

# BIG QUESTION CONVERSATIONS

RESOURCES FOR CONVERSATION LEADERS



# CONVERSATION IN CONTEXT

## KNOWING YOUR PURPOSE

An Ask Big Questions conversation is different from most casual conversation – it is an intentional conversation with a particular purpose. To achieve the purpose, it is important to understand the guiding spirit of asking Big Questions.

### What is “Ask Big Questions”?

Ask Big Questions seeks to deepen understanding and strengthen community through reflective conversations about questions that matter to everyone. No matter our background or perspective, we need opportunities to see and hear each other more deeply – not as labels but as human beings. Conversations that help us connect are essential building blocks for strong and inclusive communities. Big Question conversations support and strengthen civic habits of listening, civility, and engaging diverse perspectives, which are important steps toward better problem solving. Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel International.

### What is a Big Question conversation?

The heart of our reflective conversations are questions that matter to everyone and everyone can answer. They might be challenging questions, but they’re not “hard;” they’re not questions that require expertise to answer. They’re questions we all have stories about, questions all of us share. In this conversation, we will focus on sharing our stories and considering how our Big Question connects to our lives, not taking positions and debating issues. For our time together, we want to listen and explore to understand and learn, instead of to convince or persuade others.

# BASIC CONVERSATION LEADERSHIP

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR DISCUSSION GUIDE

Each conversation guide will take your group through a structured conversation, designed to encourage participants to share their stories and to listen to those of others. The conversation components and questions have been developed specifically to support the tone and purpose of the conversation.

### The Conversation Flow:



## WELCOME

- To begin your conversation, be sure to review the brit – the covenant -- which sets parameters to guide the group.
- It can be tempting to skip or rush this step, but taking the time to review your expectations helps establish a more trustworthy space by establishing expectations and responsibilities for how we interact.
- Reviewing the brit together also empowers you and participants with standards you can return to if you feel participants are veering away from the kind of conversation you wish to encourage.

## ASK & SHARE

- The “Ask & Share” section invites everyone to share a personal story or reflection connected to the topic you will be discussing.
- This helps people get to know one another, makes it easier for quieter participants to get comfortable in the room, and builds up to the Big Question by asking smaller questions that relate to it.
- People don’t usually ask each other Big Questions in part because they are daunting and require a kind of vulnerability we don’t display in every day conversation. “Share” let’s us approach that question more naturally.

## LEARN

- The “Learn” section is where you will spend the bulk of your time. It always centers around a text, image, or other “object,” which the group will interpret and discuss together.
- Remember, the discussion is not a class, and the point isn’t to learn *the subject matter* of the text. Rather, the goal is to learn *from one another*, and *from the discussion process* itself.
- Each Learning Object is followed by specific types of questions, all of which serve a purpose in creating a meaningful and lively conversation:

- Clarifying Questions: What’s happening in the object? What’s going on in the text/images/video?

These questions are simply to ensure everyone understands what’s happening in the object and levels the playing field so that everyone feels like they can participate in the discussion.

- Interpretive Questions: What’s the author’s intent?

These questions are meant to help unpack (interpret) the possible meanings of what is happening in the object through close reading. The key here is to stay as close as possible to the object and what we can tell from what is actually there — that is, don’t use this section to move into evaluative questions like “What do you think about it?”

- Reflective Questions: How does it resonate with us?

In many ways the whole conversation is a lead-up to these “reflective” questions that help us bridge from the author’s intent to our own experience. It is important to remember that evaluative questions like, “What do you think about this?” are different than reflective questions – evaluative questions invite opinions which can lead to taking positions and debating, while reflective questions invite sharing one’s experience.

## **DO**

- This final section asks everyone to reflect on what they have discovered during the conversation. How has it changed how they think about the topic? How might they choose to act differently in light of what has been discussed?
- It is important because it lets the participants reflect on their time together and what happened.
- It’s easy to skip over this step and simply focus on Learn, but DO is invaluable for two reasons- it helps a facilitator grow from hearing how participants felt about the conversation and it helps participants synthesize for themselves and each other, which makes new ideas stick around longer.

# CONVERSATION CHECKLIST: THE BASIC STEPS

- Before you Begin
  - Set up room/space - Be intentional about choosing and arranging a space where interruptions are minimized and chairs can be arranged in a circle so everyone can see each other
  - Make copies of the conversation guide for each participant
- Opening
  - Welcome
  - Remind everyone of the Big Question
  - Give an overview of conversation and review the bit together
- Ask & Share
  - Ask participants to consider the question
  - Give everyone a moment to collect their thoughts
  - Ask each person to introduce themselves and share a brief answer
- Learn
  - Read introductory text, if any
  - Experience the Learning Object(s) together as a group
  - Facilitate a discussion that moves through:
    - Clarifying: Examining what is happening in the object
    - Interpreting: Exploring interpretations of what happened in the object
    - Reflecting: Exploring how the object resonates with participants' experiences
- Do
  - Lead participants through the final questions, giving them time to reflect and then share.
- Closing
  - Thank participants
  - Make any summary comments
  - Remind participants of next step/session
  - Provide instructions for between session actions, if any

# DEEPENING YOUR PRACTICE AS A CONVERSATION LEADER

## WHAT DOES A FACILITATOR DO (AND NOT DO)?

Most conversations we have on a regular basis don't involve a facilitator, someone who leads and guides our interaction. A facilitator is not an expert on the subject nor are they a teacher. They are there to help as many participants as possible feel welcome, included, and engaged in the discussion. How do they make that happen?

- Facilitators use a structure (in this case our Ask Big Questions Conversation Guides) to create a transparent flow to the conversation.
- Facilitators use well-crafted questions to inspire reflection.
- Facilitators practice skills, strategies, and techniques that help manage group dynamics and support the purpose of the conversation.
- Facilitators infuse their guidance with their own style.

Becoming a good facilitator is similar in some ways to becoming a good athlete, musician or craftsman: knowing your tools and practicing the skills and techniques help you improve your overall performance, even when you already have a talent or natural aptitude for the activity. You wouldn't ever just practice it once and think you have learned all there is to learn. The more you do it, the better you get. And, just because you have learned and practiced doesn't mean that you will do it perfectly every time. You will make mistakes. You will have off days. Don't let it shake your confidence. Keep practicing.

Just as your skills will develop and improve, your style will grow and shift as you find your feet as a facilitator; it is a reflection of your unique personality, strengths and abilities. Are you comfortable talking in front of a crowd? Do you always know how to put the whole room at ease? Are you a little more quiet and an excellent, deep listener? There are many great ways to facilitate. Who you are as a facilitator will reflect who you are as a person.

# **READ, RESPOND, REFLECT: THE 3 CORE ACTIONS OF FACILITATION\***

There's no one way to facilitate a conversation, but there are a few core moves, or actions, that help facilitators do their work.

## **1. Reading (What's going on in this conversation and with this group?)**

Just as a quarterback on a football field or a conductor in an orchestra must “read” what’s happening on the field or stage, a facilitator needs to be in tune with what is happening in their group. This helps the facilitator to make decisions about what to do next (which sometimes is to do nothing at all!). Reading a room requires the facilitator to focus on listening to and observing what the group is communicating both verbally and nonverbally. Often this means the facilitator talks less than they might as a participant. (Hint: Relying on the conversation guide to provide structure for the discussion helps free your attention for listening, observing and reading the room.)

## **2. Responding (or not!)**

Reading a room primes a facilitator to respond to both problems and opportunities. Facilitators are constantly making decisions during a conversation, including the decision not to do anything. Facilitators must strike a balance between intervening so that the group stays on track, doesn't spend too much time in one section of the conversation, and isn't dominated by a select few, and letting a conversation have a natural flow so that participants don't feel overly managed by the facilitator. Just being aware of striking this balance can help a facilitator when weighing whether or not to jump in.

## **3. Reflecting (What did you learn?)**

People become better facilitators by having multiple opportunities to lead and adjusting based on what they learn. After each conversation, good facilitators reflect (sometimes with their group or a supervisor or mentor) on what went well and what they could improve next time. Don't be afraid to try new approaches, or name what's happening to the room (e.g. “Last week we ran way over, so this week I am going to try a new strategy to help manage our time”).



## **A Quick Word on What Facilitation Isn't**

While there are countless styles of facilitating, it's worth mentioning what the job is not. Facilitating is not about imparting a specific idea or lesson to the group. Facilitating is also not about avoiding conflict; it's about creating the kind of place where people who disagree can talk to each other productively—in a way that helps them appreciate and learn from each other, rather than disengaging or getting into a fight. Finally, facilitating is not therapy. As facilitators, we don't have the necessary training to help others in this way. We can support them in seeking the help they need, but it's actually our job to make sure the focus isn't on just one person's story. We want each person to feel comfortable contributing their unique experience and viewpoint.

*\*This framework for facilitating is based on the concept of the facilitators' "thinking dispositions" as described in The Facilitator's Book of Questions. (Allen, Blythe, Teachers College Press, 2004)*

## **FACILITATOR MINDSET: TRUST THE GROUP, TRUST THE PROCESS, TRUST THE OBJECT**

As facilitators, we fundamentally believe that people can learn the most from one another, and that groups of people can have powerful conversations that can change the world. This means that we have to trust that the group—any group!—will have fulfilling conversations and not over-manage them. We also have to trust that the structure we're using is a good one and that sticking to it will help us have richer, deeper conversations. And finally, we have to trust that the Learning Object chosen for the conversation guide will be a catalyst for thoughtful conversation. We need to trust these things not because the goal is to mindlessly follow a particular program, but because having trust in others and in the materials we are using means that we can let go of some of our worry and not feel responsible for every second of a conversation. It also lets us sit comfortably in silence without panicking, and trust that the group is thinking.

# NAVIGATING DISAGREEMENT, TENSION & CONFLICT

Leading a conversation can be a nerve-wracking experience. As facilitators, we are invested not only in the quality of the conversation but in each participant's feeling of inclusion. We would like for every person in the conversation to feel that their thoughts, ideas, and identity are valued.

There's a lot we can do to help each participant feel welcome and to help the conversation be rich, engaging, and structured. What we can't do is avoid all disagreements and conflict—after all, when humans interact and communicate, there are always going to be differences of opinion and there may sometimes be tensions and flared tempers.

As facilitators, our aim is to steer sources of tension and disagreement so that they lead to powerful moments of connection and conversation—even if they are difficult or tense—in which participants feel supported and welcome, and talk and listen across their differences.

## 1. Disagreement is not a bad thing.

While it's tempting to hope for a conversation that doesn't have any disagreement, those conversations can be the least interesting and transformative – if we all agree, there is little stimulus for reflection, growth, and change. That's not to say that the goal of a conversation is disagreement, but it's important to remember that when participants disagree with each other in a respectful and engaged way, that indicates that people are invested in the conversation. Sometimes broad agreement in a group doesn't mean that everyone actually agrees, but may indicate people don't feel comfortable speaking up with an opinion or are disengaging from the conversation.

## 2. Name what is happening

This is one of the most important practices of facilitation: when you are leading a conversation and things feel tense or uncomfortable, name it to the group (“It feels like we are uncovering places where our group disagrees with one another. Can we think about how we can best listen to one another's experiences even if they are different from our own?”) Naming what is happening in the room—rather than sidestepping it and hoping it dissolves naturally—is key to helping everyone recognize the dynamics of the conversation, which they may not be fully aware of, especially if the tension is not overt. It also surfaces the conflict so that it can be processed and directed in a way that makes all parties feel heard and respected even if it can't be fully resolved. By naming the moment (“It seems like there are a number of side conversations happening right now. Let's bring everyone back into the group so that we can all hear each other's opinions.”), the conversation can deepen and grow, rather than become splintered or fractured.

It is important to understand that there is a distinction between naming the moment that is happening, rather than the person who might be at the center of the moment for better or worse. (You don't want to say, "I feel like Antonio is really dominating the conversation," or "I am noticing that Emma is attacking Josh for using sexist language," or even statements that might seem positive like, "Can we all try to make 'I' statements like Crystal is doing?") Naming people instead of behaviors puts people on the defensive, making it harder for them to recognize and adjust their behavior.

### **3. Use the group agreement to guide the process**

A good group agreement anticipates conflict, and provides you with an agreed upon way to work through it. The agreement gives you an external standard to refer back to, which can help depersonalize the conflict. Using the agreement can also help the group slow down when tension or conflict is happening, which helps people step back from strong reactions. The group agreement also empowers participants to be part of addressing conflict, so it doesn't all fall on you.

# TROUBLESHOOTING: WHAT DO I DO IF...?

## MANAGING TIME AND AGENDA

### How do I manage the pacing of the conversation?

#### What to do:

- Pay attention to the clock! It's better to have a wristwatch or stopwatch than a cell phone (so you won't get distracted by texts or notifications), but check in during the conversation to make sure you are staying on track.
- Plan ahead to know where you need to be succinct and concise, such as when providing instructions. Know where you can cut to save time if you need to (such as some of the discussion questions).
- Practice "time-telling" with the group. It's perfectly appropriate to let the group know how much time is left ("We have 3-4 minutes left for this section of the conversation) so that they can understand where they are in the conversation.
- Use a "Parking Lot" or "Bike Rack" – a place to list and "park" topics that are tangents so you can move on with the topic at hand.
- Segue when possible. Seize the opportunity when a comment is made that leads perfectly to the next portion of the conversation. When that doesn't happen naturally, just name the transition and move the group forward.

### What do I do if the group is quiet or slow to talk?

It's easy to get uncomfortable or worried if there are silences, and start projecting your fears – that people are bored or you aren't doing well as a facilitator.

#### What to do:

- Anticipate and allow for silence. Silence can be generative – sometimes people need time to process and reflect on what was said, to collect their thoughts or gather their courage to speak. Get comfortable with holding the silence, and feel for when it is generative versus dead-end.
- Don't assume you know why people are being silent – if the group doesn't warm up and the conversation doesn't start to flow, it's okay to ask what is holding people back.

- Avoid question stacking. When asking a question to the group, pick one question, ask and pause. It's ok if it takes a few seconds for the first person to chime in. Asking multiple questions at once can make it more challenging for participants to respond and they may respond to the wrong question.

## MANAGING GROUP DYNAMICS

### What do I do if someone is dominating the conversation?

In this scenario, someone, or perhaps a few people, are dominating the conversation. It's not so much that what they are saying is problematic as how often they are talking. By jumping in with comments at every turn, quieter participants aren't joining in the conversation.

#### What to do:

- Create a speaking order and stick to it. If multiple people raise their hands, create a short speaking order ("From left to right, let's hear from Jordan, Malik, and Sarah"). The important part is to stick to it even if someone tries to jump in to respond.
- Invite others to speak. Saying, "I'd love to invite anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak yet to share your thoughts," is a neutral way of inviting in more voices without putting the focus on any individual participant.
- Ask the person to hold off. Often participants who dominate conversations are aware that they talk a lot. Sometimes saying, "I'd love to hear your comment but first I want to make sure anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak yet gets a chance," can be an easy way to open up the conversation and gently remind the person to allow others to speak.

### What if there's resistance to the activity?

Sometimes participants can be resistant to a particular section of a structured conversation. Or sometimes simply the idea that others may not go along with the structure of the conversation guide is enough to make a facilitator nervous. An important thing to remember is that resistance is often about other people's fears of being vulnerable in front of a group or looking stupid. (That can be true for you too.)

## What to do:

- Explain, don't apologize. The structure isn't arbitrary, rather it's designed to build a space where many different kinds of thinkers and talkers can participate. There may always be one or more participants who don't like small group breakouts, large group discussions, doing something other than talking, etc. Rather than apologize, try explaining the rationale in a short sentence. Sharing the reason for an activity and how it connects to the purpose of the conversation can help smooth the transition into the activity.
- Don't panic. Resistance never fully goes away. It's important to know that if it springs up (in you or in the group) it's not a sign that you are doing something wrong; rather, it is a sign that something—the setting, the material, the activity—is making people react. This can be a great and powerful thing.
- Stay strong. Many times a resistant person will back down if you calmly and clearly ask them to try.

## What do I do if someone is disrespectful?

It can be tricky if a participant is speaking in a way that is disrespectful or is clearly offending others in the group. As a facilitator, it's important that you don't ignore the moment. The goal is to address the participant's behavior or speech in a way that allows him or her to grow from the experience and to adjust without feeling shamed.

## What to do:

- Correct offensive language. Speak up if someone is using an inappropriate or pejorative term. It's important that others in the room see that it won't go unnoticed. You can ask for them to restate what they are saying in a more appropriate way.
- Refer to the agreements set at the start of the conversation. This can help point to the kind of behavior you expect without singling out a specific person.
- Speak from individual experience. If participants are extrapolating about groups of people, ask them to speak from their first-person experience in a specific, story-based way.
- Ask for help. It's hard to cover all the ways you should address offensive behavior in a short document like this. Bring the problem up with your program leader or fellow conversation leaders. If the conversation goes badly one week, be open about trying something new the next week. By being committed to creating intentional spaces for conversation and working through problems, we can model to others how to do this in their own lives and in other communities.

## How can I manage misunderstandings?

### What to do:

- Get specific. When a participant's comments are vague or unclear, simple questions such as "Can you give us an example of when you felt this?" or "Can you say more about that?" can help the speaker open up or clarify their thought.
- Paraphrase. When there is miscommunication or confusion, encourage participants to ask each other to re-state what they are saying, and to paraphrase what they heard to check if they understood correctly.

## How can I deepen the conversation?

### What to do:

Using questions and prompts to transition from a series of individual statements to more give-and-take can help deepen the conversation. Here are a few useful examples:

- What would you like to add to what you have shared so far?
- What more would you like to know from others in the group?
- What has started you thinking in new ways or about a perspective you hadn't considered before?
- What has been interesting, surprising, challenging, or inspiring in what you have heard others share?
- What connections have you noticed among our stories?
- What has resonated with you so far?

## MANAGING YOURSELF

### How do I manage my worries and fears?

#### What to do:

- Prepare for the things you are worried or nervous about – instead of hoping those things won't happen, prepare yourself for what you will do if they do happen. Plan your response – write your own script for how you want to respond, down to even rehearsing helpful words, phrases and sentences.
- Spend time preparing. Take time in advance to get familiar with the materials, so you can be more relaxed, present to the conversation, and able to connect with the group.

## How do I manage my own reactions and emotions?

### What to do:

- Being the leader of a conversation can feel vulnerable. We all want to be liked and feel connection and comfort with our group. But our very human desire to be liked can cause us to try to ease our own inner tensions, often by saying something off the cuff and not well thought through. Being aware of how our need to be liked is influencing us can help us be more grounded in uncomfortable moments.
- Know what pushes your buttons. What are the topics, comments, attitudes, etc. that tend to upset you or spark strong emotions and reactions? Being aware of our own “hot button” topics helps us stay centered if those things come up.

## How do I manage my own participation?

Sometimes the hardest conversations to facilitate are the ones dealing with topics that we are most passionate about. The key is to remember the role of the facilitator in the conversation and create the space for others to benefit from thinking, talking and listening together.

### What to do:

- Resist being the expert. Big Questions are intentionally designed so that everyone can relate to them, without extensive background knowledge.
- Ask yourself if you are contributing to the content or the process. As a facilitator, your responsibility is to the process. Check in with yourself about how the comment will help shape the full group’s experience.

## How do I get better at facilitating?

Most facilitators get better simply by getting a lot of practice. Getting yourself into (and out of) tricky moments in group conversations is what helps build your skillset and your confidence.

### What to do:

- Identify your strengths and weaknesses. Take some time to think about what you excel at and where you could use some extra practice. Think about how you behave in formal and informal conversations, both individual and group.



- Reflect. Take a few minutes after a conversation to think about what went well and what was rocky (or felt rocky to you, even if the group didn't seem to notice). Try to be specific about the moment and about your role in it.
- Get feedback (but not from everyone). Unstructured feedback isn't the most helpful so avoid asking the full participant group about how you are doing. But feedback from a few people can help illuminate what you are doing well and where you might want to try new strategies. Good feedback is descriptive rather than evaluative, specific, and focused on what you can try next time.
- Experiment. Try new things. Watch other facilitators in action and copy the things they do that you like best. If it doesn't go perfectly that's more than fine, but you become a better facilitator by having the courage to experiment and explore.



The Union for Reform Judaism leads the largest and most diverse Jewish movement in North America. We strengthen communities that connect people to Jewish life. Visit <https://urj.org/> for more information.



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