

or more of these conditions. If this is the case, it is unlikely that the group will be successful. Internal dynamics or cultural dynamics will get in the way and circumvent successful implementation.

When walking a client through the well-formed questions, if a “no” is reached to any of the questions, the outcome is not well-formed or framed. In this case, the facilitator’s role is to work with the group to help shift the outcomes so that they are well-formed prior to engaging in the formal conversation. Often shifting the outcomes changes the entire nature of the conversation and the actual work to be done.

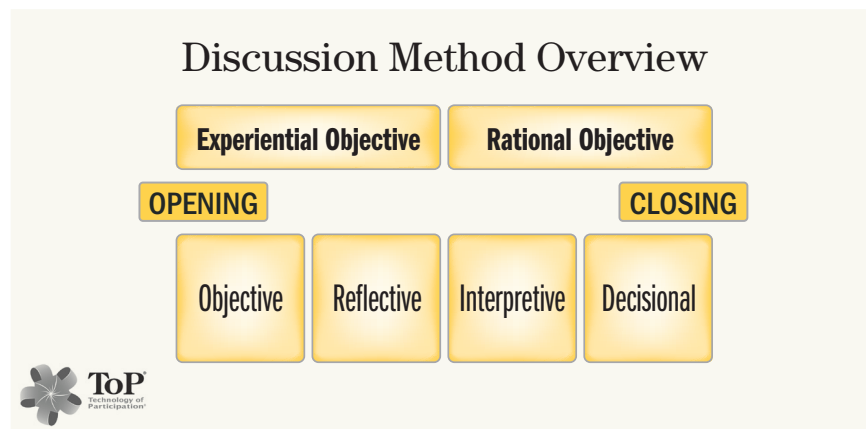
### Conversation Process: Discussion Method

The Discussion Method was developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs, an organization that works with diverse communities all over the world. The method is intended to move a group through the stages of team development – I, We, and Task stages, in a 20-minute period of time by using a specific template of sequential questions (*see page 15*).

#### The Discussion Method

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Generally, the method is intended to break ground for a group and open up the range of issues to explore in deeper conversations. If the topic is very focused and specific, it can be used to develop understanding and move a group to agreement and action.

One of the keys to the effectiveness and power of this process is that it is designed to build shared understanding rather than agreement. It is critical for the facilitator to make this outcome and distinction clear and explicit in preparing a group for the conversation. Any agreements or actions are then based on the common understandings and common ground developed through the conversation. This paradoxically often results in resolving differences and conflicts.

**IN DESIGNING QUESTIONS FOR A FOCUSED DISCUSSION, THE QUESTIONS ARE SEQUENCED IN THE FOLLOWING MANNER:**

- **OBJECTIVE QUESTION:** A question that asks for simple information and allows everyone in the group to speak. Often the largest barrier for an introverted person in participating in a group is “showing up” in the group by voicing their first comment. This first question in the Discussion Method is designed so that anyone can answer the question and thus “show up.” In this method everyone answers the first question. The question is often in the form of, “What stood out to you from the presentation, handout information, quote or graphic?”
- **REFLECTIVE QUESTION:** This question asks for feelings that members of the group have around the topic area. The idea is to create a safe space for people to let each other know about underlying feelings, values and issues. The question is often in the form of, “Given this topic, what feelings do you have about this issue relative to our team, organization, your relationships, etc.?” It is great to hear responses from as many people in the group as possible; however it is not necessary for everyone to answer this second question. This second question is designed to address the experiential or social outcome of the process.

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**STORY: A New Community Plan**

*Many years ago I was part of a community planning process in Brooktrails, California. The purpose of the overall process was to develop a new community plan. The Brooktrails community was made up of a large number of absentee owners and a smaller percentage of full-time resident owners.*

*The developers in the community wanted to continue to function in ways that supported continued property speculation. The resident owners were more focused on developing a true community. As part of the overall process a community meeting was structured to develop a community vision. The developers bussed five hundred absentee landowners up from the Bay Area in an attempt to represent the developers perspectives. Approximately one-thousand people attended the session and the meeting was held in the corporation yard. As part of this meeting we convened over fifty small discussion groups*



*of up to twenty people each, using the Discussion Method. The purpose of the Discussion Method was to build shared understanding about the needs and concerns of all owners. The groups were made up of equal numbers of resident and non-resident owners. Each group had a facilitator to assist in the conversation. The outputs from each of the fifty groups were some common ground values for the development of the community. Much to the disappointment of the developers, the conversation actually created a mutual understanding about the values that all owners shared. This then resulted in the beginning of a collaboration between all owners.*

- **INTERPRETIVE QUESTION:** This question asks each member for their specific opinions, ideas and recommendations relative to the topic. This is intended to give each person an opportunity to “get their two cents in,” and then lets them consider the ideas of others. The question is often in the form of, “What specific ideas, reactions, opinions, and solutions do you have around this issue in our organization, community, team, etc.?” Anyone and everyone can respond to this third question. This question is designed to address the rational outcome.
- **DECISIONAL QUESTION:** This question is designed to build common ground and move a group either to next steps or to action. The question is often in the form of, “Given all of the ideas and recommendations, which ideas seemed to have the greatest energy and interest for the whole group?”

## THE DISCUSSION METHOD



### Outcome

#### Rational Outcome

This is very effective for developing a shared understanding of an issue or direction prior to more detailed planning conversations.

#### Experiential Outcome

The Discussion Method creates a sense of shared focus and helps to find the common ground for a group or team.



### Tips and Reminders

#### Process Tips & Reminders

***This process is useful for initial exploration of an issue.*** It is not as effective to dig deeply into issues, and is often best used to begin an exploration. More effective processes exist to probe more deeply or to develop full actions plans.

***It can be used in very large groups as an input into other processes.*** For example, it can be used to create more focused brainstorming ideas that feed into the workshop method or other planning processes. In this way it is used to narrow down the list of possibilities from many to a few that can then be probed more deeply through further process.

***The process can be used with minimal directions.*** It is good to use with large groups where you don't have access to a pool of trained facilitators. This is a frequent occurrence in large organizations or school systems. Because the template is so straightforward, a group of novice facilitators can be provided with a short

briefing so that a large group of people can be divided into smaller conversation groups, each following a similar process.

**When designing the questions, start with the rational outcome.** This is an Interpretive Question. Next, design an experiential, or Reflective Question. When asking the questions with a group, always follow the template order – Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional.

**It’s okay to ask two Interpretive Questions.** Sometimes it is important to ask a group two interpretive questions in sequence in order to achieve the rational outcome.

### Focused Discussion: Sample Questions

<b>OBJECTIVE</b> “What?”	<b>REFLECTIVE</b> “Gut”	<b>INTERPRETIVE</b> “So What?”	<b>DECISIONAL</b> “Now What?”
What words or phrases or ideas stood out for you?	What was your response or reaction?	What are the implications of this issue for you and our team, and why?	What seems to be the lessons about this topic?
What parts of the conversation stood out to you?	What surprised you?	What insights were triggered for you?	What additional questions does this raise?
What did you see or hear that was of particular interest to you?	What excited you? What frustrated you? What’s missing for you?	What is the significance of this issue?	What are our shared recommendations emerging from this conversation?
What data or facts caught your attention?	What feelings did you experience?	What are the key themes?	What do we need to explore further?
What one thing stood out to you from the presentation as being important?	How did you feel when...?	What might be the impact of this on our work?	What could we do differently in the future?
What one insight emerged for you from the presentation?	What is your confidence level about the success for this effort?	What do you believe are the most strategic steps we can take regarding this issue?	What do we agree are the shared changes or directions for moving forward?
What one insight emerged for you from the community feedback?	What associations came to mind?	What are the key issues?	What first steps can we take?