

# Engagement Streams Framework

✘ The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation's Engagement Streams Framework describes four general categories of community engagement aligned with dialogue and deliberation strategies that can be applied in a variety of contexts

Originally developed in 2005 by Sandy Heierbacher, the Engagement Streams Framework is an influential and widely used resource produced by the [National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#) (NCDD), a nonprofit organization that maintains a network of professionals and groups working to “bring people together across divides to discuss, decide, and act together on today’s toughest challenges.” The [most recent version of the Engagement Streams Framework](#) was revised and updated in 2014.

*“These techniques strengthen the traditionally distant relationship between citizens and policymakers, and between workers and CEOs. They tap into community assets and citizen potential. They increase the quality of and buy-in for decisions. They mitigate long-standing conflicts between groups. They increase people’s knowledge and understanding of complex issues. And they enhance people’s sense of connection and commitment to their communities and the people in them.”*

*Engagement Streams Framework, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation*

The Engagement Streams Framework is designed to help local leaders select the most appropriate and effective engagement strategies for any given context, problem, or goal. According to the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, “No method works in all situations, though all of these techniques can seem like revelations and appear almost magical to those accustomed to ‘business as usual’ approaches to making decisions and addressing conflicting views. Our goals for this framework are to help you feel more confident in moving forward with your engagement efforts, and to give you a simple, useful tool for teaching others about these approaches.”

To help users of the Engagement Streams Framework better understand the purpose of dialogue and deliberation, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation provides the following useful definitions:

- **Dialogue** increases understanding, builds trust, and enables people to be open to listening to perspectives that are very different from their own.
- **Deliberation** enables people to discuss the consequences, costs, and trade-offs of various policy options or actions, and to work through the competing values that tough decisions

require us to grapple with. Deliberation often follows dialogue.

The resource also describes some of the fundamental features of effective dialogue and deliberation techniques:

- Utilizing facilitators and ground rules to create a safe atmosphere for honest, productive discussion.
- Framing the issue, questions, and background info in an impartial and accurate manner.
- Having people on all sides of the issue talk to each other face-to-face in small groups.
- Using the input and outcomes generated to shape decisions and action.

Primary Purpose	Name of Engagement Stream	Key Features	Important When...	Examples of Issues	Organizer's Strategy	Appropriate D&D Processes	Key Design Questions for Organizers
To encourage people and groups to learn more about themselves, their community, or an issue, and possibly discover innovative solutions	<b>Exploration</b>	Suspending assumptions, creating a space that encourages a different kind of conversation, using ritual and symbolism to encourage openness, emphasis on listening	A group or community seems stuck or muddled and needs to reflect on their circumstance in depth and gain collective insight.	Strengthening democracy, understanding a community of practice	To encourage new insights and connections to emerge by creating a space for people to share their thoughts, feelings and perspectives.	Conversation Café, Intergroup Dialogue in the classroom, Wisdom Council, Wisdom Circles, Socrates Café, World Café, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, Bohm Dialogue	How can we ensure that people feel safe expressing what inspires and touches them? What kind of techniques or rituals will stimulate listening and sharing, without making people uncomfortable?
To resolve conflicts, to foster personal healing and growth, and to improve relations among groups	<b>Conflict Transformation</b>	Creating a safe space, hearing from everyone, building trust, sharing personal stories and views	Relationships among participants are poor or not yet established yet need to be. Issue can only be resolved when people change their behavior or attitude, expand their perspective, or take time to reflect and heal.	Political polarization, Jewish-Muslim relations, race relations, value-based conflicts, healing after crises or trauma	To create a safe space for people with different views to talk about their personal experiences and feel heard. Often, to set the groundwork for deliberation and action.	Sustained Dialogue, Intergroup Dialogue in communities, Victim-Offender Mediation, PCP dialogue, Compassionate Listening	How can the issue be framed so that all sides are brought to – and feel welcomed at – the table? What are people's needs relating to this issue, and how can divergent needs (healing, action, respect) be met effectively? If a conflict exists, how overt and volatile is it? How, if at all, will you transition people to "what's next"?
To influence public decisions and public policy and improve public knowledge	<b>Decision Making</b>	Naming and framing the issue fairly, weighing all options, considering different positions (i.e. deliberation), revealing public values, brainstorming solutions	The issue is within government's (or any single entity's) sphere of influence.	Budgeting, land use, health care, social security	To involve a representative group of citizens in thorough discussions about complicated policy issues. Ideally, the process is linked to policy making.	National Issues Forums, Citizens Jury, Deliberative Polling, 21st Century Town Meeting, Charrettes, Citizen Choicework, Consensus Conference	How can we best represent the public (random selection, stakeholder representation, recruiting a critical mass)? Should/can public officials participate in the process side-by-side with citizens? What kinds of materials need to be developed or obtained? How can we ensure that this process influences policy?
To empower people and groups to solve complicated problems and take responsibility for the solution	<b>Collaborative Action</b>	Using dialogue and deliberation to generate ideas for community action, developing and implementing action plans collaboratively	The issue/dispute requires intervention across multiple public and private entities, and anytime community action is important.	Regional sprawl, institutional racism, youth violence, responding to crises	To encourage integrated efforts among diverse stakeholders, sectors, organizations, etc. involved in the issue.	Study Circles, Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry	Who needs to be at the table? What kind of power dynamics exist already? What group/leader/institution is most resistant to change? What group tends not to be at the table, although they're affected?

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation's Engagement Streams Framework is a particularly useful model for those who are new to the practice of dialogue, deliberation, or participatory community engagement. The framework describes the purpose and foundational features of four standard approaches to engagement: Exploration, Conflict Transformation, Decision-Making, and Collaborative Action. Source: *Engagement Streams Framework*, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

## The Engagement Streams Framework

The Engagement Streams Framework consists of two detailed charts, which makes the model particularly useful for those who are new to dialogue, deliberation, and engagement work. The first chart is a matrix of four engagement "streams"—or general categories describing the primary purpose

of an engagement activity—that have been aligned with six short descriptions of the main methodologies of dialogic and deliberative engagement. A second detailed chart catalogs 22 widely used dialogue and deliberation processes, and it includes relevant information about participant-selection strategies, optimal group size, and other features.

In addition to articulating the primary purpose of the four engagement streams and which issues and problems each stream is best suited to address, the Engagement Streams Framework describes the characteristic features of the engagement approach, representative examples of issues or problems, recommended organizer strategies, standard dialogue and deliberation processes, and essential questions for organizers and facilitators.

The four engagement streams:

### **1. Exploration**

The primary purpose of an *exploratory engagement process* is “to encourage people and groups to learn more about themselves, their community, or an issue, and possibly discover innovative solutions.” Exploratory strategies will be most useful to local leaders when “a group or community seems stuck or muddled and needs to reflect on their circumstance in depth and gain collective insight.”

### **2. Conflict Transformation**

The primary purpose of a *conflict-transformation engagement process* is “to resolve conflicts, to foster personal healing and growth, and to improve relations among groups.” Conflict-transformation strategies will be most useful to local leaders when “relationships among participants are poor or not yet established yet need to be,” and when issues “can only be resolved when people change their behavior or attitude, expand their perspective, or take time to reflect and heal.”

### **3. Decision Making**

The primary purpose of a *decision-making engagement process* is “to influence public decisions and public policy and improve public knowledge.” Decision-making strategies will be most useful to local leaders when the issue or problem can be resolved or influenced by the agency, institution, organization, or group organizing the process.

## 4. Collaborative Action

The primary purpose of a *collaborative-action engagement process* is “to empower people and groups to solve complicated problems and take responsibility for the solution.” Collaborative-actions strategies will be most useful to local leaders when “the issue/dispute requires intervention across multiple public and private entities” or “anytime community action is important.”

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