


# Dialogue to Change Process

 Everyday Democracy's Dialogue to Change Process is an adaptable community-engagement framework that helps communities build relationships and trust, learn about community issues and problems, and work collaboratively toward solutions and action

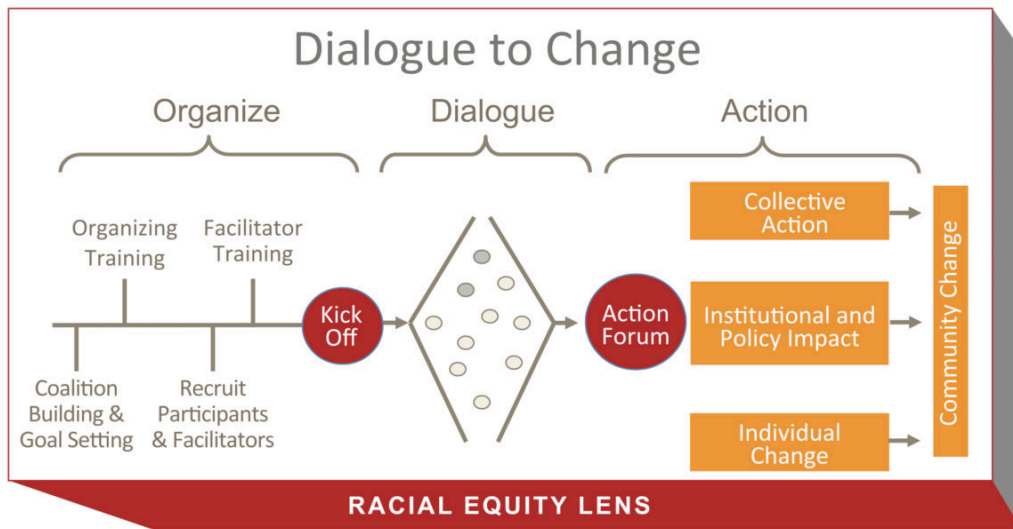
Developed by **Everyday Democracy**, the Dialogue to Change Process is informed by hundreds of dialogue-driven engagement processes that the organization and its associates have supported over nearly three decades. As an engagement framework, the Dialogue to Change Process includes a sequence of steps that local leaders, organizers, and facilitators can utilize to increase the chances that an engagement process will result in positive outcomes for an organization or community that can be sustained over time.

*“The combination of people listening to each other, sharing their own experiences, and working together to solve problems can have a deep impact, both on the issue area at hand and on how the community addresses other issues in the future.”*

## **Everyday Democracy's Dialogue to Change Process**

Everyday Democracy's work is guided by a set of core principles that can serve as a model for local engagement leaders:

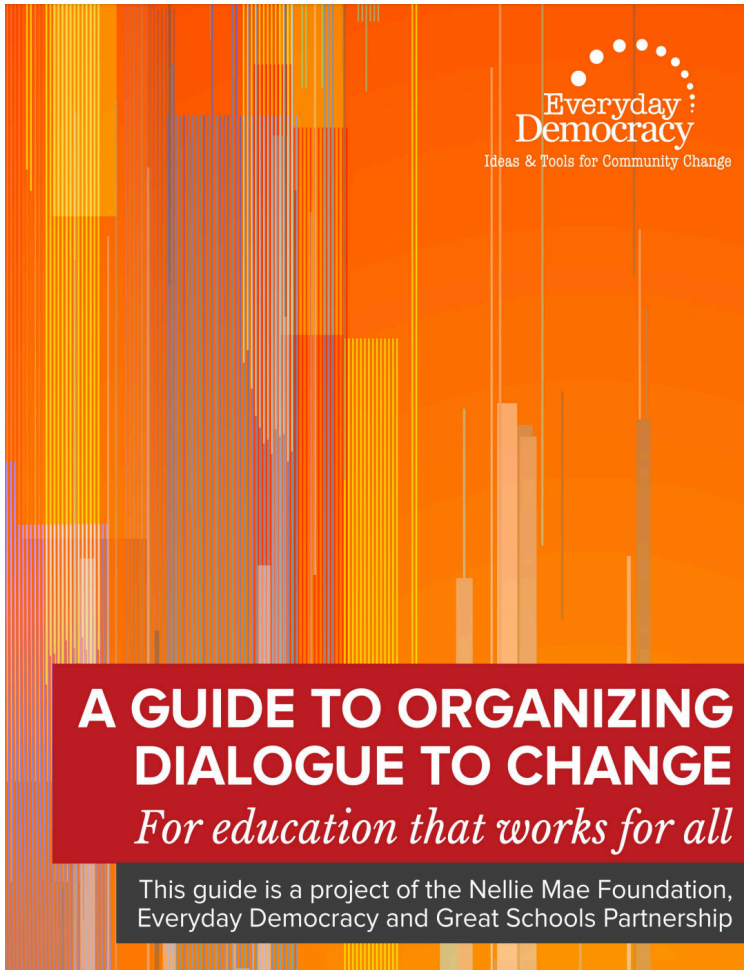
- Include everyone. Demonstrate that the whole community is welcome and needed, paying particular attention to groups that have been historically marginalized.
- Create opportunities for people, institutions, and government to work together for the common good. Keep all participants at the table.
- Embrace diversity. Reach out to all different types of people and create opportunities for them to speak honestly and listen to each other.
- Make decisions that reflect everyone's voice, particularly those who have been marginalized or excluded.
- Share knowledge, resources, power, and decision-making.
- Combine dialogue and deliberation. Create public talk that builds understanding and explores a range of solutions.
- Recognize how structural racism has shaped our nation and our communities. Use understanding of racial equity to create equitable opportunities and outcomes.
- Connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.
- Connect local change to a national movement to strengthen democracy.



Developed by the nonprofit organization Everyday Democracy and informed by hundreds of facilitated dialogues, the Dialogue to Change Process is a community-engagement framework that outlines a sequence of steps that local leaders, organizers, and facilitators can follow to increase the chances that an engagement process will result in positive organizational or community outcomes that can be sustained over time. The model encourages the use of a “racial equity lens,” and during every step of the engagement process—from organizing to execution to evaluation—facilitators pay explicit attention to how factors such as institutional racism or implicit bias can influence the process and its participants. Source: Everyday Democracy

## The Dialogue to Change Process

Everyday Democracy’s Dialogue to Change Process outlines a sequence of steps that local leaders can build on when developing an engagement process. Readers should note that the model requires several months to properly organize and execute. While a months-long time commitment may seem daunting, it’s important to recognize that there is often a *negative relationship between speed and results*—i.e., a hastily organized and executed engagement process can end up creating more problems than it solves.



To help districts, schools, and community partners develop and implement the Dialogue to Change Process, Everyday Democracy published *[A Guide to Organizing Dialogue to Change: For Education that Works for All](#)*, which describes the model in more detail and how it can be applied in educational contexts. Everyday Democracy has also produced related evaluation guides, including *[An Evaluation Guide for Practical Use](#)*, *[Evaluating Community Engagement Toolkit](#)*, and *[Ripple Effects Mapping Tip Sheet](#)*.

In community-engagement work, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should attempt to strike an appropriate balance when developing an engagement timeline: if the process moves too quickly, community members may feel left out, overlooked, or unheard, which can then aggravate any frustrations, resentment, or distrust that might already be present in the community; but if the process moves too slowly, community members may become impatient or feel their time is being wasted, which can then undermine faith in the process, damage the credibility of local leaders, or lead to participant disinterest, disengagement, and attrition. The Dialogue to Change Process offers a useful starting-point framework for planning and sequencing an engagement process, and it can be adapted for a variety of engagement needs or goals.

The Dialogue to Change Process encourages the use of what Everyday Democracy calls a “**racial**

**equity lens.**” During every step of the engagement process—from organizing to execution to evaluation—leaders pay explicit attention to how factors such as institutional racism or implicit bias can influence the process and its participants.

In some schools and communities, talking explicitly about race, inequity, or injustice is seen as too uncomfortable or risky. Yet Everyday Democracy found that when racial equity is not directly addressed and openly discussed, participants cannot fully understand why disparities exist in educational or socioeconomic opportunities and outcomes. The organization has worked with its partners to develop techniques for incorporating discussions of racial equity throughout the engagement process, and for linking those discussions to other structural inequities related to income, age, culture, gender, or sexual identity, for example.

<b>1 Organizing</b>	Making sure the right people are included in the Dialogue groups. Participants should reflect the community, diverse in race, gender, age, gender identity and socioeconomics. This stage can take four to six months.
<b>2 Dialogues</b>	Many small groups, sometimes called Study Circles, led by local, trained, facilitators, meet weekly for four to six weeks. These generally consist of eight to 12 people each, and may use an Everyday Democracy topic-specific discussion guide.
<b>3 Action</b>	Groups come together after the Dialogues to share findings and agree on action steps.
<b>4 Evaluation, Communication and Follow-up</b>	Everyday Democracy remains in touch, providing follow-up support and feedback, help for communities in sharing stories of their work and progress and incorporating outcomes and lessons learned into our own knowledge and work.

Everyday Democracy’s Dialogue to Change Process describes a sequence of four adaptable steps that local leaders, organizers, and facilitators can follow when designing an equitable community-engagement process. The four steps are (1) Organizing, (2) Dialogues, (3) Action, and (4) Evaluation, Communication, and Follow-Up. Source: Everyday Democracy

The Dialogue to Change Process includes four general steps or phases:

**1. Organizing (4-6 months)**

Perhaps the most critical step in the process, *organizing* entails proactive recruitment to ensure that a diverse and representative cross-section of the community is actively involved in the process. When community members or groups are left out—whether it’s intentionally or unintentionally—an engagement process could be undermined from the start: it may be perceived as exclusionary or

elitist, for example, or it may also cause community members to question the organizer's motivations, which can sow distrust in the community, call the legitimacy of the process into question, inflame public criticism and outrage, or give rise to suspicions about nefarious intent.

For this reason, *effective organizing takes time*, and Everyday Democracy advises that local leaders charged with planning, coordinating, and facilitating an engagement process resist temptations to either skip over the organizing stage or hastily execute strategies that are likely to result in important stakeholders and constituents being left out of the process. The organizing stage includes the following strategies:

### **Coalition Building and Goal Setting**

The Dialogue to Change Process begins with the identification of a core team of leaders, organizers, and facilitators who will be responsible for the design, planning, and coordination of the engagement process. This leadership team may vary in size or representation based on the makeup of the community or the purpose of the process, but a typical leadership team might be composed of 6-12 individuals. The leadership team should include people from positions of power or influence in the district, school, or community; people with experience or skill in engagement work; people with a stake in the outcome of the process; and people who represent historically marginalized, disenfranchised, or oppressed populations in the community.

In addition to the time, skills, and institutional support required to lead an engagement process, the team also needs to include members with the authority to make decisions that are necessary to advancing the engagement process and ensuring accountability, such as school administrators, program directors, or public officials. At this point, the leadership team meets to develop an understanding of authentic forms of engagement that utilize a racial-equity lens, develop relationships with one another, and establish broad goals for the engagement process.

It is important to note that *broad goals* does not mean *specific outcomes*. In an authentic engagement process—i.e., one that's responsive to community needs and concerns, and that empowers community decision-making and agency—outcomes are not determined in advance: *they emerge from the process*. While leadership teams should not determine specific outcomes, an effective engagement process needs priorities and focus, and participants need to know which community issues, concerns, or problems the process will be addressed.

Examples of broad engagement goals might be *Determine the best ways to involve historically marginalized groups in school decision-making*, *Develop strategies for improving educational equity in the district*, or *Involve students and families in a dialogue about ways to reduce bullying in school*. In

short, broad goals establish the scope of the engagement process, but they do not pre-determine specific actions or outcomes.

## **Organizing Training**

At this stage, the members of the leadership team, and any other organizers and supporters they might be working with, are trained in effective organizing and recruitment strategies. If community outreach and personal recruitment are not actively pursued, participation rates may be low, especially among those who are typically marginalized (even if it's inadvertently).

On the other hand, doing outreach and recruitment work well from the beginning not only increases the likelihood of achieving diverse and representative participation, but it can also generate energy and momentum that can be carried through the entire process. For this reason, skilled and knowledgeable organizers, coupled with a carefully considered outreach and recruitment plan, can ensure robust community participation and create the conditions for a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable process in which different backgrounds and viewpoints are represented.

## **Recruitment of Participants and Facilitators**

In the recruitment phase, leaders and organizers look for both participants and facilitators. Just as it's important that the composition of the leadership team is representative of the diverse constituencies in the community, the participants and facilitators should ideally be as well. Organizers can identify students, parents, and other community members with the interests, predispositions, and skills required to be discussion facilitators—in part because facilitators who are community members, rather than establishment leaders, can help to legitimize and instill trust in the process by demonstrating that the leadership team, and the organizations, agencies, or groups they represent, are committed to a process that empowers community members.

In short, there is no more visible evidence of a commitment to authentic and inclusive engagement than giving community members visible and empowered leadership roles. As in every step of the Dialogue to Change Process, leaders and organizers should remain vigilant and intentional about inclusion, diversity, and equity by, for example, ensuring that community facilitators and participants are demographically representative of the larger community.

## **Facilitator Training**

Once a team of community facilitators has been selected, the leadership team typically provides

training in group facilitation techniques. In some cases, organizations or individuals in the community may have expertise in public facilitation, but the leadership team may also consider enlisting expertise from outside the community when local trainers are unavailable.

Facilitator training is, in itself, an important way of engaging the larger community in an engagement process. While facilitators can volunteer their time, some communities offer stipends to ensure that people from all income levels are able to participate. Training youth facilitators also provides the recognition of student voice and leadership, as well as skill- and confidence-building experiences in civic leadership.

### **Kick-Off Event**

Once organizers and facilitators have been trained, and the outreach and recruitment process has generated interest and commitment from a diverse cross-section of the community, the leadership team then organizes and promotes a “kick-off” event for the dialogue process. The purpose of the event is to introduce the leadership team and facilitators, outline the broad goals of the engagement process, describe how the process will work, and give participants an opportunity to test out the dialogue process and commit to further involvement, such as by participating in a dialogue process or helping to recruit others.

At this point, leaders, organizers, and facilitators want to generate interest and excitement, so it’s important to build in time for personal connection, community building, and fun to build momentum for the community dialogue.

## **2. Dialogues (4-6 weeks)**

Everyday Democracy recommends that local leaders plan on allocating 1-2 months for the dialogue series. During this time, small groups of participants (usually between 8-10) will meet once a week for two hours at a time in locations across the community. While the specific number of dialogues, the locations where they are held, and the duration of each event, will be determined by community needs and the goals of the process, it’s important that leaders, coordinators, and facilitators create equitable conditions for participation by, for example, arranging for necessary transportation or translation, providing food and beverages, hosting the events in central or culturally welcoming locations, scheduling the dialogues at times that work for participants, or offering stipends or other incentives.

Structured sessions allow for a progression of dialogue that builds from thinking about personal hopes and concerns to considering different viewpoints and solutions to examining systemic inequities to considering possible solutions and action steps. Facilitation allows participants to share openly and

listen respectfully to others. In the final session, the group will have a chance to reflect on the specific actions they would like to pursue as individuals, teams, committees, or organizations. They will also identify action priorities that they can bring to the larger community, and reflect on what they learned in the dialogue that they can carry into their roles as students, parents, teachers, administrators, business people, or other stakeholders.

### **3. Action Forum and Action Steps**

In a Dialogue to Change Process, the dialogue series culminates in an “action forum,” or an event in which participants develop and determine a set of action steps that the community will carry out to achieve the self-identified goals of the engagement process. The discussions that precede the forum surface the problems and opportunities related to the objectives and the action forum channels those discussions into a coherent strategy for action. Again, strong dialogue design and facilitation are required, given that participants could come up with ideas and proposals that are conflicting, impractical, or infeasible. Everyday Democracy recommends that the actions generated during the forum focus on at least three critical leverage points:

#### **Collective Action**

*Collective action* refers to community leadership and participation in the execution of action plan developed during the dialogue process. In most contexts, collective action will only be truly effective when local administrators, public officials, program directors, or organizational leaders (i.e., those in positions of power) *share power and control with the community*.

An authentic engagement process establishes the expectation that community members will be meaningfully consulted or involved in a decision-making process. If the only actions that result from the dialogues are a set of recommendations that establishment leaders either take under advisement or offer to implement under certain conditions, participants may question the motivations of engagement leaders or feel that they have in some way been misled or manipulated. The surest way to build and maintain trust, motivation, and commitment in an engagement process is to give participants leadership roles in a process that produces positive outcomes that affect them, their family, and their community.

#### **Institutional and Policy Change**

In most communities, an engagement process will only have a lasting impact if public institutions and policies change as a result. In fact, one common symptom of an inauthentic or manipulative engagement process is when local leaders and institutions revert back to doing “business as usual”



soon after the engagement process wraps up.

An authentic engagement process functions like a “contract” with the community, and the failure of establishment leaders to honor the spirit of the contract, or follow-through on the commitments they either explicitly or implicitly made, will likely be viewed as a breach of that contract. For these reasons, the actions that result from the engagement process should specifically and intentionally address any relevant changes in the operation of local institutions and policies.

### **Individual Impact**

Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can not only create opportunities for participants and community members to be actively involved in the engagement process and resulting action plan, but they can also view the process itself as an opportunity to transform the beliefs and perceptions of individuals. If persistent community tensions and conflicts are a problem, for example, those tensions and conflicts may be partially resolved if public institutions change the way they operate—but they are unlikely to go away entirely. Meaningful community change is both an external *and* internal process, which means that individual beliefs, concerns, values, priorities, or viewpoints need to change as well, which often requires a new relationship between the public and their public institutions.

### **4. Evaluation, Communication, and Follow-Up**

In some cases, leaders may underestimate the importance of what happens after an engagement process ends. In addition to executing an action plan, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should pay attention to several critical components of effective engagement: *evaluation, communication, and follow-up*.

Whether it’s conducted by professional evaluators or executed by local leaders with limited resources and expertise, some form of post-engagement evaluation provides a variety of benefits. In addition to providing insights on what worked or what didn’t, which can then be used to improve future engagement strategies, a formal or informal evaluation process can also produce data that can be used to make a stronger case for additional investments in engagement work.

Evaluation results can also be part of a post-engagement communication and follow-up strategy, which is one of the most vital components of an engagement process that leaders, organizers, and facilitators need to consider. If communication abruptly ceases when an engagement process ends, participants and community members are likely to question whether anything happened or changed, and they may even feel or express resentment toward the leaders who asked for their time and perspective. Ongoing communication and outreach, which may include additional opportunities for

community members to take on leadership roles, can maintain the relationships, trust, and sense of mutual respect that result from effective engagement.

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## Acknowledgments

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