10 TEN TECHNIQUES FOR HIGH EMOTION AND/OR COMPLEXITY

At Dialogue Partners, we’re fans of top 10 lists: top 10 words of the year; top 10 foods that will make you healthy; top 10 wines of the year; top 10 places to see before you die... So we thought, why not a top 10 list of techniques for HIGH EMOTION and/or COMPLEXITY?

In reality, this list could be the top 1000 things we’ve learned, but we know you might not read it if it was that long, so we just do 10 things at a time.

Socratic Circle. The Socratic Circle is a variation of a revolving conversation that supports learning, relationships and embraces high emotion. Participants are divided equally into two concentric circles. Prompt questions, designed to spark thinking and start the conversation are introduced at the beginning. There are only 2 rules: those sitting in the inner circle are responsible to speak and participate in the conversation; those sitting in the outer circle are responsible to listen. This technique takes conversations to a deeper level and creates a safe and respectful place for emotional conversations. You can read more about Socratic Circles here.

Deliberative Forum. The Deliberative Forum technique uses material, sometimes in the form of a workbook, to provide background information, and then outlines a series of approaches to addressing a particular issue that are based on different world views and values. This approach encourages groups to listen and talk together about the pros and cons of various options proposed. Participants in a Deliberative Forum process have an equal opportunity to be heard thus helping to reduce high emotion and polarization. We used this technique in our Edmonton City Centre Airport Lands Public Involvement Project. You can read the case study here.

Open Space. Open Space is a group engagement process that is effective where a diverse group of people come together to address a complex, multifaceted issue in a productive way. It is a participant governed process, with minimal facilitation and few rules that result in surprising, long-lasting, supportable outcomes. It is most appropriate when no one knows the answer or answers, and the solution isn’t obvious. It is best on issues of conflict, controversy or passion, where people can have a direct and important influence on the issue under discussion. It can unite very diverse groups around a common issue. Our Open Space tipsheet can be found here.

Photo Voice. The Photo Voice technique combines storytelling with images and gives people the power to tell their own stories as they see them. Participants are asked to express their ideas through the use of pictures, images or their own creations and provide a narrative to go along with their photos. Photo Voice is a powerful technique to give those often unheard a voice. It works especially well with marginalized, “hard to reach”, youth or those not engaging in formal processes. Click here to read more about using the Photo Voice technique.

Ideas Fair. This engagement technique is intended to bring together large groups of participants to generate and explore a wide diversity of perspectives and ideas. Most effectively hosted as a drop-in style event, its key focus is to draw on the wisdom of many and gather lots and lots of data and insight in creative ways. It can be held as an individual event or series of face-to-face events. In a nutshell, a number of “Discussion Stations” are created to support discussion questions that builds
on itself. Embedded within each station is a unique conversation technique or method that appeals to a variety of learners (visual, auditory, tactile). This technique is ALL ABOUT LISTENING. We used the Ideas Fair technique in our City of Edmonton Evolving Infill project. For more information and an example of the discussion stations we used, please click here.

**Story Telling.** Story telling is a powerful technique that encourages listening, connects people’s experiences to their beliefs and values and generates deeper understanding of different perspectives. We all have stories to tell that share our experience and what is important to us. Using story-eliciting questions is a way of making meaning of complex issues. It helps connect people to their values, beliefs, reactions and behaviours. When stories are told in a group, it opens up the opportunity to explore insights revealed together, creates deeper understanding and builds relationships. Click here to read the case study on our City of Edmonton Evolving Infill project and how we used “infill stories” to connect participants.

**Scenario Thinking.** Scenario thinking is a tool for motivating people to challenge the status quo, by envisioning a variety of different futures, considering the implications of those possible futures, and making decisions about how to act. It is useful for complex situations where tough decisions need to be made, where courage may be needed, and where diverse perspectives need to be reconciled. A fantastic “how to” guide created by the Global Business Network for the Monitor Institute is available here. Dialogue Partners used scenario thinking in our work in reconciling available resources, declining funding and student enrolment, and a desire for quality, vibrant education for all in our project with the Edmonton Public School Board.

Games. Using innovative, creative, fun approaches to engaging people in powerful ways to make changes and take action is a core feature of public engagement. Games motivate participation, inspire outcomes and results, and drive input. We draw inspiration from Jane McGonigal, an advocate of gaming in making meaningful change in the world in our work applying games to public engagement. You can watch her inspiring TED talk here or check out her website here and you can try out her online game “Super Better” here. We’ve designed online and face to face games in many projects, including for the City of Calgary budget engagement project.

**Conversation Toolkits.** A Conversation Toolkit is a document similar to a discussion guide that allows a diverse view of perspectives to be heard in conversation. The material in your Conversation Toolkit can be easily tailored to fit the context of the situation. This technique is supportive, collaborative and builds relationships while allowing participants to explore ideas, learn new things, understand others and find solutions to challenges. In many instances, people are already talking about your project so why not give support and guidance to them to have really great conversation? For an example of a Conversation Toolkit that we created for our Evolving Infill project, please click here.

**Appreciative Inquiry.** Appreciative Inquiry is a facilitated process that engages participants by asking questions and telling stories in order to create the future together. It is grounded in positivity, appreciation and opportunity. This problem solving technique can create a strong future vision and action. In an Appreciative Inquiry process, participants work cooperatively to co-create the future together – as happened in our work with Canadian Blood Services when we designed and facilitated a multi-day leadership session.