

Public dialogue is a process that allows people, usually in small groups, to share their perspectives and experiences with one another about difficult issues. Dialogue is not about winning an argument or coming to an agreement, but about understanding and learning. Dialogue can dispel stereotypes, build trust and enable people to be open to perspectives that are very different from their own. Dialogue can, and often does, lead to both personal and collaborative action.

In the words of Harold Saunders, who has worked around the world with communities deeply divided by ethnic and racial conflict, “Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others’ concerns into her or his own picture, even when disagreement persists. No participant gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other’s valid human claims that he or she will act differently toward the other.” Public dialogue often lays the groundwork for public deliberation, a closely related process with a different emphasis.