Bridging Divides: Tools for County Leaders to Overcome Division and Foster Collaboration

Developed by Convergence Center for Policy Resolution for the National Association of Counties
Under the leadership of National Association of Counties (NACo) President Mary Jo McGuire, NACo is focusing on the signature project, “Forward Together.” The three pillars of the project are:

**CONNECT**
*Building bridges to advance excellence and networks in county government,*

**INSPIRE**
*Driving community engagement and residents’ trust in county government,* and

**LEAD**
*Facilitating local, state, federal and tribal intergovernmental partnerships and common-sense policy solutions.*

In support of the effort focused on bridging divisions and improving collaboration, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, the leading organization bridging divides to solve seemingly intractable issues, created this toolkit for county government leaders looking to overcome divides and improve collaboration.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CONVERGENCE CENTER FOR POLICY RESOLUTION

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical issues through collaborative problem-solving across ideological, political, and cultural divisions. For a decade and a half, Convergence has brought together leaders, doers, and experts to build trusting relationships, identify breakthrough solutions, and form unlikely alliances for constructive consensus-based change on seemingly intractable issues. Our process is improving the lives of Americans and strengthens our democratic republic for a more resilient and collaborative future.
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INTRODUCTION

Leaders in both public and private sectors are grappling with the daunting challenge of addressing divisions and conflicts within their organizations and communities. This struggle is particularly evident in the public sector, where county, city, and school board leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to effectively manage divisions. Tensions exist within county boards; between county level elected officials; between county government agencies; between county government, city, federal, and tribal governments; and between county governments and communities. Town halls, forums, and city council, school board, and county board meetings are sometimes veering out of control, highlighting the urgency for county and other local leaders to develop strategies and skills to bridge divides and collaborate across differences.
The Challenge

America is divided for many reasons. Over the last decade, there have been rapid technological advances, demographic shifts, and growing inequality. The proliferation of online and social media makes it possible to find what appear to be facts to support any idea, and without the ability to agree on the facts, it is hard to solve problems or engage in productive dialogue.¹

At the same time, the major political parties have become more homogeneous, and more aligned with certain identities and worldviews. Because our worldviews drive our preferences and because they now more consistently align with our politics, we have fewer and fewer interactions with people who think differently than we do. Republicans tend to live, work, worship, and play in different places than Democrats.²

As our differences lead us to spend less time together, we lack opportunities to experience our many commonalities. This dynamic leads us to exaggerate our differences and fall prey to us versus them zero sum thinking. Us vs them zero sum thinking creates a negative downward spiral in which our sense of threat from the other group leads us to cling to our own group more tightly and further reject the other group which increases our sense of threat in a pernicious cycle.³ These factors have created a heavily divided country where bridging divisions is exceedingly difficult.


Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey

51% (including 55% of independents and 85% of Democrats) say the Republican Party has been taken over by racists.

44% (including 84% of Republicans and 47% of independents) say the Democratic Party has been taken over by socialists.
The Opportunity

County leaders know that we have more in common than differences. They see it every day as they work with constituents and colleagues to solve complex problems in local communities. County leaders’ on-the-ground experience and optimism aligns with the views of most Americans. For example, even amid significant polarization, 72% of Americans believe that we have more in common than what divides us, 93% of Americans say it is important to reduce divisiveness in the United States, including two-thirds who say it is very important to do so, and 79% say that creating more opportunities for people to talk and interact with those who have different values and views would be effective in reducing divisiveness and destructive disagreement.

These trust measures present a significant opportunity for county leaders to bridge divides. They are positioned to model problem-solving and provide leadership within local government and between all levels of government, including bridging divides with local, state, federal, and tribal government. County leaders also hold a unique position to foster collaboration with communities due to their proximity to their constituents and their unique understanding of local issues.
Purpose of this Toolkit

This toolkit provides county government leaders with strategies and tools to bridge divisions within county government, between the levels of government, and between them and communities. These tools include intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup strategies.

This guide will help county government leaders to understand and apply:

1. approaches and strategies to bridge divides,
2. the steps to collaborative problem-solving, and
3. collaborative strategies to engage the community.
Divisions and conflicts exist everywhere. They are a natural part of all relationships in a diverse democracy and can be very challenging to navigate, especially for individuals and communities who’ve experienced trauma. Whether these conflicts impact collaboration between members of county boards, between government departments, or between county government and communities, there are several skills that are critical to aiding county leaders who are working across differences. The following sections are drawn primarily from Greater Good Science Center’s Bridging Differences Playbook and Convergence’s extensive hands-on experience convening diverse leaders in dialogue. The research and the expertise of these organizations provide county leaders with intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup strategies that will assist county leaders who are trying to address divisions within county boards, between county government agencies, between county government and intergovernmental partners, as well as between county governments and diverse communities.

**INTRAPERSONAL STRATEGIES**

Bridging divides requires inner work. It includes developing the right mindset to make interactions across difference constructive. Intrapersonal skills are skills that everyone can practice on their own. These skills can help county leaders step back in the heat of a moment by preventing a conflict from escalating and help them form stronger connections with people who they see as different. Though these skills may seem simple, it can be hard to remember to use them during an intense conversation, and even harder to get them right. Below are intrapersonal strategies that can help county leaders bridge divides, address conflict, and improve collaboration.

Four practical strategies that county government leaders can use to shift their thinking about other’s intentions.

1. **Assume Good Intentions.** Very few people get out of bed in the morning wondering how they can make the world a worse place. Most people, most of the time, are doing what they believe is right. Whenever possible, approach conversations with the belief that the other person means well. This positive mindset helps create better interactions and sets the stage for improved relationships and collaboration.

Below are four practical strategies that county government leaders can use to shift their thinking about other’s intentions.

- **Practice Empathy.** Put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Try to understand their feelings, motivations, and experiences. This can create a connection and help you appreciate their perspective.
- **Practice Open-Mindedness.** Approach conversations with an open mind, willing
to consider alternative viewpoints. Avoid preconceived notions or stereotypes that may cloud your judgment.

- **Avoid Jumping to Conclusions.** As difficult as it can be, resist the urge to make snap judgments or assumptions based on limited information. Take the time to gather all the facts before forming opinions.

- **Practice Patience.** Changing perspectives and building understanding takes time. Be patient and persistent in your efforts to assume good intentions, even in challenging situations.

2. **Breakout of the Echo Chamber.** By immersing yourself in interactions with new people, events, and experiences, you can expand your sense of comfort and familiarity. This practice essentially involves moving towards discomfort and fear. If an individual has a negative opinion about gun owners, a visit to the local shooting range for lessons can be enlightening. For those with reservations about immigrants, attending a religious service at a congregation frequented by recent immigrants could be informative. Approach these events with curiosity and an open mind. The aim is not to change one’s mind but to foster understanding.

Four strategies that county government leaders can use to expand their thinking and experiences.

- **Diversify Your Media Consumption.** Consume news from sources with different political, cultural, and geographic perspectives. Look into independent and community-based media outlets that may offer different viewpoints than mainstream sources.

- **Diversify Your Social Circles.** Attend events or join groups that bring together people with diverse backgrounds, interests, and beliefs. This could include community clubs, cultural organizations, volunteer activities, or visiting different faith communities and houses of worship. In professional settings, make an intentional effort to connect with individuals from different industries, backgrounds, and career levels.

- **Travel and Explore.** Travel to places with different cultures, food, languages, and perspectives. Exposure to new environments can challenge your preconceptions and broaden your understanding of others. Even within your own county, state, or community, there are diverse communities with unique perspectives. Take the time to explore and understand them.

- **Educate Yourself about Different Perspectives.** Explore literature from different authors, cultures, and historical periods. Enroll in courses or workshops that cover topics outside your usual interests.

3. **Seek and Promote Information that Challenges Stereotypes.** Our views and actions toward others are influenced by stereotypes. Exposure to information challenging these stereotypes can lead to more positive perspectives and behavior. Start by recognizing the stereotypes that we form based on different groups of people. Be aware of where these assumptions come from and actively seek information that challenges these stereotypes. Instead of directly challenging the opinion of someone from a different group, ask about common misconceptions they face; ask about their experiences at work, in the community, or in their everyday interactions. Alternatively, expose yourself to counter-stereotypical information through news or content consumption.

Four practical strategies that county government leaders can use to promote counter-stereotypical information and narratives.

- **Improve Media Literacy and Source Verification.** Critically evaluate media content, question biases, and identify stereotypes. Actively share and promote content from reputable sources that challenge stereotypes, including articles, documentaries, or research studies that provide alternative perspectives.

- **Engage with Content that Challenges Stereotypes.** Actively seek out and share content that offers nuanced portrayals of different groups and perspectives on issues.
• **Engage in Personal Reflection.** Reflect on your assumptions. Ask yourself, "Why do I feel this way about the issue? Is there another way to think about the issue? Is the issue more complicated than I think?"

• **Seek First to Understand.** Start from the mindset that the other person's perspective makes as much sense to them as yours does to you. That doesn't mean that it is factually accurate or that you agree with it, but you do need to understand it to work together effectively.

### 4. Focus On Individuality, not Group Identity.

People are often categorized into groups, such as conservative/liberal, young/old, White/Black/Brown, immigrant/citizen, or rural/urban. However, research suggests that when we focus on unique individual qualities and preferences instead, we feel less threatened by those who seem different. The key is to stop seeing others as anonymous group members and to see them as unique individuals, whom you are likely to find you have more in common with than you may have assumed.

**Four practical strategies that county government leaders can use to focus on unique individual qualities and not group identities.**

- **Practice Curiosity and Open-Mindedness.** Instead of making assumptions based on group identity, engage in conversations that explore individual experiences, preferences, and values. Ask open-ended questions that encourage people to share their personal stories. Set aside preconceived notions and judgments based on group labels and approach each person with an open mind, allowing them to define themselves as individuals.

- **Identify Common Values.** Look for commonalities beyond superficial group characteristics. Shared hobbies, passions, or goals can serve as bridges that connect people, transcending the limitations of group identity. Emphasize shared values that may exist across diverse individuals. Focusing on common ground can create a foundation for understanding and cooperation.

- **Challenge Assumptions.** Whenever you catch yourself or others making assumptions based on group identity, consciously challenge those thoughts. Remind yourself that individuals within a group can be vastly different from each other. Take the time to learn about diversity within different groups. Understanding the complexity of individual experiences within a given category can help dispel assumptions.

- **Focus on the Uniqueness of Individuals.** When discussing others, use language that emphasizes their individuality rather than their group identity. For example, say "John, who enjoys hiking and hunting," instead of relying on broad categories, such as "John, the Prius driving liberal next door." Acknowledge unique individual experiences and avoid attributing characteristics to an entire group.

### 5. Develop a Collaborative Mindset.

Finally, mindsets are a fundamental building block to bridging divides. They set up county leaders to engage in tough conversations, build relationships, and increase understanding with others. Solving shared problems across our differences requires a collaborative mindset that helps shift us away from typical "us vs. them" thinking, to thinking focused on problem-solving.

**Below are several mindsets that county government leaders can use to increase the likelihood of bridging divides.**

- **Conflict Can Be Constructive.** See conflict as an opportunity to learn and push thinking to a new level. When conflict starts to feel threatening, try to stay present, breathe, and refocus on your body.

- **Everyone Gets the Benefit of the Doubt.** Remember that negative intentions are rare and seek to understand who people are—their experiences, their values, and why they think the
way they do—before passing judgment on them or their viewpoints. Ask yourself, “Why do I think they’re saying this?”

- **Curiosity Is the Cure.** Especially when you hear things that you disagree with or don’t fully understand, cultivate curiosity, and keep asking questions to learn more rather than just react. Ask yourself, “What am I missing?” Ask the other person, “Can you tell me more about that?” Then briefly summarize what you think you’ve heard and ask, “Did I get that right?” and “Is there more you can share about that?” Remind yourself that no one person or group holds all the answers to complex issues.

- **Relationships are the Core.** Stay focused on building quality relationships as a key to solving challenging problems. Spend time breaking bread and getting to know each other more deeply. Seek to identify shared goals, values, identities, and life experiences and focus on them. The stronger the relationships built; the more likely mutually beneficial solutions can be found.

- **Seek Higher Ground.** Strive to develop solutions that integrate the perspectives and meet the competing needs of everyone who has a stake in your problem. This enables you to develop solutions that don’t require anyone to relinquish their fundamental principles. Forget the “win-lose” paradigm and instead hold on to the belief that diverse parties can find answers of mutual benefit.

**INTERPERSONAL STRATEGIES**

Interpersonal skills are our ability to communicate, interact, and work effectively with others. They involve understanding and managing your emotions and being able to relate to and understand others’ feelings. These skills are crucial in all settings, contributing to successful collaboration and problem-solving.

1. **Listen First.** When people feel heard and understood, they’re more inclined to bridge differences with others. Active listening and tuning into someone’s perspective is key to effective connection. Listening first promotes empathy and connection, particularly in challenging conversations in our daily lives. Remember that listening and understanding do not imply agreeing.

**Six strategies that county leaders can use when listening.**

- **Quiet Your Mind.** Listening well is harder than it sounds, and it’s especially hard when you’re broaching a topic you have strong feelings about. You can use various methods to quiet your thoughts. Some people work out, spend a minute or so taking deep breaths, or express their thoughts and feelings by writing or doodling in a notebook in the lead-up to difficult conversations. For some people, the practice of meditation or mindfulness is helpful.

- **Listen for the Heart of the Message.** People usually share facts, data, and demands because those things are more comfortable to talk about. They’re more hesitant to reveal their feelings, fears, and needs—the information you most need to understand the person, particularly when you’re amid conflict. It’s important to go slowly and ask multiple open-ended questions to draw out the speaker’s core concerns.

- **Confirm You’ve Heard It Right.** The active listening skill that gets used most often is reflection. It’s incredibly effective to reflect back, not word by word everything that was said, but rather the heart of the message—the feelings,
needs, and concerns that you’re hearing and observing through your deep listening. To elicit the heart of the message you can say, “Tell me more,” and “Can you clarify what you mean?” This approach invites people to move from defensiveness to explaining their viewpoints, experiences, and motivations.

- **Acknowledge Emotions.** Recognize and affirm the emotions expressed by the speaker. You can say things like, “It sounds like that was really challenging for you,” to convey understanding and empathy. You can also reflect back the heart of their message to show that you’ve heard their feelings.

- **Ask Clarifying Questions.** Ask questions to gain a clearer understanding of the speaker’s perspective. Clarifying questions can help uncover the underlying emotions and motivations behind their words. Instead of making assumptions, inquire about any uncertainties or ambiguities in a non-confrontational manner. This shows your commitment to understanding their point of view. You can ask, “I normally don’t think about it that way, can you help me understand?”

- **Resist Interrupting.** Allow the speaker to finish their thoughts before responding. Interrupting can convey a lack of respect and prevent the person from fully expressing themselves. Embrace moments of silence, as they can allow the speaker to collect their thoughts and share more deeply. Silence can also be a powerful tool in conveying your openness to their words.

2. **Put People Before Politics.** Having positive political conversations can be tough because we often stereotype people based on their views. However, if you first get to know the person as an individual and understand why they think the way they do, the conversation is likely to be more productive. There is often a temptation to dive into a political conversation, but for a more productive dialogue, it’s better to initially avoid politics or other polarizing topics. Instead, learn about the person by asking questions that reveal stories and experiences.

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**Interpersonal skills are our ability to communicate, interact, and work effectively with others.** They involve understanding and managing your emotions and being able to relate to and understand others’ feelings.

**Three strategies that county leaders can use to put people before politics.**

- **Listen to Personal Stories.** Encourage individuals to share personal stories and experiences before delving into political discussions. This helps to humanize the conversation and build a connection based on shared humanity. Be open about your own experiences and perspectives. Vulnerability in sharing personal stories can create a more open and authentic environment for dialogue.

- **Use Hedging Language.** The issues and your views on them are complex. Recognize that you yourself may hold conflicting views. Avoid speaking in absolutes. Use words like “probably,” “sometimes,” or “maybe” rather than “always,”
“definitely,” or “everyone.” This shows that you’re recognizing the other person’s views as valid and valuable. When giving your perspective it is also helpful to talk more about yourself—your own feelings, needs, values, and concerns—and less about the other “side” of the issue. Allow them to speak for themselves.

- **Lead by Example.** Model respectful and inclusive behavior in your interactions. Leaders who model these values set the tone for others to follow, fostering a culture of respect within the community or organization. When political or divisive discussions arise, focus on finding common ground while understanding that diverse perspectives enrich the conversation.

**3. Perspective Taking and Giving.** Recognizing the perspective of individuals from different groups and empathizing with their worldview fosters a deeper understanding and respect for their values. It diminishes the tendency to label them as outsiders or adversaries.

**Three strategies that county leaders can use to understand the perspectives of others.**

- **Diversify Groups.** Strive to enhance the groups you engage with by welcoming diverse perspectives. Embracing individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, as well as varied viewpoints, enriches discussions and offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities confronting county leaders.

- **Ask Open-Ended Questions.** Instead of immediately discussing issues, start by asking open-ended questions about the person’s background, experiences, and interests. Show genuine interest in things including their hobbies, aspirations, and life experiences. This demonstrates a commitment to understanding the whole person, not just their views on a specific issue.

- **Promote Respectful Environments.** Foster spaces that prioritize respect for diverse perspectives. Encourage open dialogue where individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment. Establish ground rules for discussions that emphasize respect, active listening, and the acknowledgment of individual experiences.

**4. Find Commonalities.** Even when individuals seem different, they typically have at least one thing in common. It could be a shared group, like Midwesterners, or a common role, such as both being parents. These shared identities often outweigh our differences. For instance, supporting different soccer teams doesn’t matter as much as both being soccer fans. Instead of fixating on differences, focus on finding those common threads.

**Three strategies that county leaders can use to find shared identities.**

- **Use Connecting Questions.** Start conversations with open-ended questions that encourage individuals to share a bit about themselves. Questions like, “What informed your views on this issue?” or “What did you like about growing up in your hometown?” can uncover shared interests and experiences. These types of questions foster a relaxed and informal atmosphere, especially in the initial stages of interaction. This can make people more comfortable sharing personal aspects of their lives.

- **Focus on Agreements.** People have much in common, but this can be hard to notice when you’re focused on things about which you don’t agree. Highlight areas of agreement, no matter how small or obvious.

- **Develop Cultural Awareness.** Actively seek to understand the cultural backgrounds of the people with which you interact. This knowledge can help identify shared cultural traditions or values. While finding shared identities is crucial, leaders should also respect and appreciate the uniqueness of diverse perspectives and backgrounds.
5. Seek to Understand Their Values. When appealing to those with a different ideology, it’s important to find out what values matter to them. Research shows that humans have five shared moral foundations that are rooted in our evolution. They are care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. This research suggests that people who identify as “liberal” typically prioritize care and fairness over loyalty, authority, and sanctity, while those who identify as “conservative” tend to be equally attuned to all five foundations. This difference in prioritization can help us understand that it is not that our perceived opposite is bereft of values but rather that they are prioritizing a different set of values. Understanding their values may help you communicate your opinions more effectively. Your goal shouldn’t be to change someone’s mind or convince them of something. Your goal should be to engage in dialogue with empathy and to develop an understanding of their perspective.

Three strategies that county leaders can use to understand the values of other people.

- **Active Listening.** As discussed previously, open ended questions can encourage individuals to share their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. For example, inquire about their background, upbringing, or experiences that have shaped their values. Reflect back on what you’ve heard to ensure understanding and show that you value their perspective. If something is unclear, ask for clarification rather than making assumptions.

- **Share Your Own Values.** Challenge yourself to be vulnerable and be open about your own values and beliefs in a genuine and non-confrontational manner. This can create a space for reciprocal sharing and help establish common ground. Demonstrate transparency about your values and be willing to acknowledge the diversity of perspectives. This can set the stage for constructive dialogue.

- **Moral Reframing.** People typically craft arguments based on their own moral convictions rather than the convictions of the people who have concerns about the issue. The practice of moral reframing is framing an issue in a way that is consistent with that individual’s moral values. For example, a liberal person who supports immigration on the moral grounds that many immigrants suffer harm in their home countries might address a conservative person’s concerns about immigration by framing immigration around the moral principle of patriotism due to the contributions immigrants have historically made to our country and economy. To practice moral reframing explore other person values and think about how you can address those values while holding true to your own.

**INTERGROUP STRATEGIES**

Finally, intergroup strategies are the approaches or actions employed to address interactions, relationships, or conflicts between groups. These strategies aim to promote understanding, collaboration, and positive engagement among diverse groups, fostering cooperation and reducing tension. These skills are especially relevant to leaders or facilitators trying to guide groups toward better interactions and a deeper understanding of one another.

1. **Create the Conditions for Intergroup Contact.** Research has shown that under the right conditions contact between groups can lead to a range of positive outcomes, such as reduced misperceptions, increased empathy, and improved intergroup relations. Positive contact experiences are particularly effective when they provide opportunities for individuals to see each other as individuals rather than as representatives of a particular group. In the context of problem-solving, bringing together diverse groups is important because it can harness the collective intelligence and creativity of individuals with different perspectives and backgrounds. This often leads to a broader range of ideas and more innovative solutions. Effective contact can break down barriers, build trust, and create a foundation for collaborative problem-solving.
Four strategies that county leaders can use to create intergroup contact.

- **Convene and Facilitate Meetings.** Create spaces for open dialogue within teams and communities to challenge misconceptions. Encourage individuals to share their experiences and perspectives to foster understanding. Encourage people to share personal stories that defy stereotypes.

- **Support Public Spaces and Facilities.** Create public spaces and facilities that are accessible and welcoming to people from all backgrounds. This can involve designing and opening libraries, parks, community centers, and recreational facilities that encourage community engagement.

- **Identify Shared Problems.** Identifying common problems is essential to intergroup contact because it facilitates cooperation, reduces divisions, and promotes positive relationships by highlighting commonalities. When groups recognize that they face similar challenges or issues, it can foster a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding.

- **Bring People Together.** Attend events or initiatives that intentionally bring together people from different viewpoints. Engaging with individuals from different backgrounds provides an opportunity to learn about their values and perspectives. These activities can enhance your ability to better navigate tough conversations and solve collective problems.

2. **Identify Common Goals.** When people from different groups identify a goal that they share, and they recognize that they need to work together to achieve that goal, they’re capable of putting aside their differences to come together, replacing distrust with a spirit of goodwill. Though individuals and groups may have disagreements, look for the goals that they have in common and try to highlight these common goals when the groups come together in dialogue.

Two strategies that county leaders can use to identify common goals.

- **Organize Joint Projects.** Create opportunities for individuals from different backgrounds to collaborate on projects or initiatives aligned with common goals.
tangible tasks can build a sense of unity. Implement frameworks that emphasize creativity, collaboration, and a focus on finding practical solutions.

- **Frame Discussions Around Common Goals.** Emphasize the shared goals or objectives that everyone in the group can rally around. This helps to redirect the focus away from individual identities toward collective aims. Reinforce the department’s or community’s mission, emphasizing how working together toward common objectives can bring about positive change.

3. **Focus on Solutions, not Identities.** It’s important to not focus on the identities someone brings with them into a conversation. Instead, after spending time building a relationship with the person, focus on the issues affecting the organization or community and share ideas for solutions. This is an especially useful activity when bringing together people from different, seemingly “opposing” groups. They might be inclined to focus on the other person’s identity—they’re Republican, she’s Muslim, he’s Latino—and make all kinds of assumptions based on that identity, putting themselves on edge before the interaction even begins. Whether county leaders are facilitating this conversation—or participating in this conversation—their goal is to transcend those assumptions as quickly as possible, and instead surface the issues that matter to each person—and the solutions that they have in mind.

**Four strategies that county leaders can use to focus on solutions.**

- **Use Neutral Language.** Be mindful of language that may be associated with specific identities or groups and could trigger preconceived notions. Use neutral and respectful language to ensure that discussions center around the issues at hand rather than reinforcing stereotypes. Present issues in a way that emphasizes their universal impact, ensuring that everyone can relate to and understand the broader implications.

- **Encourage Solution-Oriented Discussions.** Prompt discussions by asking participants to share their ideas for addressing specific challenges or achieving common goals. This encourages a forward-looking, solution-oriented mindset. When issues arise, guide conversations toward problem-solving rather than assigning blame. This helps maintain a positive and collaborative tone.

- **Highlight Success Stories and Best Practices.** Showcase success stories or best practices where different groups come together to successfully address challenges. This serves as inspiration and demonstrates the potential for collaboration beyond individual identities. Acknowledge and celebrate the achievements resulting from collaborative efforts. Positive outcomes reinforce the importance of focusing on solutions and can create a culture that values collective success.

- **Create Safe Spaces for Dialogue.** Provide safe and inclusive spaces where individuals can openly share their perspectives. These can include town hall meetings, community dialogues, closed-door discussions, or workshops focused on fostering understanding and collaboration. Ensure that discussions are facilitated to maintain a respectful and constructive atmosphere. Use ground rules (Appendix C) that promote active listening and discourage dismissive behavior.

These intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup strategies can be applied in all settings where there is division, and especially to help county leaders address conflict and divides within the county Board, between the county and other levels of government, and between county government and communities. They not only prepare county leaders to engage in challenging dialogues, but these strategies can also improve trust and problem-solving between communities and county leaders.
Collaborative Problem-Solving

OVERVIEW

Collaborative problem-solving is a process that incorporates the foundational intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup bridgebuilding and conflict resolution skills above into a process in which a diverse group works together to develop consensus solutions to divisive issues. Collaborative problem-solving is an approach county government leaders can use to develop wise and durable solutions to complex and contentious issues within county government, between levels of government, and between the county government and the community.

Collaborative problem-solving involves combining diverse skills, perspectives, and resources to generate innovative solutions and achieve a common goal. In a collaborative problem-solving approach, participants actively engage in open communication, share information, and collectively contribute to the development and implementation of solutions. The emphasis is on cooperation, synergy, and leveraging the strengths of individuals or groups to create more effective and comprehensive outcomes than what could be achieved individually.

Collaborative problem-solving includes the following key principles.

1. **Mindsets Matter.** As discussed above, mindsets are critical to bridging divides and solving problems. It’s important that participants enter the collaborative problem-solving process seeing conflict as an opportunity, giving others the benefit of the doubt, being curious, empathic, and open, and prioritizing relationships over winning.

2. **Diverse Groups Create Better Solutions.** Groups are powerful. Collaborative problem-solving leverages the diversity of skills, experiences, and viewpoints within the group. Different perspectives lead to more innovative and comprehensive solutions.

3. **Dialogue is Not Debate.** Dialogue is a cooperative conversation where individuals engage in an open exchange of ideas and emphasizes understanding, listening, and a willingness to explore various perspectives. Debate, on the other hand, is a competitive conversation where individuals defend their positions and seek to win or prove a point. The focus is often on highlighting differences and showcasing one’s viewpoint as superior.

4. **Focus on Interests, Not Positions.** In every conflict both positions and interests are present. Positions are the fixed stance or demands of one side of a conflict. They rarely provide insight into an individual’s interests which are the underlying needs, concerns, fears, motivations, or values that drive their positions. By focusing on interests, participants in a collaborative problem-solving process can discover shared goals and overlapping interests that are often obscured when just examining positions.

5. **Courageous Communication is Required.** Open and transparent communication is crucial to solving complex problems. The collaborative problem-solving process requires participants to share ideas, information, and feedback to ensure that interests and values are out in the open and recognized during the process.

6. **Relationships Are the Foundation.** Relationships are the grease that lubricates the gears of problem-solving. Invest in building trusting relationships through dialogue and ongoing demonstrations of vulnerability, courage, connection, and empathy.

7. **Shared Goals Create Shared Purpose.** Collaborative problem-solving gives participants the opportunity to create and work toward a common goal. A shared purpose not only unites collective efforts but also serves as a compelling source of motivation and propels individuals to solve complex problems.
8. **Deeper Problem Analysis Creates Deeper Understanding.** A deeper analysis of the problem and perspectives on the problem enables a deeper understanding of the underlying issues, their causes, and potential impacts. It facilitates the identification of root causes and establishes a shared understanding, which, in turn, lays a solid foundation for the development of targeted and impactful strategies.

9. **Don’t Split the Difference, Make the Difference.** Collaborative problem-solving processes help participants move beyond their positions and reflexive “us versus them” zero-sum thinking to craft creative solutions that integrate some of the most important needs and interests of all parties.

10. **Agreements Are the Goal.** Unlike dialogue aimed at developing understanding, collaborative problem-solving goes a step further and generates agreements. These wise and durable agreements include the collective wisdom of the group and address the needs of all participants.

11. **Action Planning Operationalizes Ideas.** The roadmap for implementing solutions defines clear steps, responsibilities, and timelines, ensuring that agreed-upon strategies are put into practice effectively. A well-structured action plan enhances accountability, coordination, and the successful achievement of collective goals in addressing complex issues.
COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS STEPS

Collaborative problem-solving starts with careful scoping and framing of the issue, followed by analyzing relevant data and perspectives. Diverse parties with unique skills come together to establish common goals, fostering a shared vision of success. Creative thinking is encouraged without immediate judgment, leading to the generation of multiple solutions. Viable solutions are then selected based on predefined criteria, and an action plan is developed for implementation. Finally, continuous feedback loops ensure ongoing evaluation and adaptation for sustained improvement.

NINE STEPS OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING.

1 **Define and Frame the Problem.** Begin by developing a thorough understanding of the problem. This involves gathering relevant data, considering different perspectives, and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of all parties. Likewise, neutrally framing the problem provides disarming language and promotes dialogue between parties, emphasizing solutions and encouraging empathy. For example, neutrally framing an economic issue as "economic opportunity" instead of "economic inequality" can open the door to dialogue among a wider group of parties.

2 **Convene Diverse Parties.** Assemble a group of parties who possess diverse skills, backgrounds, experience, and expertise related to the identified problem. Diverse groups bring a variety of perspectives and approaches, contributing to a more comprehensive analysis and innovative solutions. We are often too quick to write off some individuals or points of view as too extreme. While that is sometimes the case, engaging with the full range of perspectives on an issue generally results in wiser and more durable solutions.

3 **Build a Shared Understanding of Each Other and the Issues.** Relationships are key to successful problem-solving. Invest in building trusting relationships through dialogue and ongoing demonstrations of vulnerability, courage, connection, and empathy. This can be done by using connecting questions (Appendix B), aligning shared values, and finding opportunities for individuals to identify common, everyday similarities, such as family and activities.

4 **Identify Interests and Needs.** By focusing on interests—the "why" behind the inflexible positions that people in conflict often assume, parties in a collaborative problem-solving process can discover overlapping interests, needs and goals, that are often obscured when just examining positional demands.
**5 Establish Common Goals.** Collaboratively set goals that align with the needs of the community. Ensure that all parties understand and agree on the goals, creating a shared vision for success. Establishing common goals can take several formats. One is listing the interests and needs of all participants. Another is setting a vision for what the county will look like when the problem is solved. Yet another is establishing a set of criteria such as feasibility, evidence-based, and impact.

**6 Generate Options.** Foster an environment that encourages open dialogue and creative thinking. Brainstorming sessions and collaborative discussions can generate a wide range of mutual gains options without immediate evaluation. This step is about quantity, not quality, encouraging a flow of ideas.

**7 Select and Evaluate Solutions.** Evaluate each generated solution based on how well it meets the range of needs and interests identified in step four and fulfills the shared goals you established in step five. Facilitate discussions to collaboratively select the most viable solutions. This involves a thorough examination of the potential benefits and challenges associated with each option.

**8 Implement Solutions.** Develop a detailed action plan for implementing the selected solutions. Assign responsibilities to team members, establish a clear timeline, and allocate resources. Effective implementation requires ongoing coordination, communication, collaboration, and a commitment to executing the agreed upon strategies.

**9 Evaluate and Adjust.** Continuously monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the implemented solutions. Gather feedback from parties, measure success against predetermined criteria, and be prepared to adjust as needed. This step involves a feedback loop to ensure ongoing improvement and adaptability.
STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Strengths

One of the most significant advantages of collaborative problem-solving lies in the integration of diverse perspectives. This approach taps into the expertise and insights of various parties, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. By bringing together individuals with diverse backgrounds and knowledge, the process is enriched with a variety of viewpoints. Another notable benefit is the fostering of enhanced creativity. Collaborative problem-solving actively encourages participants to explore innovative thinking and creative approaches to address challenges. The combination of diverse ideas leads to the generation of novel, inventive, and often higher quality solutions that would not have emerged in a less inclusive setting. Moreover, the process promotes shared responsibility among the participants. As individuals contribute collectively to the identification and resolution of problems, a sense of shared ownership and commitment to the proposed solutions emerges. This shared responsibility not only enhances accountability but also strengthens the relationships of parties which often results in ongoing collaboration.

Challenges

The process can be very time-consuming and resource intensive. While collaborative problem-solving can be time and resource-intensive, for contentious issues, it may be the most efficient option as protracted conflict is likely to be more resource-intensive. Building trust between people with different views takes a significant amount of time and will likely require several meetings. Finally, collaborative problem-solving requires a high level of skills and experience, especially when addressing complex issues. A professional facilitator can help to address any skill or expertise gaps (see Appendix D).
Bridging Divides within County Government

There are many reasons for county government departments to ensure that divisions don't impact their ability to work together. These divides will create silos between departments, negatively impact communication, and ultimately impede service delivery to communities. Collaboration across departments within county government is critical for several reasons.

1. **Holistic Problem-Solving.** Collaboration allows departments to pool their expertise and resources, enabling a comprehensive approach to problem-solving. Many issues faced by communities often require multi-faceted solutions that cut across various departmental boundaries. When departments collaborate, they can address complex challenges more effectively by considering different perspectives and approaches.

2. **Resource Optimization.** Working together facilitates the sharing of resources, information, and best practices. This not only maximizes efficiency but also reduces redundancies in efforts, time, and costs. Departments can leverage each other's strengths and resources to achieve common goals more effectively.

3. **Improved Service Delivery.** Interdepartmental collaboration can enhance service delivery to the public. When departments work together, it often leads to more streamlined and coherent services for citizens. A coordinated effort can reduce bureaucratic obstacles and provide a more seamless experience for those accessing various government services.

4. **Enhanced Innovation.** Collaboration encourages innovation. When different departments come together, it creates an environment that fosters the exchange of ideas, leading to innovative solutions that might not have been conceived within the confines of individual departments. Diverse perspectives often spur creativity and new ways of approaching problems.

5. **Better Policy and Practice Alignment.** Collaborating across departments ensures that policies and initiatives are aligned and integrated. This helps in avoiding conflicting strategies or goals and ensures that different departments are moving in the same direction, reinforcing the overarching objectives of the county government.

**APPLICATION OF BRIDGING STRATEGIES**

County leaders can utilize the intrapersonal and interpersonal strategies described above to address divisions within county government. For example, if a county board is experiencing conflict between two commissioners, they can seek to understand each other's perspective by engaging in active listening, asking clarifying questions, and creating connection through storytelling. This approach will help the commissioners understand each other's common values and goals. It is important that each commissioner comes to the conversation with an open mind, void of assumptions, and with a problem-solving mindset.
Intergovernmental collaboration is another challenge experienced by county leaders. Collaboration between various levels of government, such as federal, local, state, and tribal government leaders is crucial for several reasons.

1. **Resource Allocation.** Different levels of government control various resources, including funding and workforce. Collaboration ensures that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively to address the diverse needs of a community. For example, the state or federal governments may provide financial assistance, guidance, or expertise that can significantly benefit county-level initiatives.

2. **Policy Alignment.** Collaboration helps in aligning policies across different levels of government. Policies created at the federal or state levels may need to be adapted or implemented at the county level to ensure they are relevant and effectively address local issues. Intergovernmental collaboration is another challenge experienced by county leaders.

3. **Unified Approach to Issues.** Many challenges faced by communities require a unified and coordinated approach. Issues such as public health crises, disaster response, and infrastructure development often span multiple jurisdictions. Collaboration ensures that government entities work together to tackle these challenges in a comprehensive manner.

4. **Efficiency and Avoidance of Duplication.** Collaboration helps in avoiding duplication of efforts and resources. When different levels of government work together, they can share information, coordinate programs, and prevent redundancy. This enhances overall efficiency and reduces the burden on taxpayers.

5. **Consistency in Service Delivery.** Citizens often interact with various levels of government for different services. Collaborative efforts ensure consistency in service delivery, making it easier for citizens to navigate government processes without encountering conflicting information or procedures.

6. **Funding Opportunities.** State and federal governments often provide funding for specific
programs or projects at the local level. Collaborating with different levels of government allows county governments to access these funds, contributing to the overall development and well-being of the community.

7. Emergency Response and Public Safety. During emergencies, whether natural disasters or public health crises, effective collaboration between different levels of government is vital. Timely and well-coordinated responses can save lives and mitigate the impact of such situations.

8. Policy Innovation. Collaboration fosters an environment for policy innovation. Local governments can share their experiences and innovative solutions with federal and state counterparts, leading to the development of better policies and practices at all levels.

APPLICATION OF BRIDGING STRATEGIES

County leaders are in a unique position to use the intergroup strategies outlined above. County leaders can facilitate meetings between city, federal, or tribal partners by bringing together key leaders to align on common goals. These types of convening allow all parties to share stories and to identify commonalities and values. County leaders could also organize joint training programs that bring together government leaders from all levels to engage in a training experience and develop rapport and relationships in a non-threatening, non-competitive environment.

County leaders can also use aspects of collaborative problem-solving by convening other government partners to solve complex problems. For example, county leaders could proactively convene government leaders to develop a plan for a new road, utility, or other major project. Likewise, county leaders could convene meetings with Tribal leaders to discuss challenges related to community safety in border towns that seek to identify resources, roles, and complex sovereignty issues.
Finally, bridging divides with the community also presents a challenge for county leaders. They hold a unique position to bridge divides and foster collaboration due to their proximity to local constituents. Embedded in their communities, these leaders possess a deep understanding of the various needs and challenges within their communities. Their direct connection to residents allows for targeted outreach efforts, ensuring that initiatives are tailored to address specific local concerns. This proximity fosters a sense of trust and accessibility, enabling county governments to play a pivotal role in bridging gaps between communities and decision-makers, creating more responsive and effective governance.

Bridging divides with the community starts by first engaging communities. There are many reasons for county government leaders to bridge divides with communities, including the 10 reasons below.

1. **Enhanced Trust and Transparency.** Engaging the community in decision-making processes builds trust and transparency, demonstrating that county leaders value the input and opinions of its citizens.

2. **Improved Decision-Making.** Gathering diverse perspectives through engagement helps make well-informed decisions that better reflect the community's needs and aspirations.

3. **Accountability and Responsiveness.** Engaging with the community is a way for government to hold itself accountable and ensures that it is responsive to the concerns and needs of the people it serves.

4. **Inclusivity and Diversity.** Community engagement allows for diverse voices and perspectives, ensuring that policies and services represent the entire community.

5. **Effective Policy Implementation.** Involving the public early in the policy-making process increases the chances of successful implementation, as it addresses potential issues and garners support.

6. **Community Empowerment.** Engaging the public empowers individuals and communities to take an active role in their own governance and be part of the decision-making process.

7. **Building Social Capital.** Through engagement, county governments can build stronger connections within communities, fostering relationships and networks that improve civic life and collaboration.

8. **Innovation and Creativity.** Community engagement often leads to innovative ideas and creative solutions that might not have been considered within the confines of traditional government structures.

9. **Conflict Prevention.** Engaging with communities early can help identify and address potential conflicts, mitigating issues before they escalate.

10. **Sustainable Development.** Engaging the community in discussions related to infrastructure, development, and sustainability initiatives ensures that these projects align with the long-term interests and goals of the community.

These reasons highlight how community engagement is essential to bridging divisions and is an integral component of good governance and effective public service delivery. It is about involving communities in the issues that affect their lives, ensuring that policies and actions are better aligned with the diverse needs of the community.
Principles of Bridging Divides in the Community

While every approach to engaging and bridging divides in the community is unique to each community and there is no “one-size-fits-all solution,” the following principles increase the likelihood of success.

1. **Assess Your Relationships in the Community.**
   Interacting with communities and bridging divides requires an assessment of the current relationship between county government leaders and community parties. The assessment can be completed by using a tool like the [Community Engagement Assessment Tool](#) or through less formal methods, like soliciting the perspectives of volunteer commissions and trusted institutional leaders.

2. **Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan.** Planning is the first critical step in any community interaction or bridging initiative. The purpose, goals, timelines, and assignments should be identified during the planning phase. These elements will help to drive the engagement initiative and set-up the engagement team for success.

3. **Be Inclusive.** It is important that any community interaction or bridging initiative be inclusive of all voices in the community, especially those with unique, underrepresented, and divergent viewpoints.
4. **Establish a Collaborative Tone.** Interacting with communities and bridging divides is a two-way relationship. The county government needs support from the community to do its job, and the community needs the county government to provide vital services. This means that the county government and the community must partner to solve problems for the common good.

5. **Listen First, Talk Second.** A key element of any community engagement or bridging initiative is listening. County government leaders can best serve the community by identifying the issues and concerns that are most important to them. Listening not only creates deeper understanding of the issues, but it builds trust and rapport between community members and county government leaders.

6. **Dialogue, Not Debate.** Community engagement is centered on a dialogue process. It is not a debate, a presentation, a speech, a forum, nor a town hall. Dialogue is a cooperative conversation where individuals engage in an open exchange of ideas and emphasizes understanding, listening, and a willingness to explore various perspectives.

7. **Action Builds Trust.** County government leaders should be prepared for action. Communities expect the government to solve problems and solving problems requires action. Dialogue is a great way to help county government leaders understand the issues and action builds trust.

8. **Once Isn’t Enough.** Community engagement and bridging divides should be a sustained practice and ultimately baked into county governments’ culture. It is not a one-time event or program; rather, it is a series of events that demonstrate a commitment to building trust with the community.

**Applying Bridging Strategies**

County leaders can use aspects of collaborative problem-solving to convene leaders to solve shared public problems. The heart of the collaborative problem-solving process empowers participants to focus on the party’s interests, or the “why” behind their positions and forge solutions that meet the most important needs of most, if not all, the parties involved in the process. For example, if crime is increasing in a county, residents may take seemingly oppositional positions with some focusing on law enforcement and others on community investment. Through a collaborative problem-solving process, county leaders can help the community reframe the issue to “community safety,” a shared goal that opens the door to identify multiple strategies, including both law enforcement and community investment, which are likely to result in wiser and more durable solutions than either would on its own.

To further illustrate the power of collaborative problem-solving as a tool to address community divisions, the process is incorporated into step four “meeting design” of a broader community engagement process described below.
Addressing Divisions Through Community Engagement

As discussed above, bridging divides with the community starts by first engaging communities, and a community engagement plan is a great approach to layout the necessary steps. The plan involves six steps, including:

1. **Convene a Planning Group**
2. **Identify, Notify, and Engage the Community**
3. **Educate Through Two-Way Dialogue**
4. **Meeting Design**
5. **Action and Follow-Through, and**
6. **Evaluate and Adapt**
STEP ONE: CONVENE A PLANNING GROUP

The first step in any community engagement initiative is planning. The initiative’s success relies heavily on the diligence and thoughtfulness of the planning process. It’s important to remember that county leaders are not alone. There are community leaders who are open and eager to support your community engagement efforts. County leaders should lean on these individuals to help them craft the best plan possible. This all starts with the convening of a planning group.

Use a Planning Group

Convening a planning group that includes both county staff and community leaders from diverse groups is paramount to the success of any initiative, as it brings together a spectrum of perspectives, expertise, and local insights. The collaboration between county staff and community leaders enhances the process’s credibility and ensures that logistical tasks are approached with a comprehensive understanding of government and community needs. This joint effort is instrumental in navigating the complexities of organizing meetings, identifying suitable locations, and managing various logistics, thus streamlining the planning and implementation phases. Including community leaders ensures that the initiative is deeply rooted in the community, fostering a sense of ownership and trust among the diverse groups involved. Furthermore, this collaborative planning approach serves as a catalyst for effective engagement with community groups, promoting inclusivity and a more holistic representation of the community’s needs and aspirations. Overall, the collaboration between county staff and community leaders in the planning group is essential for the success and sustainability of the process.

The planning group should consider the following questions:

1. **Clear Goals.** Why is the county engaging the community? What are the desired outcomes of the engagement efforts?

2. **Level of Engagement.** What is the level of community engagement needed for a project or policy that needs community input?

3. **Process.** What type of community engagement process will be used?

4. **Key Parties.** Who are the parties that need to be at the table? What county departments need to be involved? What community organizations, groups, advocates, or others need to be invited? How will county leaders get access to hard-to-reach communities? Who are the decision makers? When will the decision be made?

It’s important to remember that county leaders are not alone. There are community leaders who are open and eager to support your community engagement efforts.
STEP TWO: IDENTIFY, NOTIFY, AND ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

After the planning phase, the second step in the community engagement process is to identify, notify, and engage community members. Achieving sufficient notification is essential to ensure that the community is well-informed about the initiative and the corresponding community engagement plan. Early dissemination of information to a broad spectrum of parties within the county is key to conveying that the county is actively addressing a particular issue. This notification not only raises awareness but also serves as a signal to the community that the initiative may have a direct impact on them. Finally, it is important to stress that notifying the community should include various forms of electronic and printed media for both English and non-English speaking communities.

Creating an Internal Timeline

The planning group should also create a timeline to ensure that community engagement activities are well-coordinated and adequately communicated. Provide at least 30 days’ notice for upcoming events, with an ideal period of at least 60 days for community organizations. The timeline should outline the “who, what, when, where, why, and how” of the overall process, with brief, easily understood descriptions. County leaders should refer to county and state statues governing public notification.

6. Timeline. What are the timelines and key milestones of the project or policy that need community input?

Identifying Key Parties

A critical part of any community engagement plan is identifying the key parties. These are people interested in the process and the outcome of a decision, such as a new public policy or practice by county government. They are often the people most likely to be impacted by a decision and others who are simply interested.

Key party mapping is a crucial process in community engagement that involves identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing the various individuals, groups, and organizations that have an interest, influence, or impact on a particular project, decision, or initiative. This method helps in understanding the diverse range of parties and their relationships, enabling effective engagement strategies and management of interactions within a community.
Key Party Mapping

Key party mapping is important to community engagement initiatives for reasons. First, it provides a valuable tool for achieving clarity and understanding within a project or initiative. By systematically identifying and categorizing the various parties involved, it provides insights into their distinct roles, needs, and expectations. Moreover, this comprehensive understanding paves the way for better engagement strategies. With a clear picture of the parties, tailored approaches can be developed to address their specific needs and concerns. This personalized engagement fosters a more collaborative environment, promoting meaningful interactions between the project team and parties. Key party mapping also plays a crucial role in risk mitigation. By identifying potential conflicts or areas of disagreement early in the process, the planning group can proactively develop strategies to mitigate these risks. This proactive approach contributes to smoother implementation and reduces the likelihood of setbacks.

Key Party Mapping Steps

The steps in a Key Party mapping process include the following.

1. **Identification.** Compile a comprehensive list of all potential parties related to the project or initiative. This includes individuals, groups, organizations, or entities directly or indirectly affected or involved.

2. **Analysis.** Assess the influence, interest, impact, and level of involvement of each party. This analysis can be qualitative or quantitative.

3. **Prioritization.** Categorize parties based on their level of influence and interest in the project. This helps in determining who requires the most attention and engagement.

4. **Engagement Strategy.** Develop tailored strategies to engage with each party effectively, considering their interests, concerns, and communication preferences.

Key Party Mapping Framework

The first step in the key party mapping frameworks is to identify internal and external parties.

- **Internal parties.** These are individuals or departments within the county government.
- **External parties.** These include local businesses, community groups, residents, community and faith-based organizations, homeowners associations, advocacy groups, and others.

The second step is to analyze the parties.

- **Influence.** Assess the level of influence a party has on the project or decision-making.
- **Interest.** Evaluate their level of interest or concern regarding the outcomes of the project.
- **Impact.** Understand how much each party will be affected by the project.
- **Attitude.** Consider their attitude or support towards the initiative.

Next, parties should be prioritized as high, medium, or low.

- **High Priority.** Parties with high influence and high interest or significant impact.
- **Medium Priority.** Those with moderate influence or interest.
- **Low Priority.** Parties with minimal impact or interest in the project.

The last step in the key party mapping process is to develop engagement strategies for the identified parties.

- **Tailored Engagement.** Design engagement strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of parties. For example, youth or Latino individuals and youth may require targeted outreach to community-based organizations that serve these communities.

Remember, key party mapping is an iterative process and should be continuously updated as new parties emerge or as circumstances change. It’s essential to adapt and refine the engagement strategies based on ongoing feedback and developments within the community.
The Key Party Mapping Worksheet (Appendix A) will help county government leaders complete the parties’ mapping process.

**Hard to Reach Communities**

There are several hard-to-reach communities that will require county leaders to take additional steps to engage and foster trust with these communities. These communities are often left out of engagement efforts for many reasons, including because:

- County leaders don’t know that they are present in the community
- County leaders don’t know how to access these communities
- These communities aren’t well established in the broader community
- These communities live in rural areas
- These communities don’t trust the government, or
- These communities have language or other access challenges.

Examples of “hard-to-reach” communities can include youth, individuals with limited English proficiency, low-income people, people with disabilities, the elderly, refugee and immigrant communities, communities of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) communities. Extra emphasis should be placed on establishing relationships with these communities because they offer a unique and often missed perspective on issues that impact the community. County leaders can consult with national and local advocacy organizations and experts about the best strategies to engage various diverse communities.
Principles for Engaging Hard to Reach Communities

While engaging with all these communities is challenging and often requires targeted engagement strategies, there are principles that can help guide county leaders as they develop their engagement strategies.

1. **Create a Community-Centered Approach.** Historically, the government has hosted community events or meetings at government facilities. In general, this “come-to-us” approach doesn’t work. County government leaders should work with community leaders and organizations to identify the places where the community is already gathering and host events in those spaces. This “go-to-the-community” approach is more likely to generate a diverse audience and demonstrates a higher level of commitment to listen to all voices than traditional approaches.

2. **Cultivate Community Awareness.** Develop and co-deliver community awareness training in collaboration with community leaders and recognized community organizations. Invest in training for government employees involved in community engagement efforts. This training should extend beyond basic awareness to include a deep understanding of the cultural nuances, values, and traditions of the specific communities being targeted. Community awareness fosters trust and helps ensure that engagement efforts are respectful and relevant.

3. **Create Community-Driven Initiatives.** Collaborate with community leaders to create community-driven initiatives that empower local leaders and organizations within hard-to-reach communities. This approach ensures that the community’s unique needs and aspirations are central to the engagement process, fostering a sense of ownership and sustainability.

4. **Tailor Communication Strategies.** Utilize a variety of communication channels, including multilingual materials, culturally sensitive messaging, and platforms that resonate with the community. Ensure that information is accessible and understandable to all, considering factors such as literacy levels and technological access.

5. **Foster Safe Spaces.** Create safe spaces for dialogue that respect the diversity within hard-to-reach communities. Acknowledge and celebrate different perspectives, experiences, and identities. This principle involves actively addressing barriers and ensures that engagement efforts are designed to be welcoming and affirming for all community members.

6. **Commit to Building Long-Term Relationships.** Engagement should not be a one-time effort but an ongoing, iterative process. Invest in sustained dialogue, collaboration, and trust-building. Consistent presence and active listening help government leaders understand the evolving needs of these communities and adapt policies and programs accordingly.

These principles emphasize the importance of humility, flexibility, and a genuine commitment to understanding and meeting the unique needs of hard-to-reach communities. By incorporating these principles into community engagement strategies, government leaders can establish more meaningful and sustainable connections with diverse populations.

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Engaging Rural Communities

According to research by East Tennessee State University, conducting meaningful public engagement with rural communities can help agencies access first-hand information about community-specific issues and concerns otherwise unknown to the agency. Effective rural community engagement can flag potential controversies, solutions to problems that best meet their needs, and provide feedback on how to get the community involved.

Establishing relationships with individuals and communities in rural areas can be especially challenging for county government leaders. Below are five strategies that county leaders should consider.

1. Provide Mobile Outreach Services. Recognize the geographic challenges of rural communities and implement mobile outreach services. This could involve creating mobile offices, clinics, or community centers that can travel to different rural areas on a regular schedule. Bringing government services directly to these communities can overcome barriers related to transportation and accessibility.

2. Create Rural Community Liaisons. Establish formal community liaisons in county government responsible for creating partnerships with local community organizations, leaders, and influencers well-connected within rural areas. These partnerships can help bridge the gap between government entities and rural residents, leveraging existing trust and networks.

3. Utilize Traditional Communication Channels. In many rural areas, traditional communication channels such as community bulletin boards, local newspapers, and radio stations play a significant role. Invest in advertising and outreach through these channels to disseminate valuable information about government programs, services, and initiatives. This can be particularly effective in areas with limited internet access.

4. Hold Meetings and Attend Community Events. Organize meetings at gathering places in rural areas, such as houses of worship, libraries, schools, businesses, and community centers to provide residents with opportunities to voice their concerns, ask questions, and engage with county government leaders. Additionally, conduct outreach at community events to proactively improve relationships. These gatherings can foster a sense of community and allow government officials to better understand the unique needs and priorities of rural communities.

5. Invest in Infrastructure and Connectivity. Improve infrastructure, including roads and internet connectivity, to make it easier for rural residents to access government services and information. Enhancing digital infrastructure can facilitate online engagement while improving transportation infrastructure can make it more feasible for residents to attend in-person events and access government facilities.

Notification

Once the parties have been identified and strategies to engage them have been developed, the next step is notifying all parties. The notification process is an opportunity to educate community members on the planned public engagement and decision-making processes associated with the project. The initial notification may take various forms including the approaches below.

- Series of Meetings. Schedule a series of face-to-face meetings with community leaders and members to provide an overview of the community engagement process.
- Postcards. Physical postcards can be distributed to specific neighborhoods or areas to ensure direct communication.
- Letters. Formal letters may be sent to key parties, providing detailed information about the project and how it may affect them.
• **Emails.** Utilize both internal distribution lists and external distribution lists to reach a wider audience.

• **Social Media.** Leverage various social media platforms, like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and LinkedIn, to engage a diverse audience, sharing updates and relevant information.

• **Temporary Signage.** Consider the use of temporary signs, such as variable message signs along roadways, to capture the attention of passersby.

• **Traditional Media.** Issue press releases to local media outlets to ensure wider coverage and dissemination of project details. It’s important to ensure that the outlets serving non-English speaking communities are also included in the press release dissemination.

• **Get the Word Out Through Community Messengers.** Request communication support from credible community messengers, such as faith leaders, Chambers of Commerce, advocacy organizations, service organizations, and others, to deliver information about the project and need for community input.

By employing a multi-faceted approach to notification, county leaders can effectively reach and engage a diverse range of parties, fostering a sense of involvement and shared responsibility in the decision-making processes ahead.
STEP 3: EDUCATE THROUGH TWO-WAY DIALOGUE

The third step in the community engagement process is educating the community about the initiative, which could be a project, public policy, department policy, or some other important decision. It’s essential to recognize that effective community input hinges on the community’s understanding of the initiative. While the county project manager may be deeply immersed in the day-to-day aspects of the initiative, it’s important to recognize that community members may not understand the intricacies of what is being proposed. Education serves as the bridge for meaningful discussion and dialogue, playing a pivotal role in dispelling any myths that might arise regarding the costs and benefits of the initiative.

However, while the county government can educate the community about the initiative, the community can, in turn, also educate the county government. The education process should be a two-way dialogue. The community can provide insights into the scope and impacts of the policy or project on specific neighborhoods or groups. Likewise, the community can provide an often missing and important voice at the table during the decision-making process.

By utilizing two-way dialogue, county leaders can foster a well-informed community capable of contributing meaningfully to the project. This not only ensures a more inclusive decision-making process but also helps build trust by preventing the spread of misinformation or misconceptions, and bridges divides between communities and county leaders.

Education serves as the bridge for meaningful discussion and dialogue, playing a pivotal role in dispelling any myths that might arise regarding the costs and benefits of the initiative.
**STEP FOUR: MEETING DESIGN**

After the community is familiar with the initiative, project, or decision the next step is to design and facilitate the meetings. As previously discussed, there are many meeting formats and this guide focused on meetings designed for collaboration. The following principles will help county leaders to create well-designed and productive meetings.

- **Plan to convene a series of meetings** that foster sustained engagement, bridge divides, and build trust over time. This approach accommodates a variety of schedules, ensures broader community representation, and enhances a more comprehensive exploration of issues, while enhancing the likelihood of solving complex problems.

- **Use facilitators** to help plan, design, and facilitate the meetings. Facilitators allow county leaders to remove themselves from the process, so they can focus on listening to the community. Additionally, skilled facilitators are neutral and know how to translate conflict and anger into specific interests, needs, and concerns—so what’s behind the emotion can be understood and addressed. Facilitators are especially important if there are tensions and mistrust between the community and county leaders. These skilled professionals are key players in bridging divides and building trust between parties.

- **Host the dialogue in a community-friendly space** that is accessible to the community and provides a sense of psychological safety. For example, inviting the community to the Sheriff’s Office to discuss community relations issues or a controversial use of force incident will likely result in low attendance. However, inviting the same members of the community to a local house of worship, Veterans of Foreign Wars, or other gathering place will increase attendance and improve the dialogue.

**Facilitators**

A facilitator is an impartial third party responsible for guiding discussions and ensuring the smooth flow of communication during meetings. They do not advocate for any viewpoint but rather facilitate the process of collective decision-making. Effective facilitation is crucial for creating an environment where community members feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered, and fostering collaboration. This section breaks down why facilitators matter so much in community engagement meetings.
Why Facilitators Matter

Facilitators play a vital role in making sure everyone’s voice is heard and decisions are made collaboratively. They bring a fair perspective, handle conflicts constructively, and encourage everyone to participate, making the process inclusive. Facilitators also keep meetings focused, manage time effectively, and help communities make well-informed decisions. And, as mentioned above, facilitators are especially important if there are tensions between the community and county leaders. These skilled professionals are key players in bridging divides and building trust between parties.

Below are five elements of effective facilitators.

1. **Neutrality.** Facilitators bring an unbiased perspective, ensuring that the meeting is led without favoring any specific viewpoint.

2. **Active Participation.** Facilitators actively encourage participation from all community members, including those who might be less inclined to speak up. Also, by minimizing dominant voices from overshadowing others, facilitators contribute to a more inclusive decision-making process.

- **Use connecting questions** at the start of each meeting to build rapport, bridge divides, and increase trust between the community members and county leaders. These questions create the opportunity for people to connect around common values and experiences. Appendix B provides examples of connecting questions.

- **Use ground rules or meeting agreements** to guide behaviors during the meetings. With these agreements, participants are more likely to hear each other and communicate civilly. Appendix C provides examples of meeting agreements.

- **Provide balanced and detailed information** about the issue at hand without “talking at” community members for too long. It’s also important to note that information can be shared in many ways, like handouts, posters, or a pre-event open house, and that “lecturing” should be minimized.

- **Get different people with diverse perspectives to talk to each other** through the structured, dialogue process. There are many ways to do this. For example, county leaders should organize participants into smaller groups to ensure each person gets the chance to speak and to make it unlikely that one person or interest group will dominate the meeting. This dialogue process is key to bridging divides and moving the parties from understanding to issues analysis to problem-solving.

- **Diligently record what community members say** and be clear about how you plan to use their input. Throughout the meeting, the facilitators will “reflect back” the concerns, values and desires shared by community members.
3. **Structured Discussions.** Facilitators help design and adhere to meeting agendas, ensuring that discussions stay focused on the main topics. They also assist in managing time effectively, preventing meetings from running over, and respecting participants’ time commitments.

4. **Enhanced Decision-Making.** Facilitators assist in synthesizing information presented during the meeting, helping the community make well-informed decisions. Through their guidance, facilitators foster a sense of ownership among community members, making the decision-making process more participatory.

5. **Bridging Divides.** Facilitators address conflicts constructively, turning them into opportunities for understanding and collaboration. Effective conflict resolution contributes to building trust among community members and between the community and government leaders.

### Roles of Facilitators

Facilitators play many roles throughout the community engagement process. They are important resources during the planning process and meetings by ensuring discussions are respectful and inclusive. They balance participation, guide constructive dialogues, and summarize key points in real-time, which fosters understanding. Facilitators also actively seek feedback and adapt strategies for future engagements.

1. **Pre-Meeting Planning**
   - **Objective Alignment:** Facilitators work closely with county leaders to understand the objectives of the community meeting and align their facilitation approach accordingly.
   - **Customization:** They tailor meeting formats and processes to meet the specific needs and expectations of the community.

2. **Establishing Ground Rules**
   - **Creating a Safe Space:** Facilitators establish ground rules that promote respectful and inclusive communication, creating a safe space for all participants.
   - **Encouraging Participation:** Ground rules may include guidelines for ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to speak, preventing interruptions, and promoting active listening.

3. **Guiding Discussions**
   - **Balancing Participation:** Facilitators employ techniques to balance participation, ensuring that quieter voices are heard and preventing monopolization of discussions.
   - **Encouraging Constructive Dialogue:** They guide conversations in a way that promotes constructive dialogue and discourages personal attacks or disrespectful behavior.

4. **Summarizing and Synthesizing**
   - **Real-time Summaries:** Facilitators provide real-time summaries of key points, helping participants stay focused and reinforcing understanding.
   - **Building Consensus:** Through summarization, facilitators assist in building consensus by highlighting areas of agreement and common ground.

5. **Feedback and Evaluation**
   - **Continuous Improvement:** Facilitators actively seek feedback from participants to identify areas for improvement in the facilitation process.
   - **Adapting Strategies:** Evaluating the effectiveness of each meeting allows facilitators to adapt their strategies for future engagements, ensuring ongoing improvement.

Appendix D provides guidance on finding and selecting a facilitator.
Meeting Design

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation’s (NCDD) “Engagement Stream Framework” provides an overview of 22 different meeting designs. They vary by purpose, type of engagement, and range from basic to complex. County government leaders don’t need to be experts in meeting design, but it is helpful for them to understand alternatives to traditional public meeting formats. For example, it’s become increasingly clear that the typical “town hall meeting” doesn’t work. They don’t allow for an exchange of ideas and are designed for one-way communication from an expert or government official, while community members are meant to be in a “listening mode.” This creates a dynamic where community members don’t feel heard, don’t feel like they are contributors to the conversation, and lack the ability to provide input into issues that are impacting the community. Likewise, because county leaders are left to manage frustrated community members, they don’t benefit from the collective wisdom of the community, and trust between the government and community members may be negatively impacted.

In addition to collaborative problem-solving (discussed above), there are several other meeting designs that county leaders can consider. Appendix E provides examples of two other types of meeting designs, including World Café and intergroup dialogues. County leaders interested in learning more about meeting design can contact Convergence Center for Policy Resolution for expert consultation.
STEP FIVE: ACTION AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

The fifth step in the community engagement process is the commitment to action and follow-through. As county government leaders navigate various issues, action and follow-through become a linchpin for credibility and trust. This step involves efficient communication of community input to decision-makers and providing the rationale behind decisions. This section explains the critical importance of tangible steps and sustained commitment in not only addressing community concerns but also in establishing a foundation of trust that is indispensable for collaborative problem-solving.

Below are five reasons why action and follow-through are important.

As county government leaders navigate various issues, action and follow-through become a linchpin for credibility and trust.

1. Demonstrates Commitment. Taking tangible actions shows a genuine commitment to addressing community concerns, reinforcing trust by proving that leaders are actively invested in positive outcomes.

2. Builds Credibility. Consistent follow-through on promises and initiatives establishes credibility, signaling that leaders are reliable and capable of effecting real change, which is crucial for community support.

3. Encourages Future Engagement. Successful actions encourage continued community engagement, as residents are more likely to participate in the future if they see that their input leads to meaningful outcomes.

4. Strengthens Relationships. Follow-through fosters stronger relationships between government leaders and the community, creating a collaborative atmosphere and reinforcing the idea that the government is a reliable partner.

5. Addresses Skepticism. Demonstrating tangible results addresses skepticism within the community, proving that the county government is not just engaging in dialogue but is actively working towards resolving issues, thereby mitigating cynicism.

The importance of action and follow-through by county leaders cannot be overstated. By demonstrating commitment, building credibility, encouraging ongoing engagement, strengthening relationships, and addressing skepticism, leaders pave the way for successful community collaboration. The ability to translate discussions into tangible outcomes is the linchpin that transforms dialogue into meaningful change, solidifying the bonds between county leaders and the communities they serve. Action is the catalyst for a more resilient and collaborative relationship between county leaders and the communities they serve.

County government leaders can implement mechanisms to ensure action and follow-through, like committing the necessary budget resources, providing regular status reports to the community, inviting key community leaders into the implementation process, and standing up pilot programs.
STEP SIX: EVALUATE AND ADAPT

The last step in the process involves the evaluation and adaptation of the community engagement strategy. This requires regularly assessing whether goals are being met and adjusting the plan, including shifting decision dates, addressing confusion with additional education materials, scheduling extra meetings for in-depth discussions, accommodating new parties, or expanding the engagement process based on unexpected impact. Flexibility is key to ensuring the effectiveness of our community engagement efforts.

There are many ways that county leaders can evaluate their community engagement efforts. At a minimum, county leaders should facilitate a basic "debriefing" before the end of each meeting. The facilitator will ask community leaders:

- What went well?
- What didn’t go well?
- What recommendations do you have for the future?

These questions should also be asked of the planning group during an internal planning meeting. The combination of answers from the community and project team will inform changes to future meetings and improve the county’s community engagement efforts. In contrast, a more formal evaluation can be developed and administered before the end of each meeting. It can be created in applications like Microsoft Forms or SurveyMonkey and administered by scanning a QR code, or the evaluation can be printed and administered in hardcopy.

The effort could also be evaluated by providing a more formal evaluation after each session or following the last session in a series of meetings. Creating effective program evaluations involves careful planning and consideration of numerous factors. Below are five best practices to guide county leaders in developing program evaluations.

1. Engage Key Parties Throughout the Process.
   Involve key parties, including program staff, participants, and funders, in the evaluation process. Engaging parties ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, and it increases the likelihood of successful implementation of recommendations.
2. **Clearly Define Objectives and Purpose.** Start by clearly defining the purpose and objectives of the program evaluation. Understand why you are conducting the evaluation and what specific questions you want to answer. This helps in determining the scope of the evaluation and ensures that the process remains focused on relevant goals.

3. **Develop a Comprehensive Evaluation Plan.** Create a detailed evaluation plan that outlines the methodology, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. Consider the resources available, timeline, and budget constraints. A well-structured plan helps in organizing the evaluation process and ensures that key aspects are covered systematically.

4. **Use a Mix of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods.** Combine both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather a comprehensive set of data. Quantitative data, such as surveys, can provide measurable insights, while qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups offer a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences and perspectives. The combination of these approaches strengthens the overall validity of the evaluation.

5. **Keep it Short.** In most cases, a formal evaluation should be 10-12 questions in length, with five to eight of them presented as a [Likert](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Likert_scale) scale. These are questions that use a five or seven-point scale, sometimes referred to as a satisfaction scale, that ranges from one extreme attitude to another. Compared to binary questions, which give you only two answer options, Likert-type questions will get you more granular feedback about whether your product was just "good enough" or (hopefully) "excellent." The remaining questions should be open-ended questions that allow participants to provide more nuanced information to questions like, "What was the strongest part of the program?"

Appendix D is an example of a formal evaluation.

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**CONCLUSION**

The pressing need for effective strategies to bridge divides and foster collaboration across differences within public and private sectors is undeniable. As county leaders grapple with the complexities of managing conflicts within county government, between county government and local, state, federal, and tribal governments, and within local communities, the urgency to address these divisions becomes increasingly apparent. Critical bridging skills and strategies, like collaborative mindsets, empathy, active listening, storytelling, and collaborative problem-solving, offer an important path forward for county leaders to bridge these divides and effectively lead. Successfully navigating these challenges will not only enhance county government effectiveness but also contribute to the overall well-being and harmony of the communities they serve.

In the face of these challenges, county leaders have a remarkable opportunity to lead with compassion, empathy, and innovation, turning divisions into opportunities for growth and collaboration. By embracing collaborative approaches and fostering a culture of understanding and cooperation, they can pave the way for effective governance and thriving communities. Together, with dedication and determination, county leaders can build bridges that transcend differences, creating a more connected and unified country.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Key Parties Mapping Tool
Appendix B: Connecting Questions
Appendix C: Meeting Agreements
Appendix D: Finding and Selecting a Facilitator
Appendix E Meeting Evaluation
Appendix F: Meeting Design Examples
Appendix G: Additional Resources
APPENDIX A: KEY PARTY MAPPING TOOL*

1. Who will be impacted?
   a. Consider geography – who lives, works, or plays nearby?

2. Who NEEDS to know about this?
   a. Is there a legal requirement?
   b. Are there groups with strong interests?

3. Who can or will contribute to this conversation?
   a. Who are the experts?
   b. Where are the outside sources that discuss this same topic?

4. Who or what is missing? Have we included the full range of views on this issue?
   a. Each parties list should include:
      i. Experts
      ii. Member organizations
      iii. Citizens
      iv. Professionals
      v. Advocates
      vi. Emerging groups
      vii. Hard-to-reach populations

5. Who could stop this project?
   a. Is there anyone who will dislike this idea or be impacted to an extreme extent?

6. Who could make it better?
   a. How could this be more entertaining for the public?
   b. Who would have a unique perspective?

7. What questions would I ask as a community member?
   a. If you were on the outside of this issue, what would you want to know?

8. Whose life or schedule stands to be altered by an aspect of this project?

APPENDIX B: CONNECTING QUESTIONS

Connecting questions are questions that lead individuals and groups to make meaningful connections quickly. In other words, these questions challenge the parties to “go deep” fast. They generally include an element of self-reflection and self-disclosure. They help participants identify shared values, goals, and identities. A connecting question that surfaces people’s values is often the most effective type of connecting question because it reminds participants that they have shared values, which builds trust. Connecting questions should be:

- customized and relevant,
- open-ended,
- clear,
- impartial,
- engaging, and
- rapport building.

Below are examples of connecting questions. More examples can be found on Ken Cloke’s blog. He is a leading conflict resolution scholar and practitioner.

- What values guide you in your work on this issue?
- Where do your core beliefs on these issues come from?
- How do you feel that you and those who are more aligned with your perspectives are misunderstood?
- Where is an area that you have mixed feelings or doubts on this issue?
- What is oversimplified about this issue?
- What does the world look like when we have addressed this issue?
- What life experiences have you had that have led

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* Adapted from City of Fort Collins, Colorado Public Engagement Guide
you to feel so passionate about this issue?

• What do you think your beliefs might be if you had been born into a different family, religion, race, gender, class, or time?
• What is at the heart of this issue, for you as an individual?
• What do you care so much about this issue?
• What gray areas do you see in the issue we are discussing, or ideas you find difficult to define?
• What mixed feelings, doubts, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding this issue do you have that you’re willing to share?
• What questions or points of curiosity do you have for people who have different views?
• What are some of the key words or phrases that divide us?
• What are some of the key words or phrases that unite us?
• What do you think our conversation would be like if we decided not to use the words that divide us or trigger us emotionally?
• Are there any concerns or ideas you think we may have in common?

APPENDIX C: MEETING AGREEMENTS

Establishing meeting agreements or “ground rules” is a great way to ensure productive and respectful meetings. They should be customized to the needs and dynamics of the meeting. The meeting agreements should either be co-created or acknowledged and, if necessary, modified by the meeting participants, as their buy-in is important to the success of the meeting.

Below are several ground rules that facilitators and meeting organizers can consider.

1. Listen to Learn. Encourage participants to actively listen to others without interruption or planning a rebuttal. This includes avoiding side conversations and giving full attention to the speaker.

2. Respect Different Perspectives. Emphasize the importance of respecting diverse opinions and perspectives. Encourage participants to acknowledge and appreciate different points of view. Even the strongest objections or points of view can be delivered and received respectfully.

3. One Mic Rule. Use a metaphorical “one mic” rule, meaning that only one person speaks at a time. This helps prevent crosstalk and ensures everyone has a chance to be heard.

4. Stay on Topic. Encourage participants to stay focused on the agenda items and avoid straying off-topic. This helps in maintaining the efficiency of the meeting.

5. Actively Participate. Urge attendees to actively contribute to discussions, share their thoughts, and engage with the topics at hand. This can enhance the richness of the conversation.

6. Use “I” Statements. Encourage participants to express their opinions using “I” statements to
make it clear that they are sharing their personal perspectives, which can foster a more open and non-confrontational discussion.

7. **Confidentiality.** Clarify whether the discussions are confidential and stress the importance of respecting the privacy of others by not sharing sensitive information outside the meeting.

8. **Be Concise.** Request participants to express their thoughts concisely and avoid unnecessary repetition. This helps in managing time effectively and ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak.

9. **Respect Time.** Emphasize the importance of starting and ending the meeting on time. This shows respect for participants’ schedules and promotes efficiency.

10. **Problem-solve.** Commit to creative resolution of differences that integrate the needs of all participants.

Below are examples of ground rules used by organizations that facilitate challenging dialogues.

**Conversation Cafe**
- **Open-mindedness:** Listen to and respect all points of view.
- **Acceptance:** Suspend judgement as best you can.
- **Curiosity:** Seek to understand rather than persuade.
- **Discovery:** Question assumptions, look for new insights.
- **Sincerity:** Speak from your heart and personal experience.
- **Brevity:** Go for honesty and depth, but don’t go on and on.

**Living Room Conversations**
- **Be curious and listen to understand.** Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others’ experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.
- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** People tend to judge one another. Setting judgment aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.
- **Note any common ground as well as any differences.** Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.
- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what’s important to you. Speak from your experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.
- **Be purposeful and to the point.** Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.
- **Own and guide the conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the “time out” sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.
APPENDIX D: FINDING AND SELECTING A FACILITATOR

Finding a Facilitator

Finding experienced facilitators involves exploring various avenues to find individuals with the right skills and expertise. Here are some places to look.

- **Professional Networks.** Professional networks, both online and offline, are a great way to identify facilitators. Reach out to colleagues, industry associations, and professional groups related to conflict resolution, public policy, or community engagement.

- **Professional Associations.** Explore associations and organizations that specialize in facilitation and conflict resolution, such as the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR), the American Arbitration Association (AAA), International Association of Facilitators (IAF), and Technology of Participation (ToP). These organizations have directories and resources to help you find qualified facilitators.

- **Universities and Colleges.** Contact university departments specializing in conflict resolution, public policy, or related fields. Professors or researchers in these departments may have facilitation expertise.

- **Government Departments.** Some government agencies have a roster of facilitators or consultants that they use for specific projects.

- **Consulting Firms.** Many consulting firms offer facilitation services. Look for firms that specialize in public policy, government relations, or organizational development.

Selecting a Facilitator

There are several important qualities to consider when selecting a facilitator, including their experience,

1. **Expertise in Public Policy.** A strong background in public policy is essential. Look for candidates who have a deep understanding of the political landscape, policy formulation, and the decision-making processes within government and related organizations.
2. **Communication Skills.** Excellent communication skills are crucial. The facilitator should be able to articulate complex policy issues clearly and facilitate discussions effectively. This includes both written and verbal communication.

3. **Impartiality.** A good facilitator remains impartial. They should not have a personal stake in the dialogue’s outcome and should guide the process without imposing personal opinions.

4. **Analytical Skills.** Facilitators in public policy need strong analytical skills to understand and dissect complex issues. This includes the ability to analyze data, evaluate policy options, and anticipate potential consequences.

5. **Conflict Resolution Skills.** Public policy discussions often involve diverse perspectives and potential conflicts. A facilitator should be adept at managing conflicts, fostering constructive dialogue, and finding common ground among participants.

6. **Knowledge of Decision-Making Processes.** Understanding decision-making processes within government or other relevant bodies is crucial. This includes knowledge of how policies are developed, evaluated, and implemented.

7. **Flexibility and Adaptability.** Public policy environments can be dynamic, with shifting priorities and unexpected challenges. A facilitator should be flexible and able to adapt to changing circumstances while focusing on the discussion’s objectives.

8. **Facilitation Techniques and Meeting Design.** Familiarity with a variety of facilitation techniques is important. This includes methods for brainstorming, consensus-building, and other tools to encourage active participation and collaboration.

9. **Key Party Engagement.** Experience in engaging with diverse parties is vital. The facilitator should be able to create an inclusive environment that encourages input from all relevant parties.

10. **Problem-Solving Skills.** Public policy discussions often involve solving complex problems. Look for a facilitator who is skilled in problem-solving, critical thinking, and can guide participants through the process of developing effective solutions.

11. **Ethical Conduct.** High ethical standards are essential. The facilitator should operate with integrity, ensuring transparency and fairness throughout the facilitation process.

When hiring a facilitator for public policy discussions, it’s important to thoroughly review their experience, references, and conduct interviews to assess their suitability for the specific context and issues at hand.
### APPENDIX E: MEETING EVALUATION

1 (Strongly Disagree) | 2 (Disagree) | 3 (Neutral) | 4 (Agree) | 5 (Strongly Agree)

1. The overall organization and structure of the meeting were satisfactory.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

2. The meeting agenda effectively addressed important topics and provided a clear understanding of the issues discussed.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

3. The meeting facilitator effectively managed and guided the discussions.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

4. The presentations and information shared during the meeting were clear and easily understandable.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

5. My opinions and concerns were heard and considered during the meeting.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

6. The interactive elements of the meeting (e.g., Q&A sessions, group discussions) were engaging.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

7. The meeting started and ended on time, and breaks were appropriately scheduled.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

8. The level of collaboration and constructive dialogue among participants during the meeting was satisfactory.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

9. Based on my experience in this meeting, I am likely to actively participate in future community meetings.
   
   ![Score](1 2 3 4 5)

10. What was the most valuable thing about the session?
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
   
   __________________________________________________________________________

11. What would you change about the session?
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
   
   __________________________________________________________________________

12. Please provide any additional information you’d like to share with county leaders.
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
   
   __________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX F: MEETING DESIGN EXAMPLES

World Café Process Steps

World Café is another problem-solving process that county leaders can consider. It is a participatory process designed to facilitate meaningful conversations among large groups of people. It is often used to explore complex issues and build collective understanding. Below is a description of how to organize a World Café meeting.

1. Forming the Foundation. The initial phase involves assembling a planning group comprised of representatives from various community groups, county departments, and other key parties. This diverse group is tasked with addressing the logistical aspects of the upcoming community engagement event. Among their responsibilities is identifying facilitators who will guide table discussions and select discussion topics presented to community members.

2. Creating the Environment. Moving on to the setup phase, the space should be arranged in a café-style layout, featuring small tables designed to seat 4-6 people. Each table is equipped with essential materials such as chart paper, easels, paper tablecloths (or notecards), and markers for notetaking. A main area is designated as the “harvest wall,” where community members can post key insights gathered throughout the event.

3. Setting the Stage. As the community members gather, a welcoming introduction is provided, accompanied by a brief overview of the World Café process. Emphasis is placed on the significance of open and collaborative conversation, setting the tone for the discussions to follow.

4. Opening Dialogue. The first round kicks off with facilitators guiding introductions and posing a relevant question or topic for discussion at each table. Participants engage in conversations for a predetermined amount of time, typically 20-30 minutes, during which notetaking is encouraged on the tablecloths or other provided materials.

5. Harvest and Rotation. Following the initial round, facilitators remain at their assigned tables while community members move to different tables, bringing their insights into new discussions. Facilitators provide summaries of the previous conversations to the newcomers, ensuring a seamless transition between topics.

6. Building on Ideas. The second round introduces a new question or sub-topic related to the initial discussion. Community members engage in fresh conversations, building upon insights from the previous round. The process of notetaking and dialogue repeats to further enrich the exploration of the main topic.

7. Harvest and Rotation (Repeat). This pattern of harvest and rotation continues through multiple rounds, each focusing on a different aspect of the main topic. It ensures comprehensive exploration and a diverse exchange of ideas among community members.

8. Synthesis of Ideas and Solutions. In the final round, community members gather for reflection on the overall insights gained. Each table is invited to share key findings, ideas, or potential solutions that have emerged during the discussions.

9. Acknowledging Contributions. Expressing gratitude for their valuable contributions, community members are encouraged to visit the harvest wall and add any additional insights. An explanation follows on how the collected information will be utilized and shared, ensuring transparency, and reinforcing the importance of the community’s input in shaping the project’s direction.
Strengths and Challenges of World Café

Strengths
The World Café is a versatile model for engaging communities in dialogue. It can be adapted to various contexts and is particularly useful when exploring topics that benefit from diverse perspectives and collaborative problem-solving. The process encourages diverse perspectives and cross-pollination of ideas, fosters a relaxed and open atmosphere, promotes authentic conversation, allows for multiple conversations to happen simultaneously, and builds a collective understanding of complex issues. Finally, World Café generates a lot of good thinking at one time, while collaborative problem-solving is a sustained process of multiple meetings designed to generate solutions.

Challenges
A challenge of the World Café model is that it requires multiple, skilled facilitators to ensure productive conversations and smooth transitions between rounds. It is highly recommended that county leaders hire professional facilitators to lead the groups. This approach will produce high quality results and improve the credibility of the process. Another challenge of the World Café model is its high-level of complexity, including weeks (if not months) of planning and careful management of the group rotation process.

Intergroup Dialogue Steps
Intergroup dialogue is a facilitated process that brings together individuals to engage in open and constructive communication about various issues. The goal of intergroup dialogue is to foster understanding, empathy, and collaboration across group boundaries, leading to increased awareness of issues and collective action for positive change. Intergroup dialogue is often a sustained effort where participants engage in several dialogue sessions for an extended period.

Below are the eight steps in the intergroup dialogue process.

1. Preparation and Planning. The convenor should create a planning group tasked with identifying the groups to be involved, setting clear objectives for the dialogue, selecting facilitators, and other logistics.

2. Introduction and Ground Rules. At the beginning of the dialogue, facilitators establish ground rules for respectful communication, confidentiality, and active listening. They also set the tone for the dialogue by asking connecting questions and emphasizing the importance of openness, honesty, and empathy.

3. Sharing Personal Stories and Experiences. Participants are invited to share their personal experiences, perspectives, and emotions related to the discussion. This step helps to build relationships among participants.

4. Exploring Differences and Commonalities. Participants engage in open and respectful dialogue to explore the differences and similarities between their respective groups. This may include storytelling to identify shared values and goals.

5. Addressing Conflict and Disagreement. Facilitators help participants navigate conflicts and disagreements that may arise during the dialogue. This involves asking questions, framing issues neutrally, and identifying opportunities for agreement.

6. Building Action Plans and Commitments. As the dialogue sessions progress, participants work together to identify concrete actions and solutions for addressing the issues discussed. This may include advocacy campaigns, community projects, policy changes, or other forms of collective action.

7. Closure and Evaluation. A closing session reflects on the dialogue process, shared insights and learning outcomes, and celebrates achievements. Participants are encouraged to complete evaluations, provide feedback on their experiences, and suggest ways to improve future dialogues.
Strengths and Challenges of Intergroup Dialogue

Strengths

Intergroup dialogue offers several advantages in fostering social cohesion and addressing intergroup tensions within communities. First, it facilitates a nuanced understanding of diverse perspectives and experiences among participants. Through structured discussions and the sharing of personal narratives, intergroup dialogue cultivates empathy and reduces stereotypes and prejudices. This enhanced understanding serves as a foundation for building trust and solidarity across group boundaries. Intergroup dialogue also promotes problem-solving and collective action. By engaging in dialogue, participants identify common goals and develop strategies to address shared concerns. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of agency and empowerment among participants, leading to tangible outcomes such as community initiatives and advocacy campaigns. Third, intergroup dialogue contributes to the development of meaningful relationships and social capital within communities. Through sustained engagement in dialogue processes, participants establish networks of support and mutual respect. These relationships transcend social divisions and contribute to a sense of belonging and cohesion within the community.

Challenges

Despite its potential benefits, intergroup dialogue also presents several challenges and limitations that may hinder its effectiveness. First, the successful implementation of intergroup dialogue requires a significant investment of time and resources from both facilitators and participants. Scheduling sessions and coordinating diverse parties can be logistically complex and may result in low attendance rates and difficulties sustaining engagement over time. Second, intergroup dialogue may encounter resistance and conflict from participants who are unwilling to engage in meaningful dialogue or confront uncomfortable truths. Addressing these challenges necessitates skilled facilitation and a commitment to creating a safe and supportive environment for dialogue. Lastly, intergroup dialogue may have limited reach and impact, particularly in reaching marginalized or disenfranchised groups within the community. Structural barriers such as socioeconomic disparities and language barriers may prevent equitable participation, thereby undermining the inclusivity and effectiveness of dialogue processes.
APPENDIX G: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

While the following list provides valuable resources, it is important to note that it is non-exhaustive. County leaders are encouraged to explore further options and consult additional materials for comprehensive information on bridging divides and solving problems.

Tools

**Braver Angels eTraining**

These courses have been crafted by experts in communications and depolarization. They provide an effective and "safe" way to interact with people in difficult situations. These courses can be taken stand-alone or before or after Braver Angels’ Red/Blue workshops which build understanding between conservatives and liberals. Each course takes approximately 40 minutes to complete.

**Bridging and Breaking Curriculum**. Created by the Othering and Belonging Institute, this training includes modules on the topics of othering, breaking, bridging, and belonging. This is designed for folks who have already been introduced to the concepts but can use a refresher through examples. The second part of the training is an interactive discussion using case studies of real-world examples of bridging.

**Bridging Differences Playbook**

The Greater Good Science Center created the Bridging Differences Playbook based on decades of scientific studies, interviews with dozens of leaders, and the landscape of relevant programs. From this work, they collected best practices for bridging political, racial, religious, or other divides. This work helped to identify a set of skills and strategies that support positive dialogue, relationships, and understanding between groups or individuals. The Playbook synthesizes these core skills and strategies into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup skills.
Community Engagement Assessment Tool

Nexus Community Partners created a community engagement toolkit to help organizations understand their current relationships in the community and offer guidance on ways to improve their engagement strategies for future engagement efforts.

International Association of Public Participation
Global Learning Pathway

The training program of the preeminent international organization advancing the practice of public participation.

Living Room Conversations

Living Room Conversations has a wide variety of resources to help you start, grow, and continue to bridge divides and increase understanding in your own lives.

NCDD Engagement Streams Framework and Public Deliberation Guide

NCDD’s Engagement Streams Framework helps people navigate the range of dialogue and deliberation approaches available to them. Developed in 2005, the Streams Framework is designed to help you decide which types of approaches are the best fit for your circumstances. No method works in all situations, though all these techniques can seem like revelations and appear almost magical to those accustomed to “business as usual” approaches to making decisions and addressing conflicting views. NCDD’s goals for this framework are to help you feel more confident in moving forward with your engagement efforts and to give you a simple, useful tool for teaching others about these approaches.

NCDD Resource Guide on Public Engagement

The Resource Guide highlights the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation’s best collaboratively created products (like the Core Principles for Public Engagement and the Engagement Streams Framework), as well as recognizing and directing you
to a lot of the great work on public engagement that has been done by others in our field.

**Perspectives**

Constructive Dialogue Institute’s blended learning program distills rigorous behavioral science research into practical skills that help improve participants’ communication, sense of belonging, and openness to diverse perspectives.

**Polarization Detox Challenge**

The Challenge is a flexible skill-building bootcamp equipping you to break the blame cycle and be a leader of constructive conflict.

**Welcoming Community**

Welcoming Community created a guide to engaging mainstream America in integrating newcomers into our communities, called The Receiving Communities Toolkit: A Guide for Engaging Mainstream America in Immigrant Integration.

**Books**

Facilitation and Collaborative Problem-Solving


**Bridging Divides**

1. **High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out**, (2021). Amanda Ripley

2. **I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times**, (2022). Monica Guzman


**Videos and Podcasts**

1. **TED talk with “Getting to Yes” author William Ury.** The author of “Getting to Yes,” offers an elegant, simple (but not easy) way to create agreement in even the most difficult situations – from family conflict to, perhaps, the Middle East.

2. **Interview with Sheila Heen.** Author of “Difficult Conversations” discusses the importance of difficult conversations and strategies to have them.


4. **Living Room Conversation on Mental Health and Belonging.** Watch and listen as five participants speak about mental health and belonging through their own, diverse experiences.

5. **A Braver Way with Monica Guzman.** A podcast about how you – yes YOU – can disagree about politics without losing heart.

**Articles**

1. **How We Can Reconcile With Each Other When Our Politics Are So Polarized**

2. **Our Culture of Contempt**