

Talking about Guns and Violence: Strategies for Facilitating Constructive Dialogues

Author: Greg Keidan

Greg Keidan is a public engagement specialist and writer in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Email: gregkeidan@gmail.com

Articulation of Question

Guns are viewed by many people as a sacred emblem of American independence. We own enough nonmilitary guns to arm every man, woman, and child, plus a few million of our pets.ⁱ Gun related violence accounts for 30,000-40,000 deaths each year in the U.S.ⁱⁱ, approximately 60% by suicideⁱⁱⁱ. Recent tragedies in Newtown and other communities involving horrific mass shootings have brought widespread calls for new efforts to address and reduce gun related violence. Unfortunately, the highly partisan, adversarial nature of our two-party system and this issue has proven to be a giant obstacle to finding common ground and common sense solutions. In the spring of 2013, the U.S. Senate failed to pass a compromise piece of legislation in response to public and Presidential demands for tighter background checks for people purchasing firearms online and at gun shows. Despite polls showing that 90% of American adults supported this compromise deal^{iv}, influential advocates were able to sink the bill in the Senate.

A new approach to addressing and reducing gun related violence is desperately needed. It has been almost 20 years since Congress has passed any legislation to address the issue. A growing number of local and national organizations are interested in engaging diverse Americans in civil dialogue and deliberation to find consensus on common-sense solutions and to hold our leaders accountable for implementing them. However, traditional public meetings where a few advocates each take their two minutes at the microphone often result in acrimonious shouting matches, rather than identifying areas of consensus where collaborative efforts could improve safety. I spoke with seasoned facilitators and thought leaders from the dialogue and deliberation movement to answer the following question: what are the emerging best practices and strategies for facilitating civil and constructive dialogues aimed at reducing the number of Americans killed and injured by guns?

Analysis

Anyone considering planning and facilitating a dialogue about a controversial issue such as guns and violence should first have a solid background in commonly accepted best practices for facilitating civil and constructive group dialogues. If you are new to the field, visit The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) beginner's guide page, <http://ncdd.org/rc/beginners-guide>. NCDD also offers links to a variety of facilitator training guides, visit ncdd.org/rc/best-of-the-best-resources. I learned facilitation techniques initially by watching my academic and *AmericaSpeaks* colleagues, and improved through trial and error. I found the Dialogue, Deliberation, and Public Engagement (DDPE) graduate certificate program, now offered through Kansas State University, to be of great value to facilitators wishing to develop a capacity to mix and match different approaches according to the situation at hand. The International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, Institute for Local Government Public Engagement

Program, and The Public Conversations Project (see contributors section below) offer trainings and resources that could be useful to incorporate into your facilitation approach.

Controversial topics pose special challenges to facilitators and require a high level of preparation and skill. I interviewed eight experts for their insights regarding how to facilitate a civil and constructive dialogue about guns and violence. The information gathered in these conversations can be summarized as seven strategies for success:

Avoid Framing Discussions as Gun Control vs. Gun Rights

Framing a conversation as a binary question with only two alternatives is a sure way to create unconstructive shouting matches, especially when the subject is a hot-button political issue. Janet Fitch says the focus of her award-winning documentary movies and community engagement project is reframing the currently accepted prevailing framework of “gun rights vs. gun control” to a broader discussion about public health and preventing gun violence; issues that affect us all. Fitch’s film series, *Guns Grief & Grace in America*, explores topics including suicide, homicide, mass and accidental shootings with a focus on the need for prevention strategies at the local, state, and national level. She views the films as a starting point for public dialogues, and has been invited to facilitate post-viewing conversations in urban, suburban, academic and rural communities across the country.

Fitch’s documentaries lead naturally to discussions about how they make viewers feel, and what they think could be done to address these problems and prevent gun violence. She says that broadening the conversation, steering it away from the partisan paradigm and asking more open-ended questions results in more input from more participants than traditional meetings where vocal advocates dominate, argue and debate. “People appreciate the chance to have a non-polarized discussion about preventing gun violence,” she reports.

The Violence Prevention Coalition of Los Angeles also convenes community dialogues about preventing gun violence using a public health framing. “We talk about it being an epidemic and ask people to consider systemic changes that could be made to end the epidemic rather than blaming individuals,” says Director Kaile Schilling. It takes active facilitation to avoid falling into the same gun control vs. gun rights debate. Fitch tells participants that the conversation is limited to public health and prevention; questions or comments about gun rights and gun control are off limits. “About five percent of Americans are gun control advocates, and about five percent are gun rights advocates. This discussion is for the other 90% of us,” she explains. There is hope that engaging the rational majority of Americans who are not on either end of the partisan spectrum can produce common sense solutions that prevent gun violence and the political will to see these solutions through.

There is a tendency to think about gun violence only as an urban youth issue. It can be eye opening for people to learn who is actually affected by gun violence. One

alternative framing for discussion is what could be done to prevent suicides. Although most gun related deaths are suicides, this issue isn't commonly discussed in relation to legislation or other measures for reducing gun violence. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control shows that suicide rates have increased over the last decade in our country, rising over 30% among Americans age 35-64. Suicide now claims more American lives each year than automobile accidents.^v More than half of suicides in the U.S. involve firearms. How could we limit the access of people suffering from deep depression to firearms in order to prevent suicides?

Another possible framing that invites fresh perspectives and doesn't alienate gun owners is to talk about how to promote responsible gun ownership. Steering the conversation from politicized policy arguments to deeper underlying issues like safety and responsibility can be one way to find common ground. "Try to find neutral language and root options for discussion in the main core concerns rather than the main policy arguments," advises Brad Rourke of the Kettering Foundation. By asking people to convene and discuss their common core concerns, as opposed to participating in the same well-worn policy debate, you attract more diverse participants and encourage collaborative solutions.

Validate and Demonstrate an Understanding of All Perspectives in the Room

The prevailing dynamic of the current national debate about gun control vs. gun rights is one of two opposing sides that seek to undermine and attack each other. When people have chosen sides and are engaged in any kind of battle, each believing they are absolutely right, initial discussions are often less than civil. While the sense of crisis we have experienced in the wake of recent tragic events raises the level of emotions, it also helps keep participants engaged in hopes that some positive resolution may be achieved.

With time, a skillful facilitator or moderator can help participants become ready to lower the temperature and start discussing the issue in a civil way. It is important to create an expectation that this is an opportunity for people to learn from one another's viewpoints instead of arguing. Demonstrating an understanding of and respect for the credibility of all perspectives can help participants become open to hearing differing perspectives. Phil Stewart trains moderators of Sustained Dialogue™ involving opposing sides to validate what each participant is saying, while also digging deeper to learn more about what they fear, why they fear it and where their fear comes from. This kind of probing and clarifying questioning can help people get beyond their immediate reaction to consider the underlying issues and can thus help people explain themselves more fully.

Ask Questions that Elicit Personal, Emotional Stories

The Sustained Dialogue approach to moderating dialogues places a high value on helping groups of people on opposing "teams" to develop empathy and trust early in a process. Stewart says this is a prerequisite for dialogue participants to incorporate and

accept as valid the perspectives of people they may have previously demonized. By posing questions that elicit emotional stories about traumatic life events, and creating a safe atmosphere that welcomes emotional stories, a skillful moderator can help members of opposing groups begin to understand one another better, gain a new appreciation of their experiences, and develop emotional reactions to these experiences. “The key is crafting questions that get to the heart of the matter,” says Cherry Muse, President of the Public Conversations Project. With respect to talking about guns, the challenge is to steer people from the policy debate to sharing stories that help others understand where they are coming from.

While a traditional dialogue facilitator would not share their own experiences, a moderator using the Sustained Dialogue method might do so in order to help participants feel invited to share personal stories. The goal is to try to create a safe atmosphere where people will share stories that get to the root of their values and why they feel so strongly. Similarly, a 2013 National Issues Forums Advisory, *How Can We Stop Mass Shootings in Our Communities*, suggests asking dialogue participants how the issue of mass violence has affected them or their families. Author John Backman suggests that naïve questions asked in a spirit of honest inquiry, such as, “Why is gun ownership important to you and how does it improve your life?” or “What in your life has persuaded you that it is important to limit access to guns?” are effective tools for dialogue facilitators. The intent is to get at core motivations and personal stories, while avoiding making participants feel angry or defensive by clearly conveying curiosity and genuine interest in all perspectives.

Give Everyone a Chance to Be Heard

A common error made by well meaning organizations wishing to engage the public in addressing an important issue is spending too much time on educational presentations and not allowing enough time for dialogue. “People always say they wanted more time to talk,” shared one seasoned facilitator and trainer.

A commonly used best practice in facilitating large group dialogues is to break into small groups of 6-10 people for facilitated round-table discussions. This allows everyone a chance to make their voice heard, even those who might be shy to speak in front of a large and possibly hostile audience. It also allows people a chance to hear some different perspectives on a controversial topic in a relatively safe and intimate environment.

Use and Ask the Group to Enforce Ground Rules

It is a commonly accepted best practice for facilitators to ask a group to agree upon a set of ground rules when beginning a dialogue process. Depending on how much time is available and their preferred style, facilitators may allow the group to create their own ground rules, may ask them to agree to a common set of ground rules, or some combination. Some facilitators prefer to establish a few ground rules up front, others like

to wait until there is a situation before asking if the group wants to establish some rules. One common approach is to suggest one or more things to make the discussion more productive and then ask if anyone wants to suggest additional ground rules. Agreements you might consider suggesting for a dialogue about guns and violence include:

- You speak only for yourself and from your personal experience
- What we say here is confidential/ off the record
- Keep it brief so everyone has time to speak (if necessary, ask people to limit comments to a certain number of minutes and/or go around the circle so each person has their turn to speak)
- Listen respectfully; its OK to disagree but not to be hostile
- To support deep listening, after someone speaks, give it some time to settle in. Write down your questions rather than jumping in with them, and ask questions out of genuine curiosity, not to be argumentative

For ground rules to be effective they can't be imposed; the group has to own them. If a group agrees to certain parameters for the dialogue and someone tries to dominate or derail a discussion, a skilled facilitator can easily enlist the group's help in asking that person to change their behavior or withdraw so that the rest can continue.

It is worth noting that some facilitators stress the importance of allowing dialogue participants to express their emotions, as long as they relate to their own personal experiences and are not attacking other participants. Hearing passionately told stories full of emotion can be a very effective way for participants to enlarge their sense of identity so that they are able to accept the viewpoints of others different from their own.

Use Neutral Language, Be Respectful and Transparent

It is important to find neutral language to use when facilitating or moderating a dialogue related to guns and violence. Even the term gun violence, like gun control, may signal to some that the discussion will be biased against those who believe that gun ownership is vital to their security. Hot-button, highly politicized terms like this should be avoided by facilitators. Terms like responsible gun ownership and preventing mass shootings may be useful in framing this issue in a way that does not alienate gun owners and put them on the defensive. Asking people who have diverse perspectives on the issue at hand to help frame the issue and choose language for outreach and participant materials is one effective strategy to find the most appropriate terms and neutral approach that will effectively engage people with a diversity of perspectives on guns and violence. "If you don't find neutral framing, people will either stay home because they feel you are trying to force them towards a certain outcome or decision they oppose, or they will organize to disrupt the meeting because they feel marginalized," says Brad Rourke of the Kettering Foundation.

When people have chosen sides on an emotional and divisive issue such as this, it is important for a facilitator to be respectful of both sides as well as neutral. One way to

do this is to ask while discussing ground rules how people from different sides of the debate like to be identified, to get away from demonizing language. It can also be useful to demonstrate respect for all perspectives in the room by briefly summarizing the personal experiences of the participants and the values and viewpoints that these experiences led them to hold.

It is also important to be clear and up-front throughout a public engagement process about what the goals are for your dialogue. If people attend expecting to talk about one thing and that is not on the agenda, they will feel deceived and angry and could try to derail the whole process. Recruiting diverse potential dialogue participants to take part in the planning process is a good way to ensure a shared understanding of the process goals and agenda.

Make Dialogue a Habit

When people have the opportunity to participate in civil and constructive dialogues, they develop the habits of effective and civil discourse. Likewise, when organizations have the opportunity to learn from ongoing deliberative public engagement efforts, they enhance their ability to effectively and inclusively engage an increasing number of residents in addressing and overcoming challenges. Organizations and communities that develop a habit of addressing issues through dialogue and deliberation are better able to use these tools effectively than those that only occasionally convene dialogues during periods of crisis or controversy.

Ongoing or sustained dialogue methods, such as the one developed by Hal Saunders and Phil Stewart during years of tense international peace negotiations, take a deliberate and long-term approach to resolving conflicts among factions with deep mistrust and loathing for one another. “When groups have existing animosity, it may take five or six meetings before representatives are really ready to listen to one another,” according to Stewart. Achieving a collaborative positive outcome such as a peace accord can take many meetings over a period of years. The issue of guns and violence has unfortunately become a deeply partisan one, with a small but vocal minority of Americans on each side who loathe and mistrust each other. Those wishing to reduce gun-related violence through dialogue should plan for a long-term sustained effort with incremental gains.

Consider Using Keypad Polling Technology and Online Dialogue Tools

Keypad polling (using stand alone devices^{vi} or smart phones) has long been used by *AmericaSpeaks* in their 21st Century Town Hall Meeting model of large group dialogue. This technology, now more affordable than ever, allows a facilitator to quickly get a feel for who is in the room and how they break down on issues. Handheld devices transmit each participant’s choices to a computer that tabulates the responses and quickly produces an easy-to-read graph of the aggregated data. Quick polls can transparently

identify group priorities, areas of agreement and disagreement, and common goals and values. “We do polling now so people can see the pulse of the whole room, it really adds value,” says Avis Ridley-Thomas.

This technology can allow facilitators and decision-makers to get a more accurate measure of public sentiment, since participants who hold a view that is in the minority may feel more comfortable anonymously sharing their perspective through this technology than by speaking up in a group setting. Conducting polls before and after a dialogue process is one way to measure how and whether participation in the discussion changed people’s opinions. Keypad polling can also provide valuable tangible data that can help secure ongoing funding.

Creating opportunities for people to participate in real-time or asynchronous online dialogues can broaden and diversify participation when used appropriately in combination with community based in-person events. As with any dialogue, active facilitation is required to keep the online conversation lively and on-track. A useful list of resources and platforms for online dialogue and deliberation is available at <http://ncdd.org/rc/item/category/collaborative-technology>.

Engage Non-Advocates and Influencers

One important pre-requisite to facilitating a productive dialogue about guns and violence is to engage people who do not hold fixed views and affiliations. Thus far, we have mostly experienced political debates on this issue involving gun control advocates and NRA representatives. Involving people with strong views on both sides of the issue is important, but we also need to engage the majority of Americans who do not hold strong views and affiliations on this topic; people willing to consider different viewpoints. This can be a challenge. It takes targeted, personal and perseverant outreach efforts to engage more than the “usual suspects” in any public forum.

Developing effective messaging and delivering it through a wide variety of traditional media and online networks is the best way to reach a broad audience, including the majority of Americans who are neither gun rights nor gun control advocates. Another key is to engage people who can inform and influence others through their networks. If you involve a broad spectrum of people with differing views and include enough influencers, you have a chance at creating an inclusive and impactful dialogue that could enhance our safety and security.

A Resource: Facilitator Training and Development

It can be a challenge to recruit and train enough table facilitators to handle the number of break-out groups needed for a dialogue involving many people. People with training in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFTs) often have very applicable skills and training and can make excellent table facilitators. Avis Ridley-Thomas, Director and Founder of the National Institute for

Nonviolence in Los Angeles, has trained table facilitators in collaboration with the L.A. City Attorney's office and leads a two-hour session designed to train leaders how to facilitate dialogues about gun violence. She says the best facilitators are good listeners, as opposed to talkers. Ridley-Thomas stresses the primary importance of impartiality when training table facilitators. While a good facilitator may have strong feelings about the issue at hand, they must remain neutral in their language and in how they validate the perspectives of all participants. They must be equally curious about the perspectives, personal experiences, fears and values of each person at the table, especially the reticent. Otherwise the process will be viewed as biased and dismissed as a sham by suspicious parties opposing the outcomes.

Beyond neutrality, Avis believes in supporting each facilitator's unique strengths by allowing them the flexibility to do what works best for them. She provides facilitator handbooks and resources from many organizations and does a lot of role-playing with new facilitators. Exposing facilitators to different approaches and styles and encouraging them to use whatever fits with their unique personality and situation is working for Avis may be a more effective approach than promoting a single dialogue process model.

Positive Impacts

It is our hope that using these strategies may help engage a greater number of Americans in more productive discussions about guns and violence so that this issue does not become a permanent dividing line in American society. People who have an opportunity to listen deeply to a variety of perspectives will be less apt to vilify those they disagree with and more able to work together to find better solutions and areas of agreement that could serve as a basis for effective public policy.

The more Americans experience taking part in constructive, civil dialogues that lead to tangible positive outcomes, the more you work against the notion that what happens in public life is decided only by policy makers. Empowered, active and networked citizens can effectively address very difficult societal problems, as evidenced by the environmental and civil rights movements.

Communities, states and nations that learn how to effectively engage residents in dialogue on the issue of guns and violence will be better positioned to take collective action. They will be able to consider and implement policies in more informed, thoughtful, and effective ways that keep residents safer. If we can promote conversations about how to prioritize safety rather than conversations driven by fear, we have a better shot at creating policies that will effectively protect our children. Previous experiences have demonstrated that Americans who were locked in adversarial relationships can collaborate and achieve common goals when they take part in well facilitated, intelligently framed, sustained dialogues.

In the past, we have mostly heard the voices of people who express deeply held views representing the far ends of the spectrum of the gun rights vs. gun control debate. These vocal advocates don't represent where most of us stand on the issue of guns and violence. If we can engage the majority of people who are not on one side or the other of the existing gun debate, make their voices heard and empower them to work with their neighbors to create change and communicate with decision-makers, we have a chance to make real progress towards preventing tragedies and making our country safer.

Contributors

Collecting and sharing best practices for engaging diverse people in civil and constructive dialogue is important to our field and our democracy. Unfortunately, this critical assessment and sharing process is all too often overlooked due to lack of funding and the need to move on to new projects. I am very grateful to **the National Institute for Civil Discourse** for generously funding this project and to my colleagues who contributed their wisdom and perspectives as interview subjects and peer reviewers:

John Backman, author of "Why Can't We Talk: Christian Wisdom on Dialogue as a Habit of the Heart" and National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation Board Member. www.dialogueventure.com

Janet Fitch, Filmmaker and Director of the Guns, Grief and Violence Community Engagement Project. Learn about her films and project at www.changegunviolence.com

Gregg Kaufman, Professor, Georgia College Center for Engaged Learning, American Democracy Project. Gregg teaches first year college students to facilitate National Issues Forums with their peers. His students recently facilitated forums about preventing mass shootings using a National Issues Forums issue advisory guide (see Brad Rourke, below)

Cherry Muse, President of the Public Conversations Project, a Boston-based nonprofit that provides resources and trainings on topics including, "Transforming Divisive Conversations." Public Conversations recently teamed up with the Christian Science Monitor and the Mantle Project to host a civil public dialogue exploring the deep civic divide over guns. Learn more at www.publicconversations.org

Avis Ridley-Thomas, Director and Founder of the Institute for Nonviolence in Los Angeles. Learn more about the Institute at www.invla.org

Phil Stewart, Director of Community Programs, International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. Phil and Hal Saunders have moderated dialogues around the world with combatants still engaged in gun battles. They facilitated dialogues that resulted in the end of a civil war in Tajikistan in 1994. Learn more at www.sustaineddialogue.org

Kaile Schilling, Director of the Violence Prevention Coalition of Los Angeles vpcgla.org

Brad Rourke, Program Officer, The Kettering Foundation. Brad authored the 2013 National Issues Forums issue advisory, *How Can We Stop Mass Shootings in Our Communities?* The Kettering/ NIF approach tries to help people weigh options and face drawbacks of each option. nifi.org/issue_books/detail.aspx?catID=6&itemID=23757

Special thanks to Matt Leighninger and Terry Amsler for useful feedback and insights.

This article is dedicated to the healing of Larry Chin and the Ashkenaz music community in Berkeley California.

ⁱ As of 2009: 310 million guns <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/09/politics/btn-guns-in-america> and 305 million Americans <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/12/31/us-population-2009-305-million-and-counting>

ⁱⁱ National Center for Health Statistics and Centers for Disease Control data, e.g. http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/10LCID_Violence_Related_Injury_Deaths_2010-a.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Dept. of Justice Data

^{iv} <http://pollingmatters.gallup.com/2013/04/senate-defeats-background-check-measure.html>

^v <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/health/suicide-rate-rises-sharply-in-us.html>

^{vi} I recommend Turning Technologies keypad polling equipment. Consider borrowing or renting equipment initially or hiring a consultant with their own in order to determine if it is worth the investment.