

CHOICEWORK DIALOGUE MODERATOR GUIDE

This *Moderator Guide* provides step-by-step instructions for facilitating Choicework Dialogues. *Choicework Dialogues* employ a *Choicework Discussion Starter* to help organize productive dialogues. Choicework Discussion Starters are great tools for dialogues because they provide a structure for discussing alternative solutions to complex and controversial public problems by:

- Creating a level playing field for diverse participants from different backgrounds by providing non-partisan background information about an issue;
- Helping participants move past unproductive false dichotomies and encouraging creative thinking by framing issues with three, rather than two, approaches to addressing a problem;
- Encouraging participants to move beyond wishful thinking and silver bullets and to recognize the trade-offs inherent in any approach; and
- Making areas of common ground and disagreement explicit by encouraging participants to select an approach that comes closest to their own perspectives and experiences and allowing everyone to articulate their point of view.

In conjunction with the hands-on training you will undergo, this Moderator Guide will prepare you to lead productive, thoughtful and lively conversations on critical issues.

Moderator Tasks and Objectives

On the most basic level, Choicework Moderators make sure the participants in Choicework Dialogues understand the topic for discussion and keep the discussion focused and on schedule. Beyond this, moderators make the conversation as participatory and productive as possible.

A successful moderator is comfortable with the goal of an open dialogue without a predetermined conclusion. It is essential to the credibility of the dialogue that the moderator does not direct the outcomes of the conversation. The moderator should be impartial but not disengaged. The moderator does, of course, have an agenda with regard to the process of the session — to facilitate a constructive dialogue among diverse members of the community who do not often communicate with each other. But

the goal is not to lead anyone toward a “correct” answer. If you do not feel you can be objective, or if you feel you could get defensive or impatient with “wrong answers,” the moderator role is not a good one for you.

In general, moderators should be familiar with the issues to be addressed, but they need not be experts. The moderator’s job is not to teach participants about the issue at hand. We encourage a natural, straightforward style of facilitation. Moderators are more like skillful hosts who keep a party lively without themselves becoming the center of attention.

Facilitator’s main objectives include:

- Develop mutual understanding across perspectives
- Help participants explain why they feel the way they do—for instance, have they had particular experiences that have led them to their current views?
- Draw out contradictions and tensions among different ideas being discussed and help participants work through them.
- Help people clarify and negotiate differences, identify common ground, and establish priorities of action.

The most effective moderators balance the following responsibilities:

- Remain impartial toward the subject.
- Encourage everyone to join the conversation, and discourage anyone from dominating it.
- Find the right balance between having too much and too little structure during the dialogue.
- Model good listening and respectful engagement; create an atmosphere of acceptance of all ideas and persons, and help give an equal hearing to all perspectives.
- Avoid taking on an expert role with the subject matter. Your role is not to teach the participants about the issue—even if it is a subject you know very well.
- Keep the deliberation on track. Make sure the goals and process of the dialogue are clear, and help the group get back on track if it meanders.
- Clarify the conversation as needed. If you are not sure what a participant is saying, chances are good that others are unclear also. You may ask participants to clarify what they are trying to say or ask if you have understood them correctly.

- Encourage deeper reflection. Ask participants to share what is important to them about the issue or why they feel a particular approach or strategy is valuable. Make sure participants have considered the potential outcomes of their comments and ideas by surfacing trade-offs and consequences.
- Help participants identify common ground, clarify disagreements, and work through key tensions.
- Help people prioritize their ideas for action. Helping people move from exploratory dialogue to concrete implications and action ideas is an important role of a moderator.

Notes on Key Moderator Challenges

Creating an environment where people are comfortable expressing ideas

You want to create and maintain a safe and open environment for sharing ideas. The moderator can contribute by establishing a relaxed but focused tone for the session and modeling honest and straightforward, yet civil and respectful communication.

Preventing individuals or subgroups from dominating the discussion

Especially early on in the discussion, a major goal of moderators should be to make sure everyone has good opportunities to participate and “find their voice.” This doesn’t mean making everyone participate equally but, rather, it involves creating a situation where everyone has an opportunity to do so and you should occasionally “check in” with people who have not spoken to see if they have anything they want to add to the discussion.

Two typical challenges in this regard are (1) the dominant personality, who will talk at such length or with such force that less aggressive members of the group fade into the background; and (2) those with greater experience and expertise who simply have more fully formed views and can talk at greater length. Think about how you will handle these situations, but note that moderators should not feel the need to police these issues too tightly. A common mistake of novice moderators is to jump in too quickly if someone appears to be “getting out of line.” In our experience, it’s best to let things play out a bit and allow the group to react and deal with the individual or situation without interference — which is usually all that is needed. Having said that, moderators may need to intervene from time to time to keep the conversation open, constructive and

accessible to everyone. The ground rules you'll set for the discussion will help you do this.

Helping people examine their own views, understand the views of others and communicate effectively about the issues with diverse participants.

In post-conversation surveys, most participants state that what they liked most about the Choicework Dialogue was the exposure to perspectives that they would not normally have had the opportunity to hear. Participants say that they heard views different from their own position which had merit, and that they reconsidered one of their own positions at least once. Moderators can facilitate these outcomes by encouraging people to examine their views, to articulate and explain them clearly, and to hear (and perhaps respond to) the views of others.

A Note on Group Conflict

Beginning moderators are often anxious about too much conflict. However, groups often strive to minimize their own conflicts and reframe them as areas of common ground. This can artificially conceal real tensions that may need attention. It is important, therefore, that moderators take an accepting attitude toward group conflict and disagreement, an attitude that communicates, "This is normal and useful to understand." Conflicts are inherent to collaborative problem solving, and people need to learn how to deal with the inherent conflict more productively, rather than seek to resolve or avoid conflict. Moderators should look to neither agitate disagreements nor shy away from them, but rather help the group to **identify and clarify** areas of conflict and disagreement.

6 Basic Moderator "Moves"

The moderator has six basic choices or "moves" he or she can use to help guide the discussion without controlling it. Using any one of these requires close attention to the pace and mood of the discussion, as well as the behavior of participants.

1. **Move on** to the next speaker by simply pointing to the next person in line or asking the group for additional comments. People like to talk, and in many cases you will have a line of people ready to talk, and can simply move from one to another.
2. **Paraphrase** what a person has said in order to clarify the point, and move the conversation to a deeper level. When paraphrasing, always do so in a way that

makes it easy for the speaker to correct you (“So what I’m hearing is that ... Is that right?”)

3. **Ask a “probing” or “follow up”** question to the *same speaker* to get clarification or dig deeper.

Ex. “Why is that important to you?”; “Can you say more about that?”

4. **Ask a “reaction”** question that seeks to have *other* people respond to the last speaker’s comments in some way.

Ex. “Does anyone else have a different view?”

5. **Ask a new starting question.** Depending on the goals of the session, you may have a set of questions you are supposed to ask, or you may have certain issues you want to discuss, so you may just jump in to take the conversation in a different direction. Based on the responses, you may also develop a question that works to combine or compare opinions that were shared. A new starting question may be particularly important if the conversation has gotten off track and the participants need to be redirected to the issue.

Ex. “Many argue that one of the key topics with this issue is X. What are your thoughts on its importance?”

6. **Let there be silence.** Often, moderators feel pressure to keep the conversation flowing, so they are troubled by silence and seek to fill it with probing questions or a change of topic. However, sometimes the right thing to do is to sit with the silence and give people a little space to find their way to what they want to say.

Structure of Choicework Dialogues

Most Choicework Dialogues begin with welcoming remarks and an opening session to set the stage for the conversation to follow (Stage 1). In Stage 2, the participants review the Choicework Discussion Starter together. Afterward, for groups larger than 15, organizers separate participants into smaller, diverse groups of 7 to 12 (Stage 3). Each group should be as diverse as possible, not only demographically but with respect to the different kinds of community members present. In Stages 4 and 5, participants vote on their favorite approach and discuss the topic at hand. In Stage 6, the conversation is summarized in the Interim Summary.

It is the moderator’s responsibility to manage the Choicework Dialogues. The entire Choicework Dialogue is designed to take 90 to 150 minutes. There are two major phases, each with several components:

Stage 1	Purpose, overview, ground rules	10 minutes
Stage 2	Review Choicework Discussion Starter	10 minutes
Stage 3	Break into two groups, each with a moderator	5 minutes
Stage 4	“Soft Vote”	5 minutes
Stage 5	Choicework Dialogue	60 minutes
Stage 6	Interim Summary	30 minutes

The remainder of this guide will walk you through each section of the conversation in detail.

Detailed Moderating Procedures

Stage 1 (10 minutes)

Time: _____ to _____ **Purpose, overview, ground rules**

Purpose and Overview

Moderator makes a few very brief, opening remarks, explaining the purpose of the dialogue and how it will play out.

Sample language (adjust and elaborate as you think best):

“The purpose of these dialogue sessions is to explore an important public problem that affects teachers and the communities in which we live. We’re going to review the Choicework Discussion Guide together and use that as a point of departure for our conversation. Before we begin, let’s review a few basic ground rules that will help keep our conversation productive and on track.”

Ground Rules

Cover any simple ground rules you might want to apply to the discussion. For example, you might say something along the following lines:

Sample language (adjust and elaborate as you think best):

“Time is tight, so let’s all work together to keep the conversation on track and to make sure everyone has an equal chance to speak.”

“We want this to be a session where people feel free to express their views and where they can consider the views of others. It’s okay to agree with others, and it’s okay to disagree as well. We just ask that you disagree with ideas, not with people. In other words, let’s keep this constructive and avoid getting personal.”

“Also, let’s listen to each other respectfully, and resist the impulse to check our email or multi-task during our conversation.”

Stage 2 (10 minutes)

Time: _____ to _____ **Review Choicework Discussion Starter**

Sample language (adjust and elaborate as you think best):

“Let’s quickly review the Choicework Discussion Starter together. I am looking for volunteers who are willing to read sections of the guide. When we are done, I’m going to ask you to vote on the choice that’s closest to your own view of the right approach to solving the jobs problem, and we’ll begin our conversation from there.

Stage 3 (10 minutes)

Time: _____ to _____ **Soft Vote**

The job now is to launch the dialogue through the following simple steps:

- 1) Take an informal vote to see which choice is closest to the views of each participant.
- 2) Ask people why they voted the way they did.

Sample Language for Asking the Group to Vote on the Choices

“We’re going to start our conversation by taking a vote on which choice is closest to your own view of how to address the jobs challenge. We call this a “soft vote” because we’re just trying to get an initial impression of people’s first reactions. You may like elements of various approaches, or have ideas that aren’t part of the Choicework guide, and we want to hear about that. You may change your mind as the conversation goes on, and that’s fine — you won’t be stuck with this position just because you vote for it. This will just help us get our conversation going.

OK, let’s turn to the approach choices, “how many lean the most toward Approach 1? Approach 2? And 3?”

Then pick someone to get things going and ask them why they voted the way they did. Then move on to others who voted similarly or differently (depending on what feels interesting — there’s no set formula) and that will get the conversation started.

Stage 4 (60 minutes)

Time: _____ to _____ **Choicework Dialogue**

And now you're off and running. From here, you can move the discussion around the group and look for opportunities to clarify and deepen the conversation.

As it progresses, people will likely stop talking to you and start responding to each other's comments, and a real dialogue, where people are exchanging ideas and building on each other's thoughts, will begin to take shape. Remember that the vote and the Choices are just a mechanism for getting the conversation going, and as things develop you'll refer to the vote less and less and will just focus on the issue at hand and what people think will help to address it. Once some momentum picks up, your job is to help the conversation along here and there, but it is also largely to keep out of the way.

On a sheet of paper make three sections for notes. Each section should be labeled either "Common Ground," "Concerns/Disagreements," or "Outstanding Questions." As the participants discuss the issue, make sure you jot down those areas where you can here general agreement, disagreement, or outstanding questions.

Stage 5 (30 minutes)

Time: _____ to _____ **Interim Summary**

During this section, you will help the participants summarize the conversation by identifying their areas of common ground, disagreement and remaining questions. As part of the Interim Summary, moderators will make notes of the discussion on the flipchart.

Working at the flipchart, create four pages:

- Common Ground
- Concerns/Disagreements
- Questions
- Actions

1. "In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?"

MODERATOR: You can pull out some common themes that you have heard, but make sure to check that the group agrees with your suggestions!

2. “What were the things that we have disagreements about or areas where we seem to have more differences of opinion?”
3. “What questions were raised about our topic that we want to learn more about?”
4. “What are some of the actions we can take to make progress on this issue?”

Tips for Managing the Interim Summary

- Important: You should briefly “process” each suggestion by a group member to make sure most people are comfortable with having it go up on the flipchart. For example, ask, “Does everyone agree that this was an area of common ground?” before putting it up on the flipchart. If the issue can’t be resolved quickly, it can become a question for further discussion on the “Concerns/Disagreements” board.
- It is important to discourage people from introducing new material here — the task is to sum up the previous conversation, not begin a new one.
- This is one place where you can introduce your own observations. For example, if the group is missing a point of disagreement that you recall clearly, you might say, “I seem to recall some disagreement about _____. Is that accurate?”
- We don’t need 100% agreement to list something as “Common Ground,” as long as most people agree. Minority views can be recorded as well.

Recording the Interim Summary

When recording the Interim Summary it is crucial to **record the major points**. While the moderator is not expected to write everything that is said word for word, he or she should try to capture the essence of the main points being made by each participant. It is especially important to record not only each person's position ("I'm for such and such"), but each person's thinking ("I'm for such and such because..."). It is equally important that moderators do their best to **keep their own views out of the way** and record the proceedings as faithfully as possible.

Some practical tips:

- You will be working on a flipchart so the group can see the document you are creating. At the top of the flipchart, be sure to identify which group you are recording.
- Do not bother with people's names; just record their perspectives and ideas.
- Write as large and legibly as you can without slowing down.
- You can occasionally ask the group to clarify a point if it is unclear to you or if things have moved too quickly.
- Treat each person's contribution with equal respect. It is not your role to determine the value of a comment, but rather to capture the discussion.

At the end of the session store the flipchart contents, either by taking a picture of the board with your phone or by copying it onto a piece of paper.