



## COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Below are a variety of techniques community leaders and organizations can use to engage the public in issues ranging from school budgets to bond votes to strategic planning. This is by no means a comprehensive list but rather a sampling of some of the more common models used to create dialogue. For more information on techniques contact the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (<http://www.thataway.org/>).

### Focus Groups

This approach involves a series of small group discussions of 8-10 people around specific questions. These discussions are facilitated by a professional facilitator, and the groups can be a cross-section of the population or more homogeneous, but the ultimate goal is to talk with a representative sample of the population. Participants are personally invited to attend the group. The number of groups conducted will depend on the overall size of the population from which the sample is drawn.

The advantages of this approach are that you have greater control over the make up of the groups. Since individuals are personally invited, you avoid the problem with a self-selected audience. Moreover, there is a personal touch with an invitation that goes along way to creating good will. The size of the groups allows for greater individual participation and more in-depth discussion.

The disadvantages of this approach are that it is fairly labor intensive. It requires phone calls and invitation letters to participants, and multiple site visits from the facilitators. It also takes time to consolidate and summarize the data gathered. Because there are numerous groups held, the process takes longer to complete than some other options.

### Café Conversations

The Café Conversations model was developed by The World Café Community (<http://www.theworldcafe.com/>). A Café Conversation can be held for a few (12) to many (1200+) participants and generally begins by clarifying the purpose and context of the gathering. Participants sit in groups of 4-5 and engage in dialogue about questions

Marty Jacobs - President Systems In Sync 360 Cadwell Rd. East Thetford, VT 05043  
Phone: 802-785-2611 Fax: 802-785-3151 Cell: 603-208-8200  
Email: [marty@systemsinsync.com](mailto:marty@systemsinsync.com)  
[www.systemsinsync.com](http://www.systemsinsync.com)

that build upon each other. These are questions that really matter to participants' lives, their work, and their community. There are typically three rounds of progressive conversation where people travel to new tables, carrying key ideas, themes and questions from their previous table to the next one. At the end of the small group conversations, there is a final period of sharing insights and learning in a whole group conversation. A facilitator captures all the ideas, themes, insights, and learning on paper or a computer/LCD. When done effectively, Café Conversations can generate new thinking, a forward focus, hope, imagination, creative action, and new possibilities.

The advantages of the Café Conversation are that the data gathering process happens in a single event. This event can create a greater sense of community connection and can tap into a wealth of creativity. Because the groups are smaller than focus groups, there is an even higher level of participation. Café Conversations are often an energizing experience for participants, which can precipitate forward momentum toward creation of a vision or sustainable changes.

The disadvantages of this approach are that it requires access to a large meeting area with small tables. Long cafeteria tables are not conducive to setting the stage for the conversation. It also requires a longer time commitment from participants, typically four hours (as compared to two hours with focus groups). Participants are more likely to be self-selected, which can introduce bias into the data gathered. Finally, some participants may perceive this unique approach as contrived.

## Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is a model of community engagement that establishes a marketplace of inquiry, reflection, and learning, bringing out the best in both individuals and the whole. Like Café Conversations, it promotes cooperation and learning in a relaxed and natural atmosphere. It is based on what it referred to as "The Law of Two Feet," which means participants take responsibility for what they care about – standing up for it and moving to where they can best contribute. It is also based on the following four principles:

1. Whoever comes are the right people: this means that those who are attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute the most to that conversation.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could've: the idea here is to focus on the present and not try to rehash the past.
3. When it starts is the right time: this principle speaks to the idea that creativity has its own timeline, and participants must enter that process when it starts and make their best contribution.
4. When it's over, it's over: this principle also emphasizes the idea that creativity must take it's own course and not be tied to artificial timeframes.

The model can be used for groups from 5 to 1500 people and can be run for a couple of hours or up to three days. Multiple days can run consecutively or over time, and the

Marty Jacobs - President Systems In Sync 360 Cadwell Rd. East Thetford, VT 05043  
 Phone: 802-785-2611 Fax: 802-785-3151 Cell: 603-208-8200  
 Email: [marty@systemsinsync.com](mailto:marty@systemsinsync.com)  
[www.systemsinsync.com](http://www.systemsinsync.com)

meetings can be held at one site or multiple sites connected by computer and/or phone and video. The meeting is focused on a particular statement or question, and the group creates the agenda by first posting topics they are interested in leading a discussion about and a time and place for the conversation to take place. Those who have not taken responsibility for a particular topic then sign up for the conversations in which they want to participate. Each conversation group selects a reporter who then enters discussion reports into a computer, prints it out, and posts it on a News Wall. The event ends with a closing circle in which participants share insights.

The advantages of this model are that it is almost entirely participant driven, thus tapping the passion and creativity that exists within the group. It enables groups to address directly complex issues for which no one knows the answer and genuinely empowers them to come up with solutions. The model builds energy, collaboration, and shared leadership, which often carries over into everyday work. Ultimately, there is a greater sense of ownership of the issue, and participants are more willing to accept responsibility for the outcomes. Finally, the model provides a great deal of flexibility.

The disadvantages of this model are that it can feel somewhat unstructured, at least initially. It requires a skilled facilitator to manage the process and to insure adequate follow up. The individual group meetings might create conflicts for some people, if more than one topic they are interested in overlaps and they must choose one over others. The individual groups are also self-selected, which introduces bias into the conversation and may not tap the creativity of more neutral observers.

## Study Circles

Study Circles are a technique for creating public dialogue and community change. The process involves three distinct stages: organizing, dialogue, and action. The organizing stage involves setting goals, planning for action, developing materials, piloting circles, training facilitators, and conducting the kickoff meeting. The dialogue stage requires facilitating many small diverse groups of 8-12 people. These groups meet four times in two-hour sessions that cover getting to know one another, determining the nature of the problem, brainstorming approaches to change, and moving from dialogue to action. The action stage begins with a forum of all Study Circle participants to share their experience and ideas and culminates with task forces or other implementation approaches. Study Circles are guided by the following principles:

- Involve everyone.
- Embrace diversity.
- Share knowledge, resources, power, and decision-making.
- Combine dialogue and deliberation.
- Connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.

The advantages of Study Circles are that because participants are involved over a period of time, they are more likely to feel invested in the outcome, and they develop lasting relationships with people with whom they might not interact otherwise.

Marty Jacobs - President Systems In Sync 360 Cadwell Rd. East Thetford, VT 05043  
 Phone: 802-785-2611 Fax: 802-785-3151 Cell: 603-208-8200  
 Email: [marty@systemsinsync.com](mailto:marty@systemsinsync.com)  
[www.systemsinsync.com](http://www.systemsinsync.com)

Participants are also involved in both understanding the problem and creating the solution, giving them a greater sense of ownership in sustaining change. The level of individual participation is high with Study Circles, and there is a greater likelihood of creating a long-term sense of community.

The disadvantages of Study Circles are the amount of time and effort that goes into the process. The organizing stage is highly labor intensive on the part of the contractors, however, the Study Circles themselves are intended to be facilitated by volunteers. There is also the element of a self-selecting audience.

### **Future Search Conference**

The purpose of a Future Search conference is joint action toward a desired future for a community, organization, or issue. It typically involves 60 to 70 people and takes place over three consecutive days. During that time, participants review the past, explore the present, create ideal future scenarios, identify common ground, and make action plans. The following are specific conditions for success:

- “Whole system” in the room
- Global context, local action
- Common ground and future focus, not problems and conflicts
- Self-managed small groups
- Full attendance
- Healthy meeting conditions
- 3 day event (2 half days, one full day)
- Public responsibility for follow up

It generally takes 3-6 months of planning to implement a Future Search conference, and follow up strategies need to be included in that planning.

The advantages of Future Search are that the approach is systemic and not piecemeal. The work is accomplished in a focused period of time, and those who participate are likely to be more invested in the outcome. Organizers can avoid the bias of self-selected participants because they will create a careful list of participants that represents the “whole system.”

The disadvantages are that it may be difficult to get the “whole system” to attend, particularly for three consecutive days. Because the approach is systemic, the amount of information can be overwhelming to participants. Since the conference happens at one moment in time, it may be difficult to sustain momentum through the follow up stage.

### **GroupSystems ThinkTank™**

ThinkTank™ is an electronic meeting tool that enables rapid participant responses, real-time documentation, and vastly accelerated meetings. Joining skilled facilitation with ThinkTank enhances prioritization, consensus building, and other group decision-

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 Email: [marty@systemsinsync.com](mailto:marty@systemsinsync.com)  
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making activities. A typical collaborative design agenda might consist of brainstorming ideas, categorizing the ideas by themes, and prioritizing solutions based on alternative analyses.

ThinkTank requires two people to conduct a session: a ThinkTank facilitator who manages the session and a ThinkTank technographer who manages the system. Descriptions of several ThinkTank tools are as follows:

- *Brainstorming and Categorizer* are used to gather diverse ideas quickly and accurately. They capture the actual words of stakeholders and not the interpretation of a note taker/scribe normally found in a brainstorming session.
- *Alternative Analysis* is used to address multiple criteria needed to determine a quality result without technical or functional bias. For example, possible solutions could be compared to cost, time, resource availability, and customer rankings. Participants can “weigh” alternatives so all opinions are considered.

Sessions are guided by a trained ThinkTank facilitator, whose jobs it is to keep the agenda on track, create a safe environment for information sharing and exchange of ideas, and help ensure that the session meets its desired outcomes. This tool is not a stand-alone process but rather can be used in conjunction with some of the above approaches to create a more participative and cost-effective project.

The advantages of ThinkTank are that it typically reduces the amount of meeting time required to reach desired objectives by two-thirds. For example, a traditional 8-hour meeting might be reduced to 3-4 hours or less, or a 3-day session can normally be reduced to 1 day. Participants simultaneously input comments and respond to activities, and instantly see all other participants’ inputs as they are submitted. There is no waiting for a facilitator or recorder to finish writing someone’s comment down on a flipchart before the next person can provide their input. Participants input anonymously to ThinkTank. Anonymity produces deeper discussions and dialogue by “leveling the playing field” of participants. ThinkTank stores and formats all data into either MS Word or MS Excel. Reports can be produced at anytime and clients walk out of meetings with a CD containing all the of the meeting’s documentation. More information about ThinkTank can be found at <http://www.groupsystems.com/products-and-services/thinktank>.

The disadvantages are that participants require their own computer. Anonymity and responsiveness diminish if computers are shared. The cost for 10 or less participants is \$2000/day, which includes the use of 10 laptops and licenses. Costs are negotiable for more than 10 participants. If Internet access and computers are available, the cost is reduced to \$1500/day for 10 participants. Eleven to twenty participants will cost an additional \$35/license.