



Holding a *Mystery of Love* Dialogue

This section provides an in-depth overview of how to hold a sustained dialogue, and tips for facilitation. It expands upon the facilitation tips in *The Mystery of Love* Discussion Guide to provide parameters specifically for our community partners. The main focus in this section is on **sustained dialogue**. Since our partners will have varied experience with dialogue and facilitation, this entire section may not be relevant to all groups. Feel free to skim through and identify the topics that are most helpful as you're planning your dialogue.

Love is both deeply personal and, as the film says, “the force that holds things together.” In other words, the topic at the heart of *The Mystery of Love* is simultaneously intensely private and fundamentally public. *The Mystery of Love* can provide an opportunity for individual reflection, and it can also serve as a springboard to increase and deepen communities’ awareness, prompt dialogue, and inspire action. A facilitator can play a key role in helping people move along that continuum. The facilitation strategies outlined below can help.

A Note to Facilitators

The skill of a facilitator can make or break a dialogue. An experienced facilitator can help ensure that the conversation is productive and rewarding without asking people to hide feelings of pain, discomfort, or frustration. If you need help locating an experienced facilitator, contact the International Association of Facilitators: www.iaf-world.org. It is important for a facilitator to be involved in the planning of a dialogue, but be aware that it is difficult to assume the role of host or teacher and also serve as facilitator. In the best circumstances, facilitators remain neutral, focusing on helping others to be heard, rather than sharing their own perspectives. Unlike a teacher, a facilitator enters the discussion only when needed to help move things forward. If you are the facilitator, be sure that your role in the dialogue is clear.

If You Are New To Facilitating

You may want to read some additional materials that will support your skill-building in this work. Visit the website of the Public Conversations Project, a *Mystery of Love* Project national ally, at www.publicconversations.org. Look at their resources section where you will find their tool box/discussion guide on facilitation.

What Is Dialogue?

Dialogue means different things to different people, and even the experts who study and teach it will disagree about its exact definition. It is most known as a facilitated constructive conversation involving a process that allows people to share their perspectives and experiences with one another. Dialogue is not about judging, weighing, or making decisions, but rather about understanding and learning. The process of



dialogue is known to dispel stereotypes, build trust, and enable people to be open to perspectives that are different from their own¹.

But there is a distinction that makes it an art form. While the first thing that comes to mind when you think of dialogue is speaking, the actual emphasis is on *listening*. A successful dialogue needs a talented facilitator who, in addition to having an understanding of theory, intuition, and group process, is also committed to this emphasis on listening.

What is Sustained Dialogue?

Sustained dialogue is a sustained interaction that uses dialogue techniques over time to transform and build relationships and move the group towards some common goal. It was originally designed to engage people in deeply divided communities, but Harold Saunders of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue explains that sustained dialogue is not explicitly a problem-solving exercise. It is designed to shift perceptions and relationships in a way that participants may better understand and deal with practical problems in their families, their neighborhoods, their communities, and their world.

Designed as an ongoing process, sustained dialogue provides a sense of purpose, direction, and destination for participants willing to come together time after time in an open-ended process. **For the purpose of this project, we are defining a sustained dialogue as the same group of people who meet a minimum of four times.**

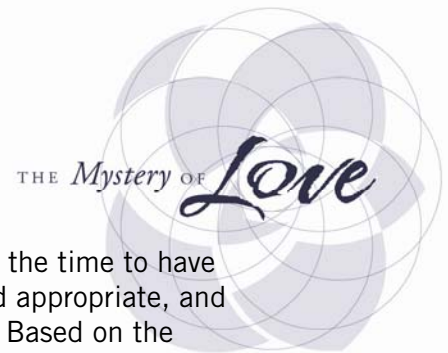
To learn more about sustained dialogue go to <http://www.thataway.org> or www.sustaineddialogue.org.

Before you Design a Sustained Dialogue

Define your goals. Set realistic goals based on your group's experiences and abilities. Decide on a target audience (whom do you want to reach?) and be clear about what you expect the participants to gain from attending. These decisions will shape the structure of the dialogue, how it is publicized, and how you assess success.

Part of defining your goals will be to choose a focus for your dialogue. Review all segments from *The Mystery of Love* and choose which segment(s) will speak to your audience and achieve the goals of your group. For example, you might invite young couples or teens to a biweekly discussion with mentors on how to build a strong marriage (looking at Monica and Mark's example in the "Love and Romance" segment), or you could gather community members in an ongoing conversation about how love makes us responsible for one another (as in the "Love and Altruism" segment featuring B.A.C.A.), or help heal divisions within a neighborhood by considering the role of love and forgiveness in reducing violence (using the story of Ples and Azim's friendship in the "Brotherly Love" segment).

¹ The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. www.thataway.org. Accessed February 28, 2006.



Be transparent about your goals for the dialogue with the group, or take the time to have the group create its own goals. Ensure that the goals are reasonable and appropriate, and can be accomplished within the time frame that you will have together. Based on the feedback from your group, you may design a dialogue focused on deepening relationships, and/or you might build towards a group activity, such as a Love in Action Project (see section 5, Designing a Love in Action Project, for more information).

Define success. Some might define success as the simple act of experiencing a sustained dialogue. Others might define it as more action-based, and introduce a deliberative element such as developing a Love in Action Project. You do not necessarily need to meet all of your goals to have a successful sustained dialogue, and you can discuss ahead of time with your group what each individual's expectations and desires are. You can jot down the responses and revisit them at the end of your sustained dialogue to see how well you've met the group's expectations.

Choose a structure and format that matches your goals. The goal of *The Mystery of Love* Project is to use the process of sustained dialogue to deepen the conversation on love. The benefit of the same group meeting over time is that it creates the opportunity for deeper relationships and transformation.

- **Timing:** It is best to keep your dialogue under two and a half hours so that participants do not get burnt out. Keeping this in mind, take into account how much of that time you want to spend showing segments from the film. We suggest screening only one or two segments so that you can allow ample time for dialogue.
- **Audience Size:** There is no limit to the number of people who can participate in the dialogue. However, the larger your group is, the more important it is to incorporate the use of smaller "breakout groups" of 6–8 people, so members can share more personal stories they may not feel comfortable sharing in a large group. You may also want to consider breaking your group into dyads (groups of two), and triads. If you have a larger group, you may want to consider using more facilitators.
- **Location:** Be sure that the space can accommodate the size of your group. For example, an auditorium might be great for a large group, but it can make it difficult for people involved in a discussion to see and hear one another. Whatever your location, be sure that everyone can easily see the screen or monitor, and also that chairs can be configured to facilitate dialogue (we recommend sitting in a circle). If necessary, check on the availability of spaces that can be used for small breakout groups. Also remember that you'll need to meet at least four times, so you'll probably want to use the same meeting place for each dialogue.
- **Other considerations:** childcare, holidays, and food.

Determine how you will use the film. There are several ways to incorporate *The Mystery of Love* into your sustained dialogue. As the coordinator of the dialogue, you should preview the film and determine which segments best address your goals and the needs of your target audience. You may decide to work with the whole film and show one segment of the film before each discussion, or you may select specific segments that are relevant to your goals. Certain segments can work well together to fit larger themes for dialogue. For



example, if you were to focus on service, you might choose the segments titled “Love and Altruism,” “Brotherly Love,” and “Love, Land, and Community” to deepen the discussion. For more ideas on how certain segments can be grouped into themes, check out the main page of our website: www.themysteryoflove.org.

Also take advantage of *The Mystery of Love* Discussion Guide, which can serve as a great resource to guide your discussions. In addition to listing commentaries from the film, fun activity suggestions, and web resources, the guide includes both general and segment-specific discussion questions that relate directly to the material from the film.

For maximum results, it is strongly recommended that you hold your dialogue immediately after screening the film while it is still fresh in participants’ minds.

Planning Your Sustained Dialogue

Once you have established a clear goal, think about how to create a safe environment that welcomes open, respectful participation:

Prepare your participants. Be sure to let participants know in advance that you will be meeting at least four times so they can plan ahead. It’s also helpful to let them know the dates and times of the sessions and how long the dialogues will be.

For action-oriented dialogue, identify and involve all key players. If you are planning to use *The Mystery of Love* dialogue to raise awareness of an issue or mobilize your community, you will want to involve all key players in your planning. For example, if you want to address the needs of at-risk youth in your community using the “Brotherly Love” segment, you’ll need to involve families, city officials, social workers, and potential funders. Consider all of the voices that need to be in the room, and make sure you plan in advance to allow plenty of time for participants to clear their schedules. Also note that when different stakeholders are included in the conversation, there may be power differentials that will need to be addressed by an experienced facilitator. It is important to make the distinction that hosting a dialogue can be an opportunity to bring people of differing views on a specific subject to come together to exchange ideas and listen to each other. It is not a place to push individual agendas, or advocate for a specific topic.

Choose a location where all participants will feel equally comfortable. If possible, hold your dialogue in a neutral place, easy to reach by various forms of transportation and accessible to people who live in different neighborhoods. Take into consideration how hosting an event at a place of worship may affect your audience. Sites such as your local public television station or a library may be able to serve as a neutral location. Also be sure that the space is accessible to people of all abilities, e.g., that it can accommodate wheelchairs, has microphones so that those with impaired hearing can hear others speak, etc.

Ensure that everyone will have an opportunity to be heard. As mentioned above, always make sure the room is set up so that people can see and hear one another easily. If the group has more than twelve participants, make plans to break into small groups or pairs.



If you do break into small groups, decide ahead of time how those groupings will be determined.

Plan to leave enough time for next steps. For some people, just speaking publicly about love is an important action step, but if everything stops at the walls of the room you're in, lasting impact will be limited. In a sustained dialogue, your group is working towards a common goal. Each dialogue session will build upon the previous ones, so be sure to create a consistent way to end each session. You can do this by setting aside time for personal reflections, making space to reflect on past dialogues, or giving "assignments" to participants for the next meeting.

Consider working with a co-facilitator. Because ideas about love are influenced by factors like gender and age, it can be helpful to have a second facilitator who provides another perspective. E.g., if you are male, co-facilitate with a woman. This strategy can broaden perspectives and increase perception. One facilitator may pick up signals from group members that the other facilitator misses.

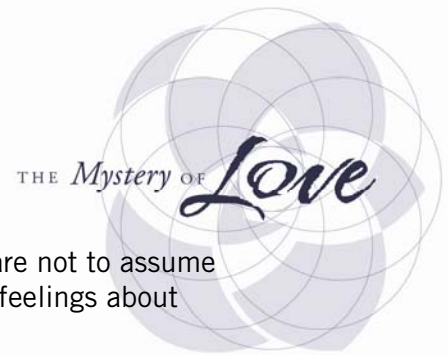
Preparation for Facilitators

The facilitator's primary job is to foster an environment where people can explore sensitive issues. A common mistake made by people new to facilitating is the belief that the role of the facilitator is synonymous with teacher. But actually, the skilled facilitator remains calm and neutral, keeps people on track, helps the group move toward action (as it applies to your dialogue design), and models appropriate interaction. The strategies below can help you create an atmosphere that encourages people to share their experiences and insights in respectful and productive ways.

Know how you will open and in what direction you will head. Feel free to choose one of the suggested questions in *The Mystery of Love* Discussion Guide or at www.themysteryoflove.org/community.php to help get a dialogue started, but keep in mind that these questions are simply prompts and are not meant to be followed like a textbook. Be present with the needs of your group as they change. Your key job as a facilitator is to be constantly aware of the dynamics of your group. Take note of people's body language as well as their verbal expression. Be fearless at re-directing the conversation if you need to, or to revisit an issue that you felt didn't get fully explored.

Identify your own "hot button" issues. Substantive discussions about love, family, and community can trigger intense feelings in us as well as in others. As a facilitator, you may end up being a target or lightning rod for the feelings of people in the room, so give yourself some time to reflect on the issues in the film before the dialogue. That way you will not be processing your own emotions and trying to facilitate a discussion at the same time.

Know your group. Issues can play out very differently for different groups of people. Factors like geography, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, education level, and familiarity with a topic can all have an impact on comfort levels, speaking styles, and prior knowledge. You might ask for relevant information as part of the registration process



or plan to work with groups with whom you are already familiar. Take care not to assume that all members of a particular group share the same experiences and feelings about love.

Consider how well group members know one another. If you are bringing together people who have never met, it would be worthwhile to devote some time at the beginning to introductions or a welcoming activity that establishes safe space. It can actually be more challenging to bring group members together who are already familiar with each other, and therefore it may be more important to create opportunities for participants to realize how much they can learn from one another. Here are three examples of activities that can help “break the ice” for a new group:

- **Toilet Paper:** This activity is best done if the facilitator can complete the introduction with a straight face. Also, it can be time-intensive, so you should only consider this if you have a group of 8 or less. As the facilitator, bring out a roll of toilet paper, and right before you pass it around the room, explain the following: “It would seem that [place where you are holding the dialogue] has had some serious budget cutbacks, and needs to be very careful with resources, so the staff has provided me with this roll of toilet paper for our next two meetings. If you could, please just pass it around and take what you think you will need, we will begin.” As you pass the paper around the room and people give you quizzical looks, feel free to act busy or make small talk. Once everyone has gotten their toilet paper (most people will know that you are up to something):
 - 1) Ask group members to count the number of squares of toilet paper they took.
 - 2) Ask them to share one thing about themselves for every square they counted. It is important that you model sharing first, and set the tone for the kind of depth and seriousness you want to experience. You may begin with the mundane, e.g., marital status and place of birth, and build towards some details people would not immediately find out. For instance, “I have lived in 10 states, I have three cats, I enjoy reading magical realism, I used to be an actress.” This can eventually progress to deeper sharing, for example, “I have elderly parents whom I care for, I have survived a major illness, I care very deeply for our environment and am concerned about the current state of the world.” You can also change the prop of the activity to something like M&M’s, but people might not take as many...
- **The Unspoken in a Hat:** The tone for this activity can be set by introducing the topic of unspoken expectations and fear, and explaining how it is normal and natural at this early stage of a dialogue for people to experience many kinds of concerns or feel hesitant about getting involved. Some people may have specific concerns and questions about a dialogue on love. A good way of addressing these thoughts and emotions is to invite people to openly acknowledge them without being subject to ridicule. Having one's fears expressed and heard almost immediately cuts them in half.
 - 1) Give everyone a few pieces of paper (make sure that you have pens available for everyone) to anonymously write their concerns, expectations, or fears.



- 2) Collect the pieces of paper, mix them around, then invite each person to select a piece of paper and read about someone else's fear/concern/expectations.
 - 3) One by one, each group member reads the statement of another group member. Once a statement is read, you can have everyone in the room who has the same expectation/fear/concerns raise their hands, cross their legs, or implement any other method of showing they feel the same way.
 - 4) When all the fears have been read and elaborated on, then discuss what people felt, noticed, or were surprised by. If there are questions that arise that only you can answer as the facilitator, this is a good time to do so.
- **The Things We Carry:** In our briefcases, purses or wallets, we all carry objects that give clues to who we are as individuals. This quick activity provides an opportunity to share the meaning of the things we carry. Ask everyone to take one thing out of their bag/purse/handbag/briefcase/gym bag and spend a few minutes (depending on the size of your group, you may want to consider giving a time limit) explaining how it represents who they are. Once again, you will want to begin so you can set the tone for the kind of depth you may be looking for, and how to say something meaningful even if an obvious object isn't readily available! For example, "This pen was given to me by my grandfather when I was 15. He always taught me the value of caring and taking care of things. Some of my friends laugh at me because of how much I recycle and how long I keep things, but I learned it from my grandfather who grew up during the Depression Era." Or—how to make a story when the object isn't there: "This is a tube of lipstick. I grew up living in rural areas for most of my life, and spent many years teaching wilderness travel, and didn't start wearing make-up until just this past year."

Set ground rules about language. You might involve group members in this process by asking people what rules would help them feel safe enough to participate openly. You'll need strategies for how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak, and how you will prevent one or two people from dominating the discussion.

You'll also need guidelines for the way people express themselves: No one may interrupt someone who is speaking; no one may use a "put-down" or slur; yelling is off limits; people may speak for themselves ("I think...") but may not generalize for others ("everyone agrees that..."), etc.

Set ground rules about confidentiality. To help participants feel as comfortable as possible, set a tone of confidentiality. What's said in the room, stays in the room. It is not uncommon for people to reveal things that put them in a vulnerable position. So a good facilitator invites people to be open and honest, but also limits the sharing of information that might put someone in danger or have serious negative consequences, e.g., admitting to being an undocumented worker, or to having committed a crime.



During the Dialogue

Take care of yourself and group members. Discussing love can evoke deep emotions. As a facilitator, you are not a counselor or social worker. If participants are particularly upset, especially about issues of family dysfunction or personal pain, acknowledge the power and validity of the emotions, gently let everyone know that the group is not equipped to address the situation, and be prepared to refer individuals to local support agencies or professionals.

Encourage active listening. Share with your group the distinction of dialogue, that it is a form of communication that focuses on the specific act of listening. One way you can illustrate this point is by encouraging participants to actively listen to what is being said, rather than actively thinking about what they are going to say when it is their turn to speak. Another activity that can illustrate this point is to break up into pairs and practice formal “active listening,” where participants listen without interrupting the speaker and then rephrase to see if they have heard correctly.

Talk about the difference between dialogue and debate. In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and actively listening to each other.

Allow time for reflection. It is always a good idea to plan a moment immediately after the screening for participants to share their reactions to the film. If you anticipate strong emotions, you might plan a moment to allow participants to take a deep breath and silently process what they have seen before beginning any discussion. Providing a variety of ways for people to share can also increase comfort level. For those who feel uncomfortable speaking or sharing emotions in front of large groups, consider arranging time to pair and share or to break into small groups.

After the Dialogue

Evaluate. Since the field of dialogue is in the early stages of research, the best way to measure success is with a formal, pre-determined evaluation. Most groups reading this document will be participating in a formal review with our project evaluator. However, if this is not the case, you can informally review the success of your dialogue at the very end of your series of dialogues. You can do this by revisiting your list of goals from your first dialogue and review with your group, or you can use a closing activity that asks people to share what they have learned or what action they plan to take. It is challenging to measure emotional and attitudinal shifts, but you can prepare an anonymous questionnaire that can help you better understand these impacts. For more evaluation suggestions, contact Active Voice.



Some Resources for Dialogue from the Public Conversations Project²

Fostering Dialogue across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project

This is a 183-page guide to convening and facilitating single and multi-session dialogues on divisive public issues. It offers advice suitable for work in a wide range of settings, e.g., citizen groups, religious groups and organizations, and sample questions on a variety of issues. You can download the guide for free at PCP's website:

www.publicconversations.org. Bound copies are available at www.cafepress.com/pcp_press for \$21 plus S&H. Available soon in Spanish.

Of special interest for Community Partners in The Mystery of Love Community Engagement Project: Chapter 4.4: Designing a Session with a Common Stimulus.

Constructive Conversations about Challenging Times: A Guide to Community Dialogue

This 58-page guide is the pre-cursor to the guide described above. It offers advice on convening and facilitating single session "community" dialogues. It was developed after 9/11 to foster dialogue about global issues and has been regularly updated with new appendices with sample questions about a range of topics. In December 2006, PCP will release version 5.0 including an appendix on using film clips as a stimulus to dialogue, and a specific format for single-session dialogues about love in the face of violence for use with the *Brotherly Love* segment of the documentary, *The Mystery of Love*.³ This guide can be downloaded from PCP's website.

Materials from the Islam Project-Greater Boston

This 2003 collaboration between Active Voice and PCP used clips from *Mohammed: Legacy of a Prophet* as a stimulus to dialogue about faith, social values and American ideals. PCP collaborated with 28 Boston area organizations to sponsor several events, most of which drew 60-80 people. A sample format for small group break out dialogues

² Links within PCP's website are not provided here because the site is undergoing changes. If you have trouble finding what you're looking for from the home page, e-mail mherzig@publicconversations.org. We apologize for the inconvenience.

³ PCP is pleased to be a national partner with Active Voice's community engagement project, which uses "The Mystery of Love" as a springboard for discussing the different aspects of love in people's lives. The film is produced by the Independent Production Fund. The community engagement initiative is supported by the Fetzer Institute's Campaign for Love and Forgiveness, Southwest Airlines, and the Betsy Gordon Foundation. The film will be broadcast nationally on PBS in December 2006. See www.themysteryoflove.org for more information.



can be found in the Guide described above and in the “Projects” section of PCP’s website.

Other Resources on PCP’s Website

Tools

- Common Phases in an Opening Meeting
- Sample Ground Rules (Agreements) for Dialogue
- Self-Help Tools for Participants
- Guidelines for Facilitators

Articles

- Searching for Wise Questions by Laura Chasin
- The Uncertain Path to Dialogue by Sallyann Roth
- Starting a New Conversation When Debate is Fruitless by Maggie Herzig

Experiential Workshops Offered by PCP

- The Power of Dialogue: Constructive Conversations on Divisive Issues
- Staying Grounded When on the Spot: A Skill-Building Workshop for Facilitators
- Inquiry as Intervention: Crafting Questions with Purpose and Impact
- Reflective Leadership in Frenzied Times

ALSO CHECK OUT THE WEBSITE OF
THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION
WWW.NCDD.ORG