



# Cultural Conversations

## BEST PRACTICES HANDBOOK

### FOR ORGANIZERS



What is Cultural Conversations?

*“A safe space for community connection  
that inspires change through storytelling,  
new friendships, awareness of diverse  
cultures, and common bonds.”*



Connect. Share. Inspire.

# Contents

Welcome .....	1
An Introduction .....	2
Neighborhood Outreach Team .....	3
Overview .....	4
The Beginning .....	4
The First Meeting.....	4
The Evolution and Growth.....	5
What Makes a Meeting .....	6
The Topic .....	6
The Storyteller.....	7
Agenda and Marketing .....	9
Logistics and Set Up .....	9
The Meeting .....	10
Creating Opportunities in the Workplace .....	15
Quick Notes .....	16
An Invitation.....	17



Copyright, City of Bellevue 2018

Planning and Community Development

Neighborhood Outreach

450 110th Ave. NE

Bellevue, WA 98004

[www.bellevuewa.gov/cultural-conversations.htm](http://www.bellevuewa.gov/cultural-conversations.htm)

For more information about the program, please contact:

Carol Ross: CRoss@bellevuewa.gov | 425-452-7917

Barb Tuininga: BTuininga@bellevuewa.gov | 425-452-2800

Sujata Agrawal: Content creation and editing



# Welcome

A diverse community is a respectful community, rich in ideas and shared experiences. This sentiment shines through in the City Council's vision statement, "Bellevue welcomes the world. Our diversity is our strength. We embrace the future while respecting our past."

As Bellevue has become a more welcoming and inclusive community, we envision those who live and work in our vibrant city will have opportunities to build greater understanding and respect for cultural differences. Hearing one another's personal stories and sharing our own has proven to be transformational. It has resulted in the development of new perspectives as well as friendships. Programs like Cultural Conversations help make our community more connected and more resilient.

On behalf of the City Council, I hope this handbook provides some useful reflections that encourage you on your cultural journey!

~ Mayor John L. Chelminiak



*From Left to Right: Councilmember Jared Nieuwenhuis, Councilmember Jennifer Robertson, Councilmember Conrad Lee, Mayor John Chelminiak, Deputy Mayor Lynne Robinson, Councilmember Janice Zahn and Councilmember John Stokes.*

# An Introduction

Cultural Conversations, launched in 2010 as a partnership between the City of Bellevue and diverse women in the community, is more than a program. It is the opportunity to hear a different view, to practice empathetic listening and speaking, to learn a new culture through storytelling, and explore deep and relevant topics together.

At Cultural Conversations, we provide the structure, the catalyst, and the container for people to build connections, but we also understand that relationships born in the room need to be nurtured outside of the regular gathering for continued growth. Our audience includes women new to the community (seeking a place to connect or find support) as well as long-time members of the community who are welcoming and willing to understand the change unfolding before their eyes.

Cultural Conversations has succeeded because it fulfilled a need within the Bellevue community (for connection with people from different cultures) and also because of its wealth of content. Cultural Conversations is like a kaleidoscope – the richness of experiences of those participating create unique patterns that change as conversations turn the dial. The impact of Cultural Conversations is not only in the number of women who come to a meeting, but also in those relationships that grow and sustain; this is affirmed when someone tells us, “We met at Cultural Conversations, and this relationship is one of several that has profoundly changed who I am.”

It is outcomes such as these that prompts us to encourage individuals, neighborhood organizations, private and public entities to create their “cultural conversation.”

This book is intended as a guide to do just that for your community. Here we share how to create a safe and welcoming space for the audience and the speakers, and build connections through rich storytelling and discussions. While we provide the “dos” based on our experience and learnings over the past eight years, your cultural conversations program will fulfill the unique needs of your community.

We recognize that a Cultural Conversation may not reach everyone in the community who want and need this kind of connection. The opportunity is in creating programs to engage groups that may include women for whom attendance due to work hours or childcare may be a challenge; English language learners for whom interpreters or text translation may be needed; mixed gender storytelling communities; and accommodation for people with limited mobility or disability.

We ask that you keep in mind what worked for us may not necessarily work for you. Try not to be too prescriptive or have a goal to have your program look like Cultural Conversations. We did not know our program would become what it is and we don’t know how it will evolve. In fact, a few years back, the City wanted us to create another Cultural Conversations for South Bellevue, but it didn’t catch on – it could be because there was already a ‘Cultural Conversations’ in Bellevue or because the idea for the program came from us instead of the community. We learned that replication doesn’t necessarily work. There must be a felt need from the community and conversations championed by a few individuals that believe in the value of connection.

We are excited at the possibility of having other cultural conversations around the city, the region, and maybe even the world! We hope this guide will help you in achieving your goals.

We wish you success as you begin your journey.

## Why do we do this program?

We believe that a more connected community is a stronger, more resilient community. We realize where similarities are recognized there is a connection; where there is a difference, there can be growth.

And as we travel through life, shared experiences and learnings shape and change the way we perceive and connect with each other.

For Neighborhood Outreach at the City (which manages Cultural Conversations), the focus is also to foster relationships between residents and to connect them to the City and community organizations for resources and leadership opportunities.

## Neighborhood Outreach Team



From left: Carol Ross, Barb Tuininga, Mike McCormick-Huentelman (Neighborhood Outreach Manager), Julie Ellenhorn, Ying Carlson



# Overview

*Barb Tuininga and Carol Ross, who manage Cultural Conversations, share how the City of Bellevue began the program and how it evolved to connect the community on the Eastside of Seattle.*

## The Beginning

It was in 2008 that Barb Tuininga and her colleagues from the Neighborhood Outreach Team at the City of Bellevue went on a “listening tour” visiting neighborhood groups and faith organizations to understand the needs of the community. They heard different people express similar sentiments:

*“I live in one of the most diverse communities in our state – I see people dressed differently, and I hear all these different languages, but I don’t know how to connect. The people in my life, (church, home, family) look and act very much the same as I do.”*

*“I don’t know how to connect with people since I arrived in Bellevue; I know that some people may be uncomfortable or fearful of newcomers coming from all over the world. I wish I could find a comfortable way for us to connect.”*

“The women were looking at the diversity around them and wanted to be connected to a community they felt they didn’t have ties with,” says Barb. They also wanted a safe place to have a conversation; some of them would not be culturally or socially comfortable discussing certain topics with men present.

## The First Meeting

The City decided to pilot a program in response to the community’s needs. The invitation to the first Cultural Conversations meeting in 2009 went out to faith communities, neighborhood groups, business and nonprofit organizations and more. The first meeting was a small intimate group of fifteen women.

They were shy, and were asked to respond anonymously to two questions on index cards:

*“What is the one question you wish you could ask someone in this room?”*

*“What is the one question you wish someone would ask you?”*

Many responses were related, such as:

*“What is it like to be a covered woman in Bellevue?”*



**It takes a team of at least two people to effectively create and manage a program of this type.**

### Cultural Conversations Facts:

- Program started in 2008
- Meetings at Crossroads Community Center began in 2009-2010
- Meetings are held on the first Tuesday of the month, between September and June
- The number of meetings held annually is 7
- The duration of a meeting is usually 90 minutes; occasionally 120 minutes
- The size of the community is 500 and growing daily
- The average number of women at a meeting is 75
- The average number of women at each table is 6
- The program is currently co-managed by Barb Tuininga and Carol Ross

*"I wish someone would ask me what it is like to be wearing a Hijab in Bellevue."*

These index cards inspired the topics for the first year of meetings. As the number of women attending grew, the shyness disappeared, and soon the women couldn't stop talking and sharing!

## The Evolution and Growth

The program grew organically – a core group of women who came to every meeting, started inviting other women; some women came because they had read about the program in the Bellevue Reporter or Neighborhood News or heard about it through a neighbor or friend; others came because the topic sparked their interest or they felt they had something to contribute; long-time Bellevue residents wanted to understand how to connect with new neighbors from other cultures.

Over the years, the topics started becoming a little deeper, more thought-provoking, factoring in the layers and complexities of what was happening in Bellevue and around the world.

The women also began speaking more openly about issues that were affecting them. They would say:

*"I love coming to Cultural Conversation because it feels so welcoming and safe here, and I learn so much about different cultures."*

Storytelling began informally as the women would talk about a personal experience in conversation with a few others, but soon became central as the program evolved. Women connected intellectually and emotionally after hearing stories of others. The team brought in Debbie Lacy, a local storyteller coach with experience working in diverse communities, to guide the women and help them tell their story more confidently. Storytellers would often write to say:

*"Thank you, I didn't realize that my story would mean so much to the women who heard it."*

Eight years on, Cultural Conversations continues to be a magical experience and strongly rooted in the community. More than 500 women are on the mailing list and an average of 60 to 80 women are at each meeting. The program has expanded to include an annual forum, attended by upwards of 200 people, where men also participate in the storytelling and conversations.



# What Makes a Meeting

A Cultural Conversations meeting is a culmination of several steps:

- The Topic: Determining the topic for storytelling and discussion that is relevant to community needs/interests
- The Storyteller: Identifying and preparing one or more storytellers
- Agenda and Marketing: Setting the agenda for the meeting; preparing and distributing marketing material
- Logistics and Set Up: Setting up the room
- The Meeting: Welcome, storytelling, table conversations, wrap up, and taking photographs
- Follow-up: Feedback

## The Topic



Each Cultural Conversations meeting has a topic as a theme for storytelling and conversation. It sets the agenda for the meeting and provides the opportunity to have a meaningful discussion on a particular or current issue that resonates with the women.

In the initial years of Cultural Conversations, the topics were of general interest related to cultural traditions and rituals. Over time, as Bellevue became more diverse, the topics become more thought provoking, focusing on local and national issues that women were facing or wanting to understand about each other.

The idea for a topic can come from different sources:

- A team discussion or program participants
- People in the community
- A discussion with other City departments
- Media (television, radio, or print)

Many times, it's been suggested to have a theme or several topics for the year. However, while the idea has its merits, it also has some challenges: it can be difficult to find both storytellers and themes that could hold audience interest.

A question posed to the Cultural Conversations team is: Which comes first? The topic or the storyteller? There is no one answer. Sometimes the team can have a great topic but may not be able to find a storyteller who can share a story related to it. Other times the team will meet someone for coffee and think, "wow, what a great story she has," and frame the topic around her story. We've hit the sweet spot when we have a topic and meet someone who has an amazing related story they are willing to share.

"I have learned that the best topics emerge in the planning process or even when we are vetting storytellers. The power is really in the storytelling; if the storyteller is sincere and people can see themselves in the story – that's when the transformation happens." ~ Barb Tuininga

### KEEP IN MIND

- Choose a relevant topic that contains elements of universal interest.
- Be flexible. The topic focus may change prior to a meeting due to a local or global event.
- Do not try not to find a storyteller who can fit the topic. It rarely works due to availability or the willingness of an individual to share. Instead focus on relationships; the stories and topics will develop organically.
- When unsure about the topic test the subject among a small informal group.

## Be Flexible to Real-Time Events

Sometimes there may be an unexpected event – local, national, or global – that may require a program shift or the need to address it at the meeting. Such incidents have their share of challenges, and it's essential to be adaptable and manage the change.

At Cultural Conversations, there have been several instances where local or world events have occurred around the time of the meeting that had the potential to impact the topic or the storyteller. As an example, the 2016 San Bernardino shooting in California happened the day before a scheduled Cultural Conversations meeting. Feeling the tension in the room at the start of the meeting, we acknowledged what had happened and allowed the women to share their concerns, which addressed what many were already thinking. (*See the Cultural Conversations Annual 2015-16 for the story.*)

Additionally, a program topic can coincide with a very timely news item. Depending on what type of entity you represent (government, nonprofit, educational), as organizers consider preparing talking points in advance of inquiries from media.

## The Storyteller



The storyteller acts as a catalyst in encouraging the audience to think about their own experiences. By sharing her story, she builds a bridge of connection between the women at the meeting. She also helps to create a safe and empathetic environment that encourages the audience to share their own stories. In one memorable meeting, a newly arrived Syrian refugee stood up just as the storyteller finished and exclaimed, *"I want to tell my story."*

A storyteller can also bring to life an abstract concept or give a human face to an uncomfortable topic. For example, Sharon H. Chang, a mixed-race Asian and author of "Raising Mixed Race: Multiracial Asian Children in a Post-Racial World," talked about exploring the intricacies of being multiracial. When she finished her story, some of the women in the audience commented that it gave them an understanding of the challenges sometimes faced by their mixed race children.

*"I do think, as a team, we build a personal relationship with the women who tell their stories. You cannot do this program without having a real connection with our storytellers."* ~ Barb Tuininga

*"Some of the women have never told their story before, and some don't feel that they are that remarkable when they are. Additionally, I think it takes great courage to tell your story, especially when you don't know how it is going to be received. And as the story unfolds, the storyteller may change it, going deeper or pulling back, according to how people are reacting."* ~ Carol Ross

It's advantageous to have a professional coach prepare a storyteller because even the most confident and rehearsed storytellers may suddenly feel vulnerable and veer off course. Coaching allows the storyteller to communicate with greater clarity, intention and confidence, knowing the boundaries of their communication. The magic of connection is achieved when a storyteller shares authentically in such a way where the listener can picture themselves in the situation and feel empathy even if the experience is very different than anything they have ever experienced.

There are public speaking and storyteller coaches who can help prepare your storytellers. With Cultural Conversations events, it's important for the coach to be culturally competent and have experience working with diverse populations.

### KEEP IN MIND

- Know your audience when choosing a storyteller. Introduce the storyteller and provide additional context around the topic. Create the environment for the audience to support the storyteller and connect with her.
- Engage with the storyteller before the meeting and be clear on the intention of the sharing. The storyteller sharing is a heart connection and not about personal or business goals. Ask the storyteller to attend to at least one Cultural Conversations meeting before sharing her story.
- Know that your storyteller is emotionally prepared to tell their story. Has this story been shared before?
- Determine what is it that you want the listener to understand or do, after the sharing.
- Draw the listener in through the five senses, as though they were a part of the story.
- Paint a picture of the before and after (lessons learned, things to explore).
- Create safety for the storyteller. Spend time talking about their story and take them through it a few times before the meeting. The format may include some framing and question prompts to help the storyteller and the audience to connect.
- Have a Plan B should the storyteller have second thoughts as the meeting approaches.

## Some examples of topics:

- Birth Stories from around the World
- Marriage traditions
- Moving Beyond Cultural Assumptions
- Immigration, The Promise and The Loss
- Taboo Topics
- Cultural Expectation: The Danger of a Single Story
- Rites of Passage
- Finding Your Own Voice
- Can We Really Go Home Again?
- The Practice of Gift Giving Across Culture
- Aging and Caring for our Elders
- Cultural Shifting Between Generations: the push and pull of the old and the new



## Agenda and Marketing

Every program requires a marketing plan to create and sustain interest. Different media is used to inform and invite women to their meetings.

- Printed flyer, email or website: these are created at the beginning of every season and describe the program, where and when the group meets, and contact information. They may also include a list of topics.
- ‘Save the Date’ email: this is sent out 4-6 weeks before a meeting and provides information about the upcoming meeting. Email reaches out to a wider audience and can grow the distribution list (as many women forward it to friends and family). RSVP request helps in planning supplies, seating, and knowing who might be in attendance.
- Neighborhood News: monthly web-based newsletter from the City of Bellevue. Printed copies are distributed to community centers and key service areas throughout Bellevue.
- Press Release: on the City’s website as a banner ad, picked up by media outlets, such as the local community or regional newspaper.

### KEEP IN MIND

- Email distribution must be handled as a bcc (blind carbon copy) to avoid unsolicited emails or marketers. Given the growth of the program, we use a list serve (public.govdelivery) to manage communication and provide delivery statistics.
- Social media tools such as Facebook or Twitter can be used to encourage attendance.

## Logistics and Set Up



When participants at a meeting number more than 15 women, it's time for more planning around the logistics. Since there is no fee charged for attending a meeting, resources become important. Where will the group meet? Is there a cost to meet in the space? Is scheduling available for the year? Is the room size adequate? What is required for set up? Will refreshments be served?

The pre-meeting preparation usually takes around 45 minutes to an hour. Depending on the meeting, the room might be set up with round tables for engagement or theater style for a presentation. Food and refreshments are laid out buffet style on one side of the room. Tea/coffee/water with an assortment of cheese, cake slices, fruits, and pastries are usually served. Sometimes food may be sponsored by local businesses.

One member of the program team is usually at the sign-in table near the door. As each woman walks in, she is greeted, asked to sign-in, and to write her name on a name tag. The women are encouraged to sit with someone they don't know, as that is when connections will follow.

## KEEP IN MIND

- Provide access for those who may have mobility issues, be hearing or sight impaired.
- Create a sign-in sheet to track attendance and to add to the distribution list.
- Make an announcement five minutes prior to the start of the meeting, reminding everyone to pick up refreshments and find their seats.
- Supply a box of tissues for those moments when emotional support may be needed.



# The Meeting

## Welcome and Introduction



A typical Cultural Conversations is planned for 90 minutes (45 minutes for announcements and storytelling and 45 minutes for table conversation). Occasionally, the depth of topic may require more time and storytellers.

The meeting begins with a welcome and an introduction. The following talking points are suggested:

- A commitment to creating a safe space for connection and conversation.
- A reminder that (in general) the storytellers are not professional speakers. Request the audience to be open and engaged when the storytellers share their story, as the richest conversations follow.
- The story being shared is one woman's story, not representative of a group of people; "The Danger of a Single Story", a phrase coined by writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
- Honor the speaker and those who share at the tables by keeping sensitive items in confidence.
- Allow everyone who wants to contribute the opportunity to speak, without any one person dominating the conversation.
- Following storytelling, allow time for questions and for storyteller table participation.
- Unless permission is provided, no recording of videos or taking of photos.

## Storytelling

Introduce the storyteller and share with the audience that she is not a professional storyteller and that their role is to listen and support her. During the storytelling session, watch the audience and try to pick up cues. Is the audience engaged? Are they bored and doing other things? Do they look unhappy? Sometimes you may need to



step in and change the direction by asking a question, or have the storyteller wrap up the story.

It is also important to connect with the storyteller after they have told their story. She may need to talk about what it was like to share her story. And she may also need to be reassured that everything went well.

There have been a few times when a storyteller's perspective on their story changed; either from their experience of telling it or it just evolved over time. It's important to share this phenomenon with the storytellers and to offer to meet with them later, if they'd like to talk about the experience or share any changes of perspective as a result of the storytelling.

**CC There's  
a lot going on...  
women are  
listening to  
stories, and it's  
almost as if they  
are saying – I'm  
with you; I'm  
right here and  
I'm engaged –  
it's written all  
over their face.  
The story is so  
compelling.**





Sometimes it can happen that suddenly there is an emotion in the room that you didn't anticipate or the storyteller can go even deeper than what we expected or planned. At one meeting, we had a situation where the storytelling started to cross into the realm of being a therapy support group instead of sharing a story. It was almost jaw-dropping, and we thought 'you didn't indicate that you would be talking about this.' We recognize that there are different degrees of sharing and that some topics may trigger the need for professional counseling or the need to have resource materials on-hand. And while it may be difficult to interrupt the storyteller, you have to step in and get them back on track.

~ Barb Tuininga and Carol Ross

## Table Conversations



Table conversations where women in small groups have an opportunity to share is the second point of connection at a meeting and very likely where the most intimate sharing occurs. An ideal number of people at a table is six.

Often participants who may be reserved, or those that feel they don't have anything important to say, will feel more comfortable sharing in the small group after hearing others' stories.

The team uses two to three open-ended table questions in large print at each table – to help start conversation and provide a point for anchoring when the discussion veers off-topic. A good rule of thumb for the length of table conversations is 30-45 minutes.

Many of the participants may not know each other. To maximize time, have the group introduce themselves using the question as a form of storytelling. For question example: "Describe an experience where there was inappropriate language being used referring to a cultural group." A person at the table could say: "*I experienced inappropriate language being used during a visit with my extended California family. We are a large family that has lived in the same town for over 60 years. I've been gone five years having relocated to Bellevue and much has changed. At our gathering, a guest commented on...*"

### KEEP IN MIND

- Acknowledge first-time attendees; "Please raise your hand if this is your first meeting so others can also welcome you."
- Appoint someone with some experience in previous conversations help guide table conversation or keep it on-track. Consider introducing a formal facilitator role.
- Be personally aware of cultural differences in communication style. For example, in the U.S. we may

communicate with a very direct “I” way of telling stories and asking questions which may be uncomfortable for others.

- Remind participants to be respectful, try to stay on-topic and be present for the time that they have together. Listening can be as powerful as sharing.
- Respect boundaries and build trust. Everyone who is willing should have a chance to participate without interruption. One person should not dominate the conversation. Respect privacy in the sharing (once outside of the conversation circle) by not referring specifically to the person by name, or where they live.
- Do not judge another’s comments of their experience; rather understand through specific examples why they might feel that way.
- Assign an experienced volunteer or staff to handle uncomfortable situations that may arise.

## Wrap Up



A meeting can be wrapped up by letting conversations conclude at the end of the meeting time with no summary. It is also possible to bring the group back for a 5-10 minute sharing of the most remarkable things that were experienced in the table conversation; but it's often hard to pull the group out of a conversation or have the larger room experience the same level of connection shared at every table.

Sharing and connection can occur long after the end of the meeting. Often, participants are busy exchanging

contact information, browsing a table that may have community/program flyers and information, engaging with the storyteller, or wanting to share informal feedback with the program team. At times, someone may indicate that they also want to share their story.

If you are looking for feedback, you can have a facilitator provide some notes of the experience or find an easy feedback loop such as a simple comment card or ask for quotes.

One idea is to have a piece of easel paper draped over the table and some markers at each table where one or several words might be written to describe the experience of the conversation for the individuals at the table.

The post-meeting clean-up usually takes around 45 minutes as women tend to linger and carry on conversations begun at the tables. As the team is engaged in cleaning up, that is a good time to debrief; what went well, what was challenging, any observations. Also, take inventory of food and beverages to plan for the next meeting.

While it is fresh, any reflective time the next day is a great time to jot down those observations and any comments that may have been shared verbally and/or in writing by participants. This information could be the basis of reporting back to your organization about the success of the event or beginning to build the template for a collection of meeting stories and notes.

## Taking Photographs



Photographs are important because they help capture the meaning of an event over time and ‘tell the story’ of its journey as it grows and changes. The photos can also be used for promotional purposes, such as press releases, website, and social media.

Capture the diversity of a meeting through emotions (laughter, smiles, hugs, thoughtful expressions), actions (speaking, applause, intent listening, people greeting each other), and numbers in attendance (group, wide shots).

## KEEP IN MIND

- Get permission from the audience to take their photos. If the participant “opts-out”, provide an identifier on their name badge that can easily be spotted by the photographer.
- Determine whether the sensitivity of the topic is appropriate for taking photos.
- Avoid being intrusive. Use a camera with zoom capability and limit flash to capture close-up evocative images.

## Follow Up

Part of the journey in creating meaningful programs is to find a way to collect honest feedback about how a program was received. Ask yourself and others the following questions:

- Were logistics handled properly? Was there too much included in the program?
- Was the storytelling effective?
- Was there meaningful dialogue at the table?
- What could we have done differently or have communicated more clearly?



# Creating Opportunities in the Workplace

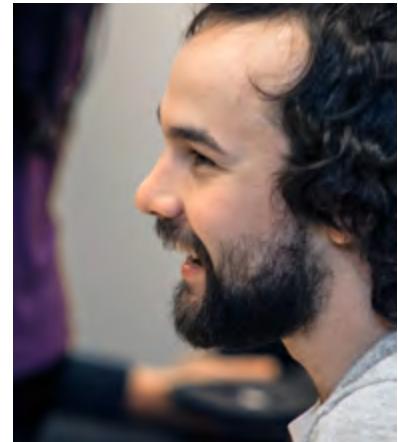
The growing diversity in the workplace offers a rich environment to have a cultural conversation, increase cultural understanding and improve collaboration. Often there are stories just waiting to be told that could lead to more engagement and a shared appreciation for similarities while valuing differences.

Building trust in a work environment may require additional patience on the part of the organizer. Narrow topics with designated storytellers can set the stage for personal sharing.

Having a person assigned to facilitate discussion, establish ground rules for communication, and focus on conversation-starting table questions creates a container that allows those participating to feel more relaxed. The goal is for participants to develop a comfort level where they can have informal conversations over coffee or lunch, and build friendships.

## Some ways of providing structure:

- Watch a TED Talk around a particular topic followed by a discussion.
- Read a book or an article and ask people to share their thoughts.
- View an art or photograph installation followed by discussion.
- Group sharing around a particular common experience; for example, the experience of arriving at this place (town, company, organization, etc.)
- Coming together a month after a cultural training activity to share how new tools have been applied or what questions remain.



# Quick Notes

Here is a quick summary that will help in having an engaging and rewarding cultural conversation.

## *Safe Space*

- Make the program a safe space, where the participants feel comfortable to have conversations and share stories. Some values that can be adopted:
  - Be present and engaged
  - Be respectful of different cultures and views
  - Everyone's voice is important
  - Have no fear to ask questions

## *Be Adaptable*

- Be flexible to real-time events: sometimes unexpected event – may require a program shift or the need to address the issue in the room. Such incidents have their share of challenges and it's important to be adaptable and manage the changes.
- It's OK if something happens that isn't planned. Something wonderful could happen as a result.

## *Be Prepared*

- Expect the unexpected – you do not have control of who shows up and if they have an agenda that does not work well with the goal of the program.
- Be prepared when presenting controversial topics.
- Have a norm about how to respond to a tense or unexpected situation – keep calm; keep the program goals in mind and protect them.

## *The Storyteller*

- Know your audience when choosing a storyteller; the storyteller must connect to the audience; the audience must connect with her story.
- Engage with the storyteller; brief her about the program and audience expectations. Make her feel comfortable in telling her story in front of a group.
- Have a Plan B. Sometimes the storyteller may have second thoughts as the day comes closer.

## *The Topic*

- The topic must be relevant and contain elements of universal interest

## *Marketing*

- Create promotional material to 'spread the word'; distribute a 'Save the Date' email as a reminder; use social media
- Distribute the email as a Bcc (blind carbon copy) to avoid unsolicited emails.

## *Logistics and Set Up*

- Understand your budget and the limitations thereof when planning the program.
- Set up the room with round tables or theater style depending on the meeting and type of presentation. Food and refreshments can be laid out buffet style on one side of the room.
- Maintain a sign-in sheet at the door.

## *The Meeting*

- Include some key points in the introduction:
  - The commitment to creating a safe space for connection and conversation.
  - A reminder that the storytellers (in general) are not professional speakers.
  - Honor the speaker and those who share at the tables by keeping in confidence those sensitive items that may be shared
- Get permission from the audience to take their photos. This can be managed by having them agree/not agree on the sign-in sheet. Also, remind people at the beginning of the meeting that photos will be taken.
- Be sensitive and prepared for course correction: during the storytelling session, watch the storyteller as well as the audience to pick up cues.
- Provide a few open-ended questions at each table to help get the conversation started.
- Connect with the storyteller after she has told her story. She may need to share her experience or be reassured that everything went well.

- Wrap up by letting conversations conclude naturally at the end of the meeting time or have a few tables share the most remarkable things that were experienced at their table.
- Get feedback by having a facilitator provide some notes or find an easy feedback loop such as simple comment card. Also, jot down your observations and any comments that may have been shared verbally and/or in writing by participants.

## An Invitation

What unique opportunities exist within your communities to have conversations that increase understanding, build connection, and grow leaders and resiliency? We invite you to use this handbook as a template, customized to the character of the communities in which you live, collaborate and serve. Start small and allow the program to grow organically, letting connections be your guide.

We would love to hear from you about what you create, how your community responds and what you learn along the way. Wishing you great conversations in this journey!



Welcome and introduction



Storytelling



Table conversations



Wrap-up

