

How to change
the world
one conversation
at a time

The art of hosting
action
conversations

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Australian Conservation Foundation
Community Leaders Program

"Humans have already changed the world several times by the way they had conversations. There have been conversational revolutions which have been as important as wars or riots or famines. When problems have appeared insoluble, when life has seemed to be meaningless, when governments have been powerless, people have sometimes found a way out by changing the subject of their conversation, or the way they talked, or the persons they talked to."

- Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation*

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Changing the world with conversations

"Any person, any couple, any community has the answer to their problem within their own system." - Milton Erikson

When it comes to changing our lives or changing the world, it all begins with a conversation. Alone, we humans often feel weak, disempowered and easily stumped by obstacles. But together we are capable of extraordinary results. Every great environmental campaign, revolution or social change started with a conversation between two or a few people. Out of that conversation these people decided to work together, with a hopeful attitude, on things they cared passionately about. And great things happened.

This is a guide for anyone who wants to start a conversation around sustainable solutions at home, at work and in the community.

It's based on a simple model with three parts:

- 1) **HOOK:** Give people something stimulating to talk about.
- 2) **DISCUSSION:** Ask questions that spark a positive conversation about personal action.
- 3) **PLAN:** Kick off personal action by deciding how to take the 'first next steps' towards personal action. Buddying people is one effective way to organise these 'first next steps'.

These conversations could be over the back fence, in a community group, or in a structured workshop. They can all spark personal change.

The first step in leading a conversation is to understand your role as a facilitator.

How to be a facilitator

"People do not respond in a sustainable way if they do not participate in their own future, in their own destiny."

- Gil Brenson-Lazan

When you host a conversation you are acting as a facilitator.

Facilitation means "making easy". A facilitator takes responsibility for helping a group of people achieve things that matter to them.

The seven roles of a facilitator

A facilitator aims to do at least seven things:

- (1) A facilitator **WELCOMES** everyone into the event.
- (2) They act for **FAIRNESS** by inviting quiet people into the discussion, and shifting attention away from talkative people, so all have a fair chance of being heard. If Nick is quiet, you might invite him in by asking "And what's your view on this Nick?"
- (3) They propose **GROUND RULES**, so people know how to participate. "Only one person speaks at a time – no interruptions." "It's OK to ask questions as we go." "No personal criticism." "All ideas are OK." Then they ask the group for consensus on those ground rules: "Can these be our ground rules?"
- (4) A facilitator creates **CLARITY** so that all understand what is being said. When someone makes a point, you should reflect it back to them using your own words, to check that you understand and to help everyone else understand.
- (5) A facilitator is **PREPARED**. They write a **PLAN** before the event, about what they want to happen at each stage, including the directions they'll give and the questions they'll ask. Then they adapt their plan on the fly. They also make sure that any necessary **MATERIALS** are there, for instance flip-chart paper, marker pens, food and refreshments.
- (6) At the end of the meeting, they make sure everyone has a clear idea about **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT**.
- (7) Lastly, a facilitator is **neutral**. A facilitator should not:
 - express a position on the matters being discussed;
 - take sides in an argument;

- pressure people to make a particular decision.

An experienced facilitator is “agnostic about content” but “zealous about process”. They are concerned about HOW a group decides, not WHAT a group decides.

Good facilitators are optimists

“Start with a rock-solid belief in everyday people. Your entrance into a community should be upon a core belief that everyday people can come together to create positive change in their community...It’s important who makes the change in a community. Is it us, as outsiders, or the people themselves? I believe that it has to be the people. So often people have no one who believes in them. And if I can be that one person to believe in somebody, it will help them believe in themselves. Because if they don’t believe in themselves, change will not happen.

“Also, I have to believe that change can happen. I have to believe that the people can make change. I have to be real clear, and say, ‘I believe that your ideas can happen. I believe that we can do it.’ I try to give examples where other people have created similar change. These conversations are the beginning of the seeds that will grow into future community action.”

- Castelloe, P. and Watson, T. (2000) *How to Enter a Community as an Organiser*, Center for Participatory Change, downloaded from www.cpcwnc.org/Toolbox/tbxentercom.html

How to host an action conversation

STEP (1) The Hook

Give people something positive and stimulating to talk about.

A conversation needs a focus. It could be:

- a personal story;
- a news story or TV show;
- a video or slide show;
- a talk by an expert guest speaker;
- a tour of a sustainability centre;
- a visit to an organic garden;
- a quiz night
- an organic food tasting (e.g. from your own garden)
- a demonstration of green cleaning or gardening techniques.

Whatever it is, it should be about optimistic, do-able, local solutions to problems people really face in their lives. A presentation on "the problem of global warming" or "waste", for instance, might not stimulate people with new ways of thinking about what **THEY** can do. But a presentation on "how we greened our golf club", given to a golf club, is much more likely to stimulate those listeners to think about what *they* can do!

The best hooks are subjects that people feel strongly about. For instance, one group in Gippsland got a big crowd when they had an expert on sustainable housing as a guest speaker after the Black Saturday bushfires.

How to get great guest speakers:

- ask your council's sustainability educator;
- contact local environment groups or organisations.
- use the support network that GreenHome is has given you.

Getting attention: the art of 'cut through'

To grab people's attention and get them to come along, make sure your event is about real solutions to people's real passions, problems or frustrations (which may not be the same as yours!)

STEP (2) The Discussion

Asking questions to take people on a journey to action.

After listening to a talk most people are dying to have a talk themselves. All you need to do is pose simple, open-ended questions to kick off the conversation.

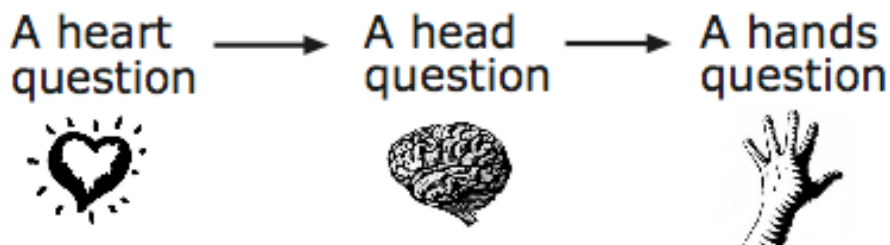
An open-ended question is one that doesn't have a yes/no answer. An easy way to ask an open-ended question is to remember Rudyard Kipling's verse:

I have six honest serving men
They taught me all I knew
I call them What and Where and When
And How and Why and Who.

An even easier rule to remember is: An open question is any question that starts with "What...?"

Here is a series of questions to take people on a journey from passion to action:

The formula is:



Heart: Action begins with heart, so the first question should reveal people's passions. For example:

"What's your biggest concern about (the issue)?"

Head: Then get people thinking practically about what could solve the problem. For example:

“What actions could make a difference?”

Hands: Then ask people to imagine themselves being part of the solution. For example:

“What could you do?”

Here’s some more on the three questions:

(1) A heart question



People love to talk about matters close to their hearts. A great discussion starts with a question that touches things people feel passionate about. It must be an open-ended question. As a discussion-starter, all you need to do is ask that question.

You could ask:

- “What interests you most about...?”
- “What’s your biggest concern about....?”
- “What’s your biggest frustration about?”
- “What changes would most you like to see?”
- “What would you most like to change about your town/neighbourhood/home?”

Notice that these questions are personal; they focus on the ‘you’. It’s important to get people talking about their *own* experiences, lives and feelings from the start. That’s the first step towards taking responsibility (see box on enabling and disabling talk, below).

People often start by griping and complaining. That’s OK, as long as you turn the conversation onto what could make a difference – that’s the next step.

(2) A head question



Then ask for their ideas on what could make a difference. Most people love to chew on problem-solving questions, so this part is easy.

- “What change could make the biggest difference to the sustainability of your town/neighbourhood/home?”
- “What actions could we do?”
- “What would the first step look like?”
- “What’s the simplest action that could make a difference?”

It helps greatly, of course, if there has already been an inspiring talk from someone who is “living the dream” and has shared their ideas.

(3) A hands question



Lastly, ask people about the actions they’re interested in doing.

- “What would you love to be able to do?”
- “What’s the first step you’d like to take?”
- “What could you imagine yourself doing?”
- “What do you want to do?”

This shift into “What could *you* do?” is a crucial moment in the discussion. Don’t forget it, or there will be no personal action!

Here’s an example of a journey of questions

The hook: a presentation about “detoxing your home”.

1) A heart question



“What’s your biggest concern about chemicals in the home?”

2) A head question



“What changes at home would make the biggest difference?”

3) A hands question



“What’s one simple change you’d like to make?”

Try creating your own journey of questions.

Scribing

It's a good idea to ask someone to write down the points being made during the conversation. They'll need some large sheets of paper (e.g. flip chart paper) and marker pens. They need to write big and clearly so everyone can see.

Scribing shows respect for the participants. It also makes sure that people don't forget good ideas during the conversation.

If you've got a large group divided into tables, then appoint a scribe for each table.

Step (3) The plan

Buddying people in groups to plan together.

As soon as people have begun to identify specific actions that interest them, it's time to get them buddied-up. This is a really important part of your role as facilitator. Remember that people are far more likely to act when they are working together or have the support of others.

Here's a process to use:

- 1) Suggest that people with similar issues, actions or interests get together in 2s, 3s, 4s or 5s. But don't let groups get larger than 5 because then it's too easy for some people to withdraw and leave the discussion to others.
- 2) Once people are buddied, ask them to help each other make an action plan on *how* to carry out their desired action.
- 3) If only individual actions are being considered, each person could write on a sheet of paper:

"My top action is:

"The steps to doing this are:

"The things I'll need are:

"My helpers or partners are:

"I will start on (date):

4) Partners check off each others' action sheets, suggesting ideas and extra details - especially the timeline!)

5) If a team wants to work together on an action, write:

"Our desired action is:

"The steps to doing this are:

"The things we'll need are:

"The members of our group are:

"Our first meeting is where: when:

The group then discusses and agrees on the details.

6) Ask each individual or team to report to the whole room on their desired activities and first steps.

Have someone jot down all the names/commitments, so they can be followed up later.

Celebrate each plan with applause.

Celebration is a really important step because it firms peoples' commitment when they present their ideas to others and get recognised.

P.S. Don't let people depart without sharing their contact details with buddies or team members.

An advanced facilitation technique

After you pose a question, give people one or two minutes of silence to compose their responses before anyone talks. This greatly improves their thinking and speeds up the process.

Concluding the conversation

- 1) Thank all for their spirit and commitment.
- 2) Ask the group what they'd like *you* to do next.

Ideas to consider:

- follow-up on people's commitments after one or a few months;
- organise another get together to trouble-shoot people's plans;
- arrange a guest speaker on another subject.

Where to hold conversations

An action conversation can happen wherever people come together.

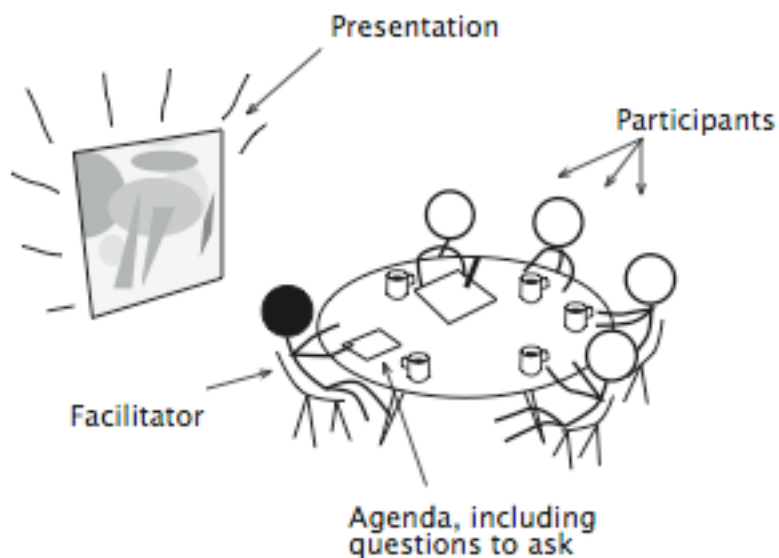
The most influential conversations happen between people who know each other. So it's a good idea to use existing networks that you're already part of.

It could be:

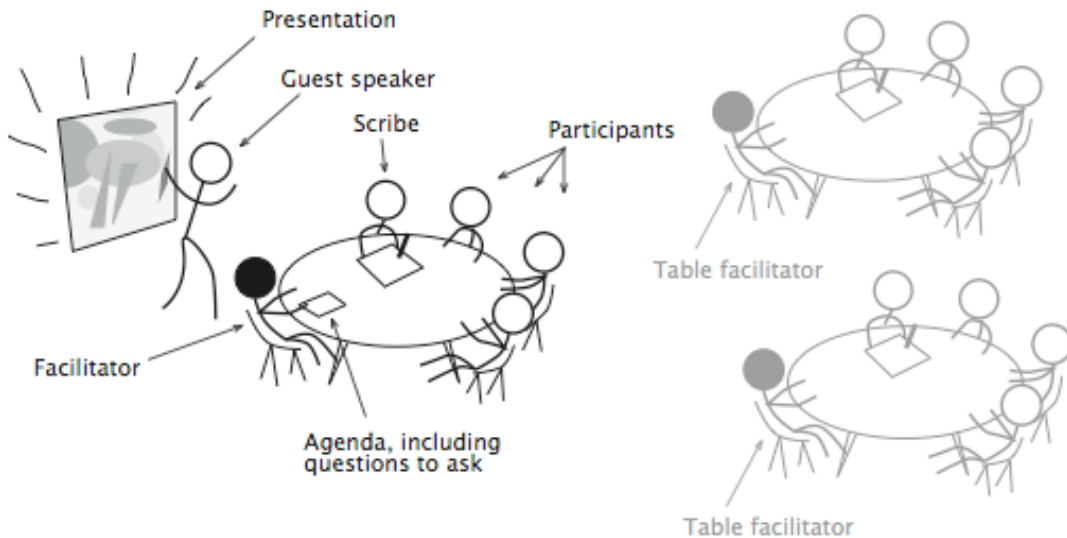
----> two friends meeting over coffee;



----> a lunchtime talk in a workplace;



----> a talk at a community group or club with a guest speaker.



An action conversation could happen:

At work

In your club or association

In your community group

A book club, mothers' group, walking group

Over dinner

Over the back fence

A parents' picnic or cafe chat

A school group

A stall at a fair or fete

A street BBQ

A visit to a local sustainability centre or community garden

A party with a green theme

A talkback session on local radio

One good idea is to organise a guest speaker for the regular meeting of a group you belong to, or someone you know belongs to.

Some things to keep in mind:

- make a friendly, comfortable environment
- food and refreshments
- welcome people and giving name tags
- a sheet for collecting contact details

Following up on actions

Ideally, people will leave the conversation with a clear plan of action and someone to help/support them to carry it out. But that doesn't mean they will definitely do it. Some will, but others will go back to their busy lives and get distracted again. The only way to lock-in an intention is for people to believe they will be contacted again by one of the people they publicly committed to.

Following-up is therefore vital to ensure that actions actually do occur.

Following-up can be as simple as a phone call.

To follow-up:

1) Offer to follow-up with a phone call to check on progress, help trouble-shoot any issues or discuss problems.

Ask: "Are you happy to be contacted in one, two or three months to see how you're going, answer any questions and solve any problems?"

If people agree:

2) Circulate a sheet with names, contact details, and proposed actions. Invite participants to fill it in.

Name	Phone	Email	Proposed action	Date for follow-up

3) You, or someone else at the meeting, actually follows up.

Following-up is also the best way to monitor and evaluate, that is, to find out how much action has actually occurred as a result of the conversation.

Follow-up involves calling each participant. It can be a wonderful way to create relationships and a network. It also gives you great stories to share with others. You'll be excited at the number of people who do MORE than they promised.

Once again, remember not to pressure people during a follow-up call. Just have a chat about how they are going and offer any ideas, contacts or resources that could help. If they haven't acted yet, ask them if they're happy for you to contact them again in future.

Questions to ask during follow-up

"Have you started doing (insert action committed to)?"

If yes:

- "What was the best lesson you learnt from it?: and
- "What was the biggest advantage you got from doing it?"

If not:

- "What would it take?" and
- "Is there something simpler you could do instead?"

An example of an action conversation

Step	Sample words
The stimulating hook:	A 20 minute talk from a guerrilla gardener.
1) Questions that reveal passions:	"What's your response to these ideas?" "What interests you most about guerrilla gardening?"
2) Questions that uncover ideas for change	"What could be done to get edible plants growing on our streets?" "What actions make the biggest difference to the quality of our streets?"
3) Questions that reveal actions people are interested in:	"What you like to be able to do?" "What's the first step you could take?"

<p>Inviting people to buddy up:</p>	<p>"I notice there are some common interests here. Would you like to stand up and form groups around those interests?" "Please help your partner with their plans (3 minutes each)."</p>
<p>Inviting people to write down their action plans:</p>	<p>"Here's a form you could use to record your plans."</p>
<p>Inviting people to share their plans with the group:</p>	<p>"I'd like to hear your ideas. Can each of you say what you plan to do? [starting with] Bruce..?"</p>
<p>Thanking and celebrate:</p>	<p>"Well done! Thanks for your spirit and commitment!" [applause]</p>
<p>How you'll ask them what they want the group to do next?</p>	<p>"What would you like to happen next?"</p>
<p>How you'll offer to follow-up.</p>	<p>"Are you happy to be contacted in one, two or three months to see how you're going, answer any questions and solve any problems?"</p>

Frequently asked questions

Q: What if there's a big group, say 30 people?

A: Break them into groups of 5 and appoint people to be facilitators and scribes for each group. Tell the facilitators their main job is to ensure everyone has a fair chance to have their say.

Q: What if people's solutions are unsustainable or you just don't agree with them?

A: Either accept their views, or tell them you are "taking off your facilitator's hat", then express your view, and put it on again. Don't argue emotionally or you'll lose your credibility.

Q: What if I want to be a presenter AND a facilitator?

A: Make your presentation, then tell the audience you are putting on your facilitator hat, and stick to that role.

Q: Can I facilitate and scribe at the same time?

A: Not really. It's impossible to give your full attention to someone while you're still writing down the last thing they said. Ask someone else to scribe.

Q: How long should an action conversation take?

A: It depends on the number of people are participating. As facilitator you should pace the whole process in your head and make a plan with indicative times for each step. An informal workplace discussion might take as little as 20 minutes. However complete presentation and discussion at a community event could easily take 60-90 minutes.

Q: Opps. We just spent the whole time talking about the big picture and never got down to specific actions.

A: This can easily happen if you don't *localise* your questions. For example: "What could reduce car use *in our neighbourhood?*" "What could save water *at our football club?*" "What could *our street* do get off the grid?"

Q: What if someone says something that's just plain wrong?

A: Test it with the group. Say "who has another point of view?" If no one challenges an idea you think is plain wrong, then take off your facilitator's hat, express your view, and put it on again.

Q: What if no one wants to act?

A: Then explore simpler, easier actions. Ask "What's the simplest no-sweat action you could do along the path?" But don't pressure people - in the end you might have to accept that these people just aren't ready to act.

Q: What if people attack my credibility or right to facilitate?

A: Put it to the group. Say "I'll going to ask the group: should we continue?" Don't argue, leave the decision to them and you'll get the best result.

Q: What if you have an impatient activist who doesn't give a stuff about process and just wants people to agree with their ideas for action?

A: Put it to the group. Ask: "Who thinks we should continue discussing this issue?"

Q: What if people just won't stop griping and complaining about the government, the council, developers, banks, global capitalism etc...?

A: Flip the conversation back to positive personal actions: "What's something you could do about it?" See "Enabling and disabling talk" below.

Q: What if people "leap to easy answers"? For instance, if the question is "What's can we do to make less waste?" Someone might reply "It's all caused by people's attitudes!"

A: This would be unhelpful because a) it blames others instead of accepting responsibility oneself; b) peoples' attitudes are hard to change; c) people's attitudes are only part of the problem. When this happens (and it will), focus people back on the how their own lives could contribute to a positive solution: "What could YOU DO to make a community with less waste?"

Q: When facilitating should I be standing or sitting?

A: It's a personal choice. At a large meeting you need to stand to be seen. At small intimate gatherings it's good to sit down because it puts people at ease. On the other hand, if you're uncertain of your authority, then standing can help you feel in control.

Some background to action conversations

Beware of pressuring people

"It is the client who should be voicing the arguments for change. When you find yourself in the role of arguing for change while your client (patient, student, child) is voicing arguments against it, you're in precisely the wrong role."

- Miller, W.R., and Rollnick, S. (2002) *Motivational Interviewing, Preparing People for Change*, The Guilford Press, New York p22

When people feel pressured to change, they tend to do the opposite thing in order to assert their self-respect. So it's vital to avoid creating the impression that you want people to act in a particular way. People have to make their own decisions about when, where, how and whether they act. If people feel they are being pushed out of their comfort zones *they will resist*.

Remember that you can't motivate people, people can only motivate themselves. It's best to imagine that people have come along already motivated to do something (or they probably wouldn't be there). The real effect of a conversation is not to create motivation, but to help people figure out *how* to act with a reassurance that their action will be successful. The safer the environment, the more support people have, and the less pressure people feel, the more likely they are to act on their inner motivations.

How to lower peoples' fears of change

All new behaviours are scary for those who haven't done them yet, or have tried them in the past and failed.

Even simple actions like calling a politician's office or installing a lo- flo shower head can terrify people who aren't sure about how to control potential failure or embarrassment.

Even if people WANT to do something new, their fears still need to be overcome.

Familiarity and free choice are the keys to letting people manage the risk of doing something new. People need to see others doing it so they can picture in their heads EXACTLY how to do the action successfully; they need to rehearse any words they might have to

Speak; and they need to feel completely in control of when, where and how to do it.

As a facilitator you can:

- encourage similar people to tell the story of exactly how they did it;
- talk people through the action so they imagine exactly how to do it, dealing with possible fears along the way;
- invite people to rehearse the behaviour or words in a safe environment
- buddy people up to work together. That is the best way to reduce fears.

Enabling and disabling talk (the art of FLIPPING)

Remember to keep the conversation positive and optimistic. When people express doubts or worries, don't ask them "Why?" or spend time discussing on what could go wrong. Instead ask them:

- "How else could you do it?"
- "What would it take to do successfully?"
- "Is there something easier you could start with?"

Personal change requires optimism, and negative talk can easily blunt it. So be careful to frame discussions positively, for example:

Negative framing	Positive framing
Soil problems	"How can we create great soil?"
Weeds	"How can we reduce weeds?"
Avoiding plants out of season	"What are the best plants for this season?"
Pests	"Ideas for a healthy garden."

A lot of conversations are complaints or gripes about the actions of other people, "the government" or "them". These conversations are disempowering because they imply that the speaker is a victim of external forces without the power to change the situation.

Other conversations are about “me doing something”. These are empowering conversations because the speaker is actively considering things they want to do.

A good conversation begins by asking people about their personal passions or frustrations. These are often negative, so it’s OK for a conversation to start negatively. But if people continue on this path they are likely to lose their motivation to act. It’s your job as facilitator to quickly shift ‘negative/other’ conversations into ‘positive/self’ conversations.

Fortunately it’s easy to flip a disempowering gripe into an empowering conversation. For example, when someone says:

“I’m really angry about the government’s greenhouse targets.”

You can flip it back as a positive question:

“What target would you like to see?” or “What do you think it would take for the government to raise its targets?”

If someone says:

“I’m really frustrated about how hot my house is in summer.”

You can flip it to:

“What would make a difference?” or “What are some simple ways to cool it?”

Once people have started to consider the problem positively, you can gradually introduce questions about individuals’ role in the solution:

“What’s one thing you could do to influence the government?”

or

“Where would you like to start cooling your house?”