Moving from Polarized Polemic to Constructive Conversation—
A Report from the
Public Conversations Project

Margaret Herzig

Picture this: You are a public participation specialist who has been asked to work with a group of key stakeholders to foster constructive public discussion and deliberation on a controversial public issue. "So far, so good," you may say. Now picture this: You have just learned that these stakeholders are so polarized that they can't imagine working with "those people" on the other side of the issue whom they describe variously as deceitful, fanatical, idiotic and greedy. "Just my kind of job," you may say. If that is your reaction, you may have little to learn from this article. If your reaction is, "This sounds like a nightmare," read on.

I will begin by briefly describing some common patterns of polarization. Then I will describe the general approach that the Public Conversations Project has developed to reverse those patterns through dialogue and the steps in our process. In the last section, I will comment on ways in which private dialogue can enhance public participation, making reference to two cases.

Patterns of Polarization

When public conflicts are longstanding and involve deep differences of identity, worldview, and values, constructive conversations leading to informed and empathic problem solving may be unthinkable. Polarized partisans usually express absolute certainty about their own views and denigrate or dismiss the concerns and values of the other. They rarely ask each other genuine questions and if they listen to each other at all, they typically do so to scan for the other's moral or logical flaws. Each side presents conflicting data and charges the other with peddling misinformation. Adding to this divisive atmosphere is the media, which typically gives voice to the most self-assured and indignant spokespeople for each position. To the extent that outspoken participants in the public discourse are secretly conflicted about any aspect of

the issue, about the tactics they use, or about the toll taken by the battle, they render voiceless a part of themselves and are unable to bring their full selves to the public debate and to efforts to resolve the conflict. Citizens who choose not to align with one cause or the other also become voiceless in this public discourse. They may fear that if they speak up they will be seen by the activists as muddle-headed, apathetic, or "traitors" to a group with which they are expected to align. They may see themselves as not having anything to offer. Or they may see themselves as choosing disengagement from a draining and tiresome battle.

The Public Conversations Project

The Public Conversations Project (PCP) designs and facilitates conversations among people who are experiencing intense polarization (e.g. pro-life and pro-choice activists) and among people whose relationships are somewhat less polarized but whose ways of relating are significant barriers to collaboration and problem-solving. The Project began in 1989 as a brainstorming group at the Family Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts, exploring the possibility that family therapists have ways of working with conflict that can be adapted and applied to divisive issues of public significance. Our most intensive work to date has focused on the abortion controversy, battles over forest practices, conflicts over homosexuality and religion, tensions among leaders concerned with population and women's health and rights, and divisions related to differences in social class.

The goal of the conversations we facilitate -- which we typically call "dialogues" -- is not to broker settlements. Rather, it is to promote constructive ways of communicating across differences, to stimulate fresh ways of thinking about the ideas, beliefs and commitments of the "other" and of oneself, and to open up possibilities for action and change that were either obscured or unimaginable in the prior polarized debate. Most of the situations in which we have worked have been so burdened by stereotypes and distrust that those involved needed to engage in dialogue before they could engage in constructive problem solving; thus, we have focused on fostering shifts in relationships and in the climate of divisiveness. In some situations, it has been appropriate for us to carefully combine or put in sequence different kinds of constructive conversations, some of which are more oriented toward problem solving and action.

Objectives and Premises

Two objectives guide us in designing and facilitating dialogues: 1) to avoid the old fruitless conversation and 2) to invite participants into a new conversation.

Here are some of the premises that guide our practices. [1] You may infer, accurately, that these premises guide us toward a major investment in pre-meeting work.

1) **Preventing re-enactment of the old unconstructive patterns is essential to creating space for the new conversation and affirming that something new is possible.**

2) **If we want to prevent re-enactment of the old conversation, we must learn about how the old, polarized conversation goes and what participants hope to do differently.** This enables us to support what is new and fresh and to avoid inadvertently supporting conversations that are fresh for us but that represent old ruts and dead-ends for the participants. Learning about the old conversation also helps us steer clear of inadvertently replicating old injurious patterns related to who is typically included or excluded, whose resources typically are affirmed or invisible, who usually talks or listens, etc.

3) **Participants must be prepared to enter into a new conversation.** The pull of the old conversation is strong and resisting it is hard work; it requires participants to have strong commitment and motivation. Through our pre-meeting exchanges with participants (described later) we insure that all who attend will come with an intention to do that work, with shared goals, and with clear expectations.

4) **An atmosphere of safety and respect is crucial to leaving behind the old conversation.** Polarization is rooted in fear. It is when people feel a threat –- perhaps a threat to their basic security, or their sense of identity and dignity[2] -- that they join with others who share their position, seeking to enhance their sense of safety and power.[3] If we are to ask people to set aside their rhetorical armor and their presentation of a monolithic "united front" with their comrades, we need to offer other forms of safety and power. We offer the protection provided by a set of ground rules, by a carefully planned environment for the conversation and by careful facilitation. We offer the power of full and authentic speaking in a private setting away from the press.

5) **When participants speak as complex individuals, they begin to listen more fully to each other and they become genuinely interested in each other.** We assume that spokespersons for various perspectives have more complex views than their slogans suggest. We also assume that solutions to problems are more likely to emerge when habits of simplification are blocked, new information is shared, and people bring forth the multiple resources embodied in their life experience. The opening questions that we pose in dialogue sessions encourage people to speak about what matters most to them, to share stories about ways in which their views have been shaped by their life experience, and to reveal the complexity of their views. As a result, information emerges that is suppressed or ignored in the usual

conversation, enlarging each person's grasp of what the issues are, who cares about those issues, and why.

6) **When we bring an appreciative stance to our interactions with participants, we foster hope and mobilize energy for the new conversation.** When people are stuck in chronic conflict, they typically view each other as having limited moral or cognitive capacities. They may see their adversary as uncaring or bull-headed, and capable of uttering little other than wrong-headed slogans. Or they may see the adversary as brilliantly conniving and using all too many resources to implement a selfish or destructive agenda. When called upon to work with such groups, we resist the pull toward viewing any of the people involved as deficient or "problem-saturated." A "problem-saturated"[4] story holds little space for new thinking, new behaviors, and new relationships. Furthermore, we see ourselves not as experts standing above participants but as co-creators with them of new contexts for conversation – contexts that will invite them to bring skills they already use in other contexts into the conversation about the divisive issue. We see our expertise as guiding us in creating contexts in which their expertise, drawn from their experiences, can be activated and exercised toward the goals of better understanding and bridging differences.

7) **Collaborative planning and "emergent design" enhance participant ownership.** We are committed to participants' "ownership" of their conversation through all phases of the work. For example, whenever possible, we design meetings in collaboration with a diverse subgroup of the participants. When we design long meetings, e.g., two-day retreats, we build in plenty of flexibility so that we can continue to collaborate with our planning partners and the full participant group in developing agendas and designs that respond to what has happened in earlier sessions and to where the group wants to go next. At the end of each meeting, in facilitating participants' conversation about next steps, we do so without investment in any particular outcome, committed to supporting the participants' investment in their "new" conversation.

Typical Steps in the Process

No single list of steps will accurately describe all of our work; what we offer here is a typical list of steps in the process.

Step One: Matching What We Do to What Potential Participants Want
Early in our conversations with potential participants and conveners, we seek to determine whether our general approach is well suited to their goals.

Step Two: Learning about the Old Conversation and Exceptions to It
We talk with potential participants and others who are familiar with the issue to learn about the "old" stuck conversation – what is said repeatedly, where the

dead ends are, who typically participates, who cares about the issue but remains silent, etc. We also inquire about times when something other than the old conversation happened, how they understand this exception, and what skills, resources, visions, and values already exist in the community that might support future excursions out of the old and into the new.[5]

Step Three: Collaborative Decision Making About the Initiative
We talk with a range of potential participants (and potential conveners if the convening role is yet to be defined) to learn: Is there motivation to come together? If so, for what purpose? Within what time frame? Who should convene the event? Who should be there and why? Whose involvement would be especially helpful in designing or convening the meeting? Whose participation might be especially beneficial in spreading positive results beyond the bounds of the initial dialogue group? Who should be there in part because they usually sideline themselves or feel sidelined by others, despite the valuable skills and fresh perspectives they might offer?

Step Four: Further Planning and Issuing of Invitations
PCP staff, participants and convenors decide who will convene the event and its basic parameters. The convener may be PCP as a "third party." It may be a planning group consisting of a diverse subset of the participants whom PCP staff serve as design consultants and facilitators. Or it may be some other variant, for example, PCP may issue invitations on behalf of a small group representing different viewpoints. The next step is to collaborate with this group to draft an invitation that will enable potential participants to make an informed decision about whether to attend. The invitation always includes: 1) a statement of objective, 2) an indication of what participants can expect, and 3) an indication of what the conveners and facilitators will expect of participants. For example, the invitation is likely to include a request that people attend only if they can commit to participating for the full duration of the meeting, and it will include a list of proposed group agreements (See Appendix A). It may also include a table distinguishing debate from dialogue (see Appendix B).

Step Five: Pre-Meeting Exchanges with Participants
The extent and form of communication that occurs before the meeting depends on the size of the group and the roles that we and others play in convening the meeting. In many cases, after written invitations have been sent, we call each of those who have agreed to attend. This phone call addresses questions participants may have about the process and provides an opportunity for us to begin to build a relationship with participants with whom we have not previously spoken. We are particularly interested in hearing from participants about what they hope for, what they are concerned about, what they would like us to know about them, and what they think of the proposed group agreements. If they have strong reservations about their ability or willingness to abide by agreements of this sort, we encourage them to be fully candid with us and to consider declining the invitation. If they indicate that the agreements will

require a stretch – a stretch they are willing to try to make – we ask them how they think we can best support them in making the stretch.

Step Six: The Final Phase of Meeting Design
Using what we learned through our conversations with participants, and any last minute "weather reports" we may receive about shifts in personal or political situations, we transform the general outline of the meeting into a more detailed plan. This plan covers: informal aspects of greeting and convening people; opening comments to be made by conveners and facilitators; plans for reviewing (and possibly revising) the proposed agreements; procedures by which participants will introduce themselves to each other; opening questions and exercises; and roles that each team member will play.   Meeting designs for more than one session include much more detail for the opening session than for later sessions. We resist "getting ahead of the group" in our planning because we are committed to developing evolving designs that are maximally responsive to the interests and needs of the group over the course of the meeting.

Step Seven: The Meeting

General Structure. The first phase of a meeting typically includes: opening remarks, introductions, group agreements, role clarification, and an overview of plans for the meeting. The middle section of the meeting varies enormously depending on the goals of the group. We often begin this section by posing questions that are carefully worded and structured to invite personal and complex speaking and to avoid speech-giving, rhetoric and old patterns of unequal airtime.[6] After posing a question we usually ask all participants to reflect for a moment, and then proceed in a "go-round" format. This structure blocks reactivity and helps each person to fully speak when they are speaking and to fully listen when they are listening. Less structured conversation generally follows opening questions and exercises. At the end of the meeting, we may facilitate a conversation among participants about possible next steps. In addition, we typically pose closing questions that invite acknowledgement of the contributions participants have made, promote reflection on the experience, and encourage participants to consider both opportunities for and barriers to maintaining and sharing - outside of the room - what was of most value during the dialogue. Confidentiality agreements are generally re-visited.

Emergent Design. During extended meetings, the team (which may consist of some combination of PCP facilitators and the planning or convening group) meets during meals and other breaks to design subsequent sessions that respond to the emerging needs, concerns and interests in the room. The same questions that guided the team in developing the plan for the opening session of the meeting also guide us in our continued planning. We ask ourselves: What is now of most interest to the participants? What formats for speaking and listening will best support the participants in their efforts to stretch toward a new conversation and to leave old conversational habits

behind? How might the old or feared conversation slip back in the room at this point in the meeting, and what can we do to discourage that from happening? What new, hoped-for qualities have been emerging in the conversation that seem worthy of special attention and support? How can the resources in the room be best activated to achieve the goals that most energize the participants?

Facilitation. Our facilitation is characterized by transparency (openness about the thinking behind what we do or propose to do), compassion (avoiding a shaming approach to transgressions of the groundrules), and legitimacy (grounding interventions in group agreements and role definitions).

Step Eight: Follow-Up and Evaluation
After the meeting we seek feedback through written evaluations and follow-up phone conversations to promote further reflection, learn how we can be most helpful in next steps with a particular group (if there are next steps), and learn lessons that help us improve our practice. We may draft a report that maintains confidentiality or anonymity as appropriate, while still allowing those who have been moved and informed by their participation to share some of its fruits with friends and associates. Such a report is always reviewed by all participants before being released for further distribution.

How Private Dialogue Can Enhance Public Participation

Divisive public issues are generally debated in the media by highly visible spokespeople representing opposing perspectives. When these debates are polarized, they bring to the public an extremely limited discourse on the issue, one filled with slogans, derision, blame, and charges of misinformation (some of which are well-founded). Such discourse is not conducive to creative problem solving, nor does it promote the education and involvement of interested citizens. Through dialogue, however, those who shape the public discourse on controversial issues can begin to offer the public a more complex, inviting, and informative discussion. Two brief examples follow.

The Northern Forest Dialogue Project (NFDP)

In 1994 we were invited by an organizational consultant known for his work on communication skill-building, Grady McGonagill, to collaborate with him to design and facilitate a "dialogue retreat" for stakeholders in the northern forest of New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The idea for this project came to McGonagill when he read an article in an environmental publication that attributed to Charles Neibling of New Hampshire Timberland Owners' Association the idea that "representatives of the various groups that have been at loggerheads should retire to the woods to get to know each other, develop some trust, and see if we can move beyond an 'us' vs. 'them' mode."

McGonagill tested this idea with some key stakeholders, who felt that dialogue was worth a try as an informal complement to more public processes in motion at the time.[7] Between 1994 and 1996 Grady McGonagill and I convened two regional dialogues and several state-level dialogues with environmentalists, forest product industry representatives, local government officials, and private property rights advocates. Most of the meetings brought together about twenty people for two days.

Many NFDP participants were surprised at the power of the context of dialogue to change what was possible in the conversation. One man wrote to us:

> *As an elected official, I have attended many meetings to discuss controversial items. In these meetings, people representing different points of view get together to argue for their positions. Each person must hold on tight to their position. They do not -- or can not -- show interest in other views or shift their own views publicly because that would make them look weak... To make matters worse, if they did lose touch with their position, the media would have a field day expounding on the winner and castigating the loser -- very publicly.*

> *At the dialogue meetings, for the first time, and I believe due to the format, we really listened to each other and realized we had important things in common. It was heartwarming and exciting after so many years of antagonism. I learned that (they) wanted a healthy economy, where before I believed they didn't care anything about the local economy. We ultimately discovered ways in which we can both better serve the Park, maintaining different priorities, but working toward compatible goals.*

Another participant ended his participation in one of the meetings by saying "Groundrules forever!" He asked his fellow participants to imagine how much less aggravation they would all have in their lives if they took the groundrules with them when they left the dialogue room. And, in fact, the "culture" of the dialogue did leave the room with many participants. For example, two participants in the NFDP, an environmentalist and a representative of a paper company, began reviewing each others' Letters to the Editors, before sending them to the newspaper, to give each other feedback about anything they perceived to be misinforming or unnecessarily polarizing. This new way of relating across a political divide not only reduced aggravation for those most involved in the controversy; it also provided the public with more light and less heat on the issue.

The Maine Forest Biodiversity Project (MFBP)

Soon after the Northern Forest Dialogue Project was initiated, Grady McGonagill and I were approached by a newly formed steering committee[8] that was planning to convene about 100 diverse stakeholders in Maine's forests. They were motivated in part by witnessing the intense polarization that divided the Northwest. Rather than waiting for a possible analog to the Spotted Owl of

the Northwest to trigger an escalation of polarization in Maine, they called stakeholders together to learn together about biodiversity and to engage in dialogue about "hot" issues related to Maine's forests. We worked with them to design and facilitate ten two-day conferences and one one-day conference. Unlike the Northern Forest Dialogue Project, for which we raised funds, the MFBP was directed by the Steering Committee that engaged our services as meeting design consultants and facilitators.

The participants in the MFBP recognized that one of their dead-end conversations was about whether there was a biodiversity "problem" in Maine. To address this stalemate constructively, they commissioned a scientist, Sue Gawler, to carry out an assessment of Maine's biodiversity, and they authorized a diverse Scientific Advisory panel to work with her. Similarly, they recognized that abstract discussions about large reserves in Maine created fearful reactions on the part of large landowners and despair on the part of environmentalists, so they painstakingly defined their agreed upon objectives for reserves in Maine. Then they commissioned another scientist, Janet McMahon, to conduct an inventory of Maine's public lands to determine the extent to which those objectives could be achieved on public lands. Both scientists reported back to the full group of 70-100 participants on their assumptions and their progress.

Finally, participants recognized that maintaining biodiversity would require some combination of reserves and careful management of industrial forests in the "matrix" within which the reserves existed, and that foresters had little easily understood guidance on how to manage for biodiversity. Project participants formed a subcommittee to produce a practical manual on maintaining biodiversity in the working forest. Through collaboration, this diverse group of stakeholders has generated mutually respected information to contribute to public deliberation about biodiversity in Maine. In closing, I would like to share my favorite metaphor for the relationship between private dialogue among key stakeholders and public deliberation: The dialogue room is a greenhouse where experimental seedlings that would never take root and survive in a harsh climate enjoy enough protection to grow and display their worth. When some of those seedlings (fresh ideas and approaches) show special promise, the people who have developed and nurtured them carefully bring them into the harsher climate of political processes. They say to their friends, associates, and constituents: This is new. Don't denigrate or throw it away until you give it a chance. If it looks promising to you, maybe we can protect it and cultivate it together.

Appendix A: Commonly Proposed Group Agreements

1) to honor whatever confidentiality or anonymity agreements are requested by any participant;

2) to allow others to finish before speaking;

3) to speak personally, for yourself, not for "we" or "them" or a constituency;

4) to avoid making attributions to the intentions, beliefs or motives of others and to ask questions of others if you find yourself making untested assumptions;

5) to honor each person's right to "pass" if asked a question that he or she is not ready or willing to answer; and

6) to share "air time."

Appendix B: Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue—A Table

Debate	Dialogue
Pre-meeting communication between sponsors and participants is minimal and largely irrelevant to what follows.	Pre-meeting contacts and preparation of participants are essential elements of the full process.
Participants tend to be leaders known for propounding a carefully crafted position. The personas displayed in the debate are usually already familiar to the public. The behavior of the participants tends to conform to stereotypes.	Those chosen to participate are not necessarily outspoken "leaders." Whoever they are, they speak as individuals whose own unique experiences differ in some respect from others on their "side." Their behavior is likely to vary in some degree and along some dimensions from stereotypic images others may hold of them.
The atmosphere is threatening; attacks and interruptions are expected by participants and are usually permitted by moderators.	The atmosphere is one of safety; facilitators propose, get agreement on, and enforce clear ground rules to enhance safety and promote respectful exchange.
Participants speak as representatives of groups.	Participants speak as individuals, from their own unique experience.
Participants speak to their own constituents and, perhaps, to the undecided middle.	Participants speak to each other.
Differences within "sides" are denied or minimized.	Differences among participants on the same "side" are revealed, as individual and personal foundations of beliefs and values are explored.
Participants express unswerving commitment to a point of view, approach, or idea.	Participants express uncertainties, as well as deeply held beliefs.
Participants listen in order to refute the other side's data and to expose faulty logic in their arguments. Questions are asked from a position of certainty. These questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements.	Participants listen to understand and gain insight into the beliefs and concerns of the others. Questions are asked from a position of curiosity.
Statements are predictable and offer little new information.	New information surfaces.
Success requires simple impassioned statements.	Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed.
Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public discourse. (The discourse defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood.)	Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, that is, to express fundamental needs that may or may not be reflected in the discourse and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in the public debate.

Endnotes

[1] For a fuller description of the Project's work, see Chasin, R., Herzig, M., Roth, S., Chasin, L., Becker, C., and Stains, R. "From Diatribe to Dialogue on Divisive Public Issues: Approaches Drawn from Family Therapy." in *Mediation Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 4 Summer 1996. This paper and many others are available on our web site at www.publicconversations.org.

[2] See Kelman, H. "Informal Mediation by the Scholar/Practitioner." in J. Bercovitch and J. Rubin (eds.) *Mediation in International Relations: Multiple Approaches to Conflict Management.* London: Macmillan, 1992.

[3] There is nothing inherently problematic about forming interest groups or about engaging in vigorous debate. Both are staples in a healthy democracy. Polarization occurs when debates get stuck and stale and when unabated fear fuels demonization.

[4] This term comes from the work of narrative family therapists David Epston and Michael White. See White, M. and Epston, D. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York: Norton.

[5] These interviews constitute only a first pass at "mapping" the old conversation and discovering under-appreciated resources and new possibilities. As we collaborate with participants in planning meetings – and even as we facilitate meetings – we continuously enrich our understanding of old stuck places and new possibilities.

[6] See our web site (www.publicconversations.org) for more information. Click on "Resources" to find a toolbox of materials on designing dialogues and an annotated bibliography with links to papers.

[7] The Northern Forest Dialogue Project was carried out concurrently with the last 18 months of the federally funded Northern Forest Lands Council, to which the dialogue project had no connection.

[8] Steering Committee members were: Roger Milliken, Jr. of Baskahegan Company, Cathy B. Johnson of the Natural Resource Council of Maine, Barbara Brusila of the Small Woodlot Owners Association of Maine, Barbara St. John Vickery of the Nature Conservancy, Tom Morrison of Maine's Bureau of Parks and Lands, Jym St. Pierre of RESTORE: the North Woods, and Doug Denico of S.D. Warren Company. The Project was coordinated by Phil Gerard. For more information, contact the Nature Conservancy at 207-729-5191.