

EMBRACING DIVERSE IDEAS IN A POLARIZED WORLD

PREP FOR THE SESSION

Session Objective

Through exploring the value of **diversity** of perspectives and opinions, particularly investigating the competing desires of inclusion and group-preservation, learners will develop new insights that support their ability to appreciate different perspectives within a group and ultimately promote working together more effectively.

At-a-Glance:

When it feels like the world is highly polarized, it can be challenging to lead a group with diverse beliefs and perspectives. This resource will help a group or organization have a structured conversation that answers the question, how might we make space for disparate perspectives during a polarized time? Using a short passage from Pirkei Avot to highlight diverse opinions, learners will then participate in a silent conversation, a chalk talk, to further discussion about the benefits and challenges of including diverse perspectives and opinions as we work together.



Time Estimate:

- 50 minutes



Best Uses:

- Can be led with teens and adults.
- Especially useful for groups of people who are working together to achieve a goal.



Materials & Set-Up:

- Markers
- Post-it notes
- Sharpies
- Tape
- Timer
- 6 sheets of large butcher paper or chart paper for the chalk talk activity. Write one of the chalk-talk prompts on each paper and hang them around the room, with physical space between each sign.

LET'S GET STARTED



FRAME THE ISSUE

10 min



We are living in a highly polarized time; there are political divisions, a growing wealth gap, media echo chambers. Polarization can lead to a growing sense of distrust in institutions, government, and even between individuals. We have each likely seen polarization's negative effects in all of these areas - perhaps even right here, at our own organization. We face the risk that society-wide polarization can divide *our* our organization and keep us from doing the important work that we need to do to meet our goals.

We each bring our own unique perspectives and reasons we have joined this group. Today, we want to explore the tension that can happen when a group holds diverse opinions and wants (or needs) to work together. Diversity has many meanings - there is diversity of age, gender, race, sexuality, wealth, experiences, religion, and more. For the next 50 minutes though, we are focusing on diversity of perspectives and opinions - although as we will likely discover, other types of diversity may show up as well.

Note to facilitator: *If you already have working norms for group conversations, this would be a good time to highlight them. Otherwise, you might want to ask: We are going to be talking about issues that are potentially intense or emotional for some members of our group; what guidelines will help you feel comfortable to share vulnerably? Take some responses and add these if they have not been mentioned: assume good intentions of one another, speak from the I (only speak on behalf of yourself), allow for multiple voices to be heard (step up/step back), and respect the expertise in the room.*

Also, if there are bosses, leaders, and/or adults (facilitating for teens) present, they should decide how they will participate in order to make space for the employees, members, and teens to share - and perhaps articulate their intentions to the group.



There are two post-it notes in front of you.
Write or sketch in response to each prompt.

- On Post-it 1: Describe a time you held a viewpoint that was different from the rest of a group. (examples: my political party was different from that of my family, I went out to dinner and disagreed with my friends about how we should divide-up the bill.)
- On Post-it 2: What is an issue that we are currently struggling with as an organization in terms of honoring multiple viewpoints? What is the range of viewpoints? (examples: Should we sing the Hatikvah at events? Which American politician do we support? Should kosher food be required at an event? Should security guards be armed? What collective action should we take regarding reproductive rights?)
- Turn and share your post-it notes with the person near you. You will have about 2 minutes each.

Note to facilitator: You may want to collect Post-it 2 before the end of the meeting in order to capture the range of issues that people are concerned about. If you plan to do this, announce at the outset.



EXPLORE THE VALUE: DIVERSITY

30 min



Diversity has been defined as, “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements: variety” (source: Merriam Webster Dictionary). We remain focused on diversity of perspectives and opinions, which is sometimes called worldview diversity. Jewish tradition has wisdom to offer around this topic. This text is from the Mishna, which was codified around the year 200 C.E. It is written in Hebrew and is a book of Jewish ethics compiled together.

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as it is said: “From all who taught me, I have gained understanding.” (Psalms 119:9)

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד
מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט)
מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך
שיחה לי.

- What is your reaction to Ben Zoma’s idea that a wise person learns from every person?
- Do you think we should strive to learn from everyone? Why or why not?
- In the context of our work together, what are the benefits and drawbacks of trying to learn from everyone? Think specifically about the organizational challenge you wrote down.

When we take the time to hear everyone’s perspectives, it can help us approach problems in new and creative ways. However, including everyone’s voices might slow things down, or make us lose focus of our collective goals/identity as a group. In addition, sometimes there are perspectives that end up getting more attention than others. For instance, if someone has a formal leadership position or just speaks up frequently and confidently, it may be challenging for others to disagree. And, members of a group might overlook dissenting views in pursuit of harmony and consensus.



ACTIVITY

In a polarized world, it can often feel like people are shouting at one another. Today, we are going to do the opposite. We are going to engage in a silent conversation called, “chalk talk.” One of the benefits of doing this is that there can be equity of voice since everyone will be communicating at the same time, without anyone speaking over one another.

There are six prompts around the room which we are going to silently discuss in writing. Begin by answering one question and then moving to the next. After you have answered all of the questions, circle back and respond anonymously to others’ responses. Your responses can be as simple as, “why?” or “can you share more about that?”

One way we will honor all the voices in the room is to acknowledge that spelling or writing in English may not be everyone’s most comfortable modality. The chalk talk isn’t about correcting spelling or grammar. It is about allowing people to express themselves freely.

Read the chalk talk prompts aloud:

- What helps you share your perspectives with this group? What makes it challenging for you to share?
- What topic or subject have we done a great job of inviting in diverse opinions about?
- What topic or subject could we do a better job of inviting in diverse opinions about?
- What do you notice about what types of opinions are allowed and are not allowed in our group?
- What perspectives do you think are missing from our group that you think would benefit us?
- What new guidelines for working together would you like to propose?

I will let you know the chalk talk ends by saying, the chalk talk is now closed. Does anyone have questions on the directions or the prompts? The chalk talk is now open. I’m going to invite you to stand up and choose a question to begin.

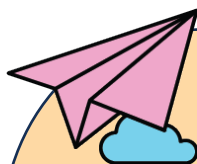


Note to facilitator: You may want to take on the role of “keeping the conversation going” by writing responses and questions that help to keep people writing. After 7 minutes, announce the chalk talk is closed. Take 3 minutes to circulate, making sure you have read all/most of the comments looking specifically for trends or takeaways that emerged.



Facilitator prompts the group:

- What trends did you notice? What disagreements did you notice?
- What was it like to do this activity via chalk talk? How, if at all, might it have been different if we had a full group conversation out loud? Would your personal participation have been different at all? How so?



REFLECT AND PROMPT ACTION

Facilitator prompts the group:

- What do you now personally realize about honoring diverse opinions? (invite everyone to write a response on Post-it 1 and take that post-it with them.)

Note to facilitator: Invite everyone to write a response on Post-it 1 and take that post-it with them.

- Based on our conversations today, what do you think we might consider for our meetings or decision-making processes in the future? (invite everyone to write a response on Post-it 2 and then open up for discussion).

Note to facilitator: Invite everyone to write a response on Post-it 2 and then open up for discussion.

Thank you for being vulnerable and sharing today. All of the diverse perspectives and opinions we have heard today will help us on the way to ensure diverse perspectives are represented as we continue to work together.

