

Introduction to Hosting for *Let's Talk America*

Congratulations! Making the choice to host a Let's Talk America conversation is a bold step of living democracy. With your help, we will achieve the purpose of *Let's Talk America*: restore faith in our democracy, build trust between us, and give us a sense, once again, that the voices of "We the People" matter. This manual provides a process that will honor LTA principles and enable you to take the conversation from small talk to big talk in a way that allows everyone to feel respected, safe and heard. With a little study and preparation, your conversation can create a positive and empowering experience for all. This manual will train you in the Conversation Café¹ process. This is the simplest process we know and one that has a proven track record to be easily and reliably adopted by hosts who may have no previous experience –as well as by skilled facilitators. For those with some facilitation experience who want to host a conversation for a large group, we will also offer a design for a conversation process that combines elements of Conversation Café with World Café. Please note, however: you are welcomed to use any process or structure that has a beginning, middle and end, that guarantees that all voices will be heard (and no one voice heard too much!) and that truly welcomes all points of view in the spirit of LTA goals and purpose. There are many methods, such as Council, World Café, Wisdom Councils, Open Space, Future Search, Study Circles, Utne Salon, etc.²

How do you have a *Let's Talk America* Conversation?

The resources in this manual will enable you to organize the conversation in a way that honors these principles:

- ❖ **Inclusive** – all people and all perspectives welcome:
 - Invite friends and neighbors including individuals you don't usually get to talk to and those who may think differently than you and hold different views.
 - If you are open to having people you don't know, register your conversation at www.LetsTalkAmerica.org so that people in your community can find you.
- ❖ **Non-partisan** – bring your views, but no lobbying for your causes, candidates, movements or parties
 - Think of this as a "commercial free zone" – no marketing of a product, service, event or particular agenda, point of view, outcome, solution or cause.

¹ There are Conversation Cafes in over 26 cities in the U.S. plus Canada, Hong Kong and Europe. Conversation Cafés are hosted, drop-in conversations, in public places and among diverse people, about our feelings, thoughts and actions in this complex and changing world. The aim is to promote community, democracy and wisdom worldwide through generating millions of open, respectful public conversations. The focus of these Conversation Cafes may be on aspects of our personal, social, spiritual, civic or recreational life – whereas each LTA conversation will focus on the state of our democracy in America – whether and how our voices matter, what America means to us, how we make a difference. Learn more at www.conversationcafe.org

² If as an LTA host you invite people to a "Conversation Café", please be sure to use the Process and Agreements as described here. You are welcome to borrow from the Conversation Café Method and/or vary the form, but if you do, please call it something else!

- Refrain from political networking, creating task groups or enrolling others in collective actions so that “no committees will be formed” between the opening and closing rounds of an LTA/Conversation Café.
- ❖ **Respectful** – there is a host and "ground rules" to assure that everyone has a chance to be heard
 - Use the Conversation Café Agreements and Process – or any other structure that allows a good balance of safety and creativity for everyone at the table.
- ❖ **Open** – new people, new ideas, new information, open up new insights, and possibilities for action
 - Foster the spirit of inquiry – discovery and curiosity rather than persuasion or debate.
 - Report on the themes and insights from your conversation by filling out the questionnaire on the LTA website.

What is the role of a host?

Hosts are vital to the success of every LTA conversation. They:

- Create a safe, welcoming environment for strangers to shift from small talk to BIG talk.
- Conduct a simple process that practically runs itself.

At the same time, hosts benefit from hosting:

- They have a meaningful outlet for service as “We the People” search for meaning, connection and intelligent action in the world as it is today. Hosting is an act of taking responsibility for our government and working for desired change.
- They become known and valued in the community as people who listen gently, speak thoughtfully and understand group process.
- They engage in a fascinating practice of attending to both their interior conversation and the group conversation in the dual roles of humble participant and weaver of meaning and connection.

How do I get people to come?

Inviting people like you – and not like you – to have a conversation about our democracy can be a challenge. What if they reject your ideas? What if they think you are strange for even asking? What if they get into an argument and can’t get out? What if they try to convince you they are right and you are wrong? What if... Such fears are in part why sincere Americans who may differ in views have become scared to talk to one another.

Let's Talk America helps you get over this reluctance by offering the very safe and effective Conversation Café method and the excitement of being part of a national conversation. It can be as easy as inviting neighbors to a potluck or attending a civic or church event. People are curious – they want to hear what others think as long as it isn't a harangue. They will feel honored when you tell them you want to hear what is on their mind. People blossom when others listen with respect. As an LTA host you are giving your guests a BIG GIFT.

You can start small and do it at your home with neighbors or book club friends. Or you can be more ambitious and approach colleagues or organizations to participate and co-host with you – such as a synagogue, church or Rotary. You can register your LTA conversation location and time by going to www.LetsTalkAmerica.org and signing yourself up (look for the [Step-by-Step guide](#) under host resources if you need help). People interested in joining an LTA conversation can then find you. You can invite people yourself – your friends, neighbors, church or club members, colleagues at work. When you call people directly, it let's them know you want them in particular to come. Sending a personalized letter or email also increases the possibility that people will attend. We all like to get a special invitation. To increase your reach and the possibility of a broad range of attendees, you can send an email invitation and ask others to forward it to others. You can send out press releases to local papers to announce your conversation (check out our samples). You can put up flyers on community bulletin boards or at your location if it's a public place.

Choose the time and date and select the location: you might want to use your own home or a more public place like a café, library, church, union hall or cafeteria. Some businesses, religious institutions and libraries offer free meeting spaces; community centers are reasonably priced. Cafés, restaurants and pubs are perfect sites. They are public. They serve food and drink – so there is nothing to prepare and nothing to clean up. They have many tables so if your group grows beyond 8, you can split up and have two conversations. They are free to you as a host, though please encourage all participants to “pay the rent” by buying something to eat or drink. Check the noise level – try for something fairly quiet. Your best bet is to talk to the café owner, tell her or him you'll be bringing in new “customers” to the establishment and that it will be publicized through the Lets Talk website. Ask what times work best—you wouldn't want to meet during a mealtime rush.

Materials LTA provide for you

On the website – www.LetsTalkAmerica.org – you will find a selection of materials for your use at your LTA conversation, including the following:

- A Poster you can use to advertise your conversation.
- Wallet Cards that give an introduction to *Let's Talk America*, as well as the Process and Agreements. It's like a “mini-manual.” Download and print copies so

participants can take them home – and maybe start conversations in other cafés, at dinner parties, in churches, at schools, or anywhere people gather to talk. Indeed, the Wallet Cards have enough information to get anyone started as a host-- although studying this whole manual offers greater understanding about the process

- Question and Issues Bank: suggested questions to use in your conversations
- Sample Invitation
- Sample Press Release
- Questionnaire to complete after the conversation so your group's insights and learnings will be included in the national conversation

Other supplies to bring

- Something to mark the table if you are in a public place, so that newcomers can easily identify the LTA/Conversation table. For example, some Hosts have brought colorful signs, checkered tablecloths or even balloons to float over their table.
- **Wallet cards** for each participant, so they have a copy of the process and agreements
- **Index cards or paper and pencils** for participants to jot down a word or two if their own thoughts are more compelling than what others are saying. The point isn't to make a record, it's to be able to return to participating fully--very useful if you are so distracted by your own thoughts you can't listen to others. Invite people to just jot down something that lets them pay attention again.
- **Nametags** are a good idea: you can purchase them, use computer labels, or make them from string and small squares of paper – or just write on a strip of masking tape.
- A "**Talking Object**" (a stone, some symbolic object, or just whatever is handy – even a salt shaker!) to be passed from speaker to speaker.

Overview of the Process: How to host a *Let's Talk America* using the Conversation Café Method

The LTA/Conversation Café process almost facilitates itself. The table hosts are like any hosts for parties or gatherings – getting things started and keeping them going. It starts with a couple of rounds of individual sharing with no input from others and then blossoms into respectful conversation. A brief guide for hosts follows.

What, generally, makes a good conversation? Many things: an alive topic of interest to all, an open and receptive mood, people willing to listen as much as speak, a willingness to drop preconceptions and explore many different ideas, a comfortable setting in which people can easily hear each other, a group small enough for everyone to speak. A good conversation is more like a game of hacky-sack than a game of tennis – the objective is to keep the ball in the air, not to defeat your “opponent.” At its best, such conversation gets deeper and richer the longer it can be sustained.

Your spirit of welcoming and open heartedness is the most important ingredient.

What do we talk about?

The very idea that people will have a chance to safely dialogue with people who don't share their views may bring folks to the table brimming with questions and topics. However, you may want to use the current *Let's Talk America* conversation starters as a way to begin. You may have a predetermined, particular issue or topic in mind and choose to name it when you list and advertise your conversation. The LTA website includes a whole bank of questions and issues with ways to frame the conversation.

Sampling of LTA conversation starters to get the ball rolling once you've set the stage for your conversation:

Try these as openers (and find more in the Question & Issues Bank)

- Think of the times when you were about 12: What was the America of your youth?
- How are the ideals of America your own ideals?
- What does America mean to you? What is the American dream?
- Tell about a time when you made a difference in your community? Do you have the same power in shaping the future of America?
- Tell the story of an experience when you felt, "This is what democracy looks like"
- What is the America you'd want to leave to future generations?

Or, If you are wondering, "How could they think *that?!*" try asking this...

- What would you like to ask someone who doesn't agree with you that could help you truly understand them better?
- What are you yearning for them to ask you that would help them understand you better?

Setting the Stage: Opening the LTA/Conversation Café

Welcome everyone to the conversation and state the theme or topic for the Café. Explain how their participation embodies the mission of Lets' Talk America:

- We who engage in this LTA initiative believe we will restore faith in our democracy, build trust between us, and give us a sense, once again, that the voices of "We the People" matter by engaging thousands of people in simple, open conversations among Americans of every stripe in groups like this about what America is and could be.
- We aim to change the tone of political discourse in this country from the polarized, divisive, either/or rhetoric we hear from the politicians and pundits, to an inclusive dialogue that welcomes all voices to the table and recognizes that we all hold a piece of the truth.

Then, come to a decision about the ending time: it is best to give an hour and a half to this process.

Agreements:

Next, read the Agreements out loud. You could have each person read one of them. This begins the sense of ownership of the process and helps people begin to know one another. You may want to elaborate on each one:

- **Open-mindedness:** listen to and respect all points of view. *Conversation isn't just talking. It's talking and listening. In fact, in a group of 4-8, you'll be listening more than you are talking! By focusing on listening, you may also benefit from the variety of ideas around the table*
- **Acceptance:** suspend judgment as best you can. *We all judge one another, but do your best. It means you will be able to hear new things from others. It also helps everyone feel safer if they think others are trying to not judge them!*
- **Curiosity:** seek to understand rather than persuade. *We're not here to convince others that we are right and they are wrong. If someone expresses a point of view that seems different from yours, see if you can ask some questions to gain clarity or understanding.*
- **Discovery:** question old assumptions, look for new insights. *Lets Talk America dialogues aren't polite conversation – they are designed to expose us to new ideas and to possibly even grasp something new. Make such discoveries common by watching for them.*
- **Sincerity:** speak for yourself about what has personal heart and meaning. *We want to hear what's important to you, not just your opinions or data you've collected. Relate your ideas or reports to your personal experience.*
- **Brevity:** go for honesty and depth but don't go on and on. *Honesty and depth are important to a good conversation, but so is giving everyone a chance to speak. People are polite. They may not stop you if you go on and on. But you can stop yourself. Try to stay under a couple of minutes.*

Now explain the process: there will be two rounds with a talking object, then open conversation, and lastly a final round where each will reflect on their experience. Offer the pens and cards to help them stay focused. Introduce and explain the talking object. It is a powerful tool of democracy and empowerment. As a listener in the circle, we know our task is to listen deeply for the meaning and intention of the speaker who is holding the talking object, without interjecting or commenting at all. When we are holding the talking object, we know we have the floor, without interruptions. We can pause and reflect silently without fear of losing our turn. We can pass if we don't want to speak. We begin to speak from a more thoughtful and deeper place because we realize – everyone is listening carefully. The quality of the conversation is profoundly affected.

Now, just before beginning Round 1, invite people to be silent for a moment to quiet their minds and collect their thoughts around their deepest intention and highest purpose for the conversation.

NOTE: If there are more than ten or twelve people, it's best to divide into two separate groups so everyone will have time to be heard. You can ask one of the other guests to serve as 'host'. The dividing can happen right after this point, where you've explained the process. Or you could do the first round together, then divided - and then come back together for the final round. Also, people might drift in after the starting time, but we find it works well to start on time and allow newcomers to just sit down and join in when their turn comes. Hand them the wallet card to review the process.

Process:

Round 1: Go around the circle once, inviting each person to say their name and speak to what brought them to the conversation and briefly mention what is on their heart and mind regarding the theme (people can pass if they like). Remarks should be succinct (perhaps 1 minute each) to allow time for everyone to speak. The speaker holds the Talking Object, passing it to the next person when through speaking. Listen to each person, with no feedback or response. It is wise for you, as host, to begin, as you can model the depth and brevity of the desired response. Gently remind people, no cross talk at this point if they begin to respond or ask questions (unless it's just to repeat something they couldn't hear).

Note: Some hosts like to begin with an expanded first round, when each person tells a personal story to establish a base of shared experience before addressing potentially more charged questions such as democracy, freedom and power. Perhaps, "Tell the story of your name and the landscape that shaped you", or "Tell about a time when you felt most American." Some hosts choose to do this in pairs or trios before gathering in the larger circle. Find your own entry point, based on your inspiration and sense of your group.

Round 2: Go around the circle again, with the Talking Object, giving each person another chance to speak without feedback or response. Explain how in this round people may deepen their own comments or speak to what has meaning for them now; they can also respond to what others have said. Request that everyone keep their comments brief, less than two minutes, so that most of the time will be available for the open back and forth that follow the second round. Remind, still no cross talk.

The Middle: Open, Spirited Conversation

Now it is time to open up the conversation. Place the talking object in the middle of the table, explaining how everyone is asked to keep in mind the Agreements and how the talking object can be reintroduced if someone feels it will help: they can pick up the object or just tap it any time to indicate they want a turn - or offer it to someone they would like to hear from. About five or ten minutes before the final

round time (i.e. 15 to 20 minutes before ending time), remind the group so you can begin bring the conversation to a close.

Here are some guidelines for you to keep in mind during the conversation:

- Listen to understand – to expand your insights, to see differences and similarities, to learn.
- Speak to share and inform, raise or answer questions, offer an insight, help focus the discussion, state an opinion.
- Keep it inclusive – share the airtime, encourage everyone to join in, avoid dominating or interrupting.
- Search for deeper meaning. Look for core needs or values underlying people's feelings.
- Offer and ask for specifics rather than generalizations.
- If the conversation gets hot, with interruptions and excited repartee, consider using the Talking Object to slow things down.
- Ask for a time out if the conversation seems to be fragmenting, confusing or chaotic. A moment of silence can be helpful.
- If stuck in disagreement or debate, respectfully acknowledge your differences and change course to explore underlying assumptions, differing information, beliefs, values, etc.

The Ending: Closing the Conversation – The Final Round

About five to ten minutes before the ending time (depending on the size of the group – you'll need more time the larger the group), introduce the final round. Using the Talking Object, do a round of reflection. Ask the group to take a minute to think about this experience: as an option, you may invite them to write a few words on the cards, which you can then collect. Ask them to consider, "What I heard that I appreciate, What challenges, touches, inspires or surprises me, or The deeper question I am left with is...". Then invite each person to say briefly what they are taking from this conversation.

- If enthusiasm is high, consider meeting again. Ask, "Who wasn't here? What new points of view would we like to invite to our next *Let's Talk America* conversation?" Ask everyone to bring at least one person they suspect is different from them. Keep expanding. You can keep this process going as long as you like: have an LTA conversation, ask at the end "Who isn't here?", bring new people and perspectives into the circle and... have an LTA conversation. How many rounds can you go? How many new voices can you bring in? How well can you honor the Agreements as more and more diverse points of view come to the table? As your circle grows, you will need to "deputize" new hosts for each group of up to eight. Have them read this manual.
- Invite participants to fill out a simple questionnaire to share their experience with the conversation and thus fully engage in this learning process about what's on the minds of "We the people". Go to www.LetsTalkAmerica.org.

On the website they can also look through the feedback from other conversations across the nation and/or find out about gatherings in your neighborhood.

- Close by thanking each other - and set a time and place for another conversation if desired

After the Ending

- Consider staying awhile and talking further with others who may have the time, energy or similar interests.
- As a host we ask that you report on your conversation at the www.LetsTalkAmerica.org website. This is a crucial part of the process of learning, discovery and building trust. With your help, we will gather a sense of the national conversation of Let's Talk America where everyone's voice is included.

If you invite more than a living room or café-full, the Host Resource section at the www.LetsTalkAmerica.org website has suggestions for large-scale conversations ("The LTA Café: A Design for Hosting Large Group Let's Talk America Dialogues")

- If you want to host a gathering with some new people, list your time and place on the website so that neighbors and new people can find you.

How To Take Your Conversation From Good To Great

For the most part, the process runs itself. Yet there may be occasions when people break the agreements – they go on and on. They misunderstand others and assume they are right. They lecture. The agreements are your biggest ally. Just gently stop the process – even with a hand signal, and redirect the group to review the agreements to help get it back on track.

The talking object is another "ally." If things are contentious, you – or anyone at the table – can pick it up and ask to be the next to speak. You can even hold it and ask for a minute of silence. *"Let's stop, breathe, and reflect on what we would like to happen here."* And very often, asking a key question can redirect the conversation to get beneath positions or intellectualizing to the heart of the matter. This helps keep it interesting and inclusive.

Here are some ways to stay at ease, curious and inviting and keep the conversation interesting:

- (If your curiosity is piqued) *Tell me more about...*
- (If your instinct is to counter another's statement) *This is what I heard you say... is it what you meant?*
- (If you are with someone who begins advocating for a fixed position) *What led you to this point of view?*
- (If you are with someone who begins campaigning for a candidate) *What is most important you in a leader?*

- (If someone begins lecturing and intellectualizing) I notice your passion on this issue: *What makes this so important for you?*
- (If you are with someone who always agrees with you) *What If the opposite were true?*
- (If you suspect you don't understand) *Can you say that in another way?*
- (If you hold a different opinion) *I'd like to offer another point of view...*
- (If someone has been silent) *I'm wondering if you have some thoughts or feelings about what you've been hearing?*
- (If someone's ideas are very abstract) *If what you are proposing came to pass, how would things be different?*

Thoughts on Hosting

So what is our most important role as host? It is not to flawlessly facilitate a successful conversation. Rather, it is to hold the space – and be part of the space – of community/safety/love. We are stewards; we are safeguarding the space for people to share their vulnerability and possibly their confusion and to explore deeply enough to find out what they really think and feel about the topic. Part of this safety is that *WE* are also making ourselves vulnerable – sharing our own thoughts and feelings. We are part of the process. We honor the folks who come to these conversations, we honor the risk they may be taking in coming to a public conversation, and we endeavor to provide a space that is safe enough, broad enough and deep enough to embrace all.

Hosting is simple – like breathing is simple. It can be as minimal as showing up, introducing the process and keeping time. Yet the practice of hosting can be very profound. It is a dynamic, honest, humble process of staying present to your own reality while drinking in the reality of everyone else at the table. It contributes to the reweaving of the web of community and builds the critical thinking, social engagement and conviviality that is the best of what America has always been and the essence of what we intend to be in the future.