say, "We seem to be hearing from the same people. Let's give others a chance."</li> <li>• Call on people by name to answer.</li> </ul>
The group gets off on a tangent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask, "How does what you're talking about relate to this question?" Or, "So what does that lead you to think about this question?"</li> <li>• If you can't get a person to focus, call directly on someone else to talk and then bring the first person back into the conversation later.</li> </ul>
Someone seems to have a personal "grudge" about an issue and keeps talking about it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remind the person about where the group is trying to focus. Ask them to respond to the question at hand.</li> <li>• Acknowledge the person and move on. Say, "I understand what you're saying but, in the interest of time, we need to move on."</li> </ul>
People argue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the person continues to be disruptive, say, "We hear your point but we need to focus on this question now."</li> <li>• Don't let it bother you too much. It's okay as long as it's not mean spirited.</li> </ul>



People never disagree

- Find out what's behind the argument. Ask why people disagree.
- Break the tension with a joke.
- Stop to review the ground rules.
- Take a break.

People look bored or lost

- Play devil's advocate. Bring up different points of view and see how people respond.
- Check it out – tell people you've noticed they don't disagree and ask why.
- Ask a direct question to get folks back in the conversation. Ask, "What do you think about \_\_\_\_?"
- Take a quick break. Stand up and stretch. Walk around for a few minutes.