

CIVIC SEASON 2021

How to Host a Socratic Dialogue on the Civic Season

As an early stage of the [Civic Season](#) design research, [Made By Us](#) and [Civics Unplugged](#) held three Socratic Dialogues - a structured format used for group conversations about a fundamental, preferably philosophical question or topic. We examined independence, celebration, and interdependence in the context of July 4th. The themes which surfaced were [captured by a graphic visualizer as an expression of the landscape we're exploring](#) throughout Civic Season, as a starting point and an invitation to include more voices and stories. In that spirit, if you're interested in holding your own Civic Season Socratic Dialogue, we offer the following guidelines.

In every Socratic Dialogue, participants embark on a shared voyage of discovery and, by design, the experience itself becomes an inclusive experience grounded more in the process than the outcomes. The Socratic Dialogue is **not** a debate, a results-oriented conversation nor a discussion; it is not about finding a single answer or winning an argument. It is about reaching a form of consensus through exploration – and, above all, about the shared learning journey itself. So, both the process and the outcomes offer ways to deepen connection and reflection.

The guidelines are simple but critical for the format to work as intended. The pace will feel SLOW, which is the point, but this creates safety and expands inclusion. So, leaving sufficient time for people to contribute means that a group of 15 - 20 probably needs 90 minutes, to include a proper opening, some group agreements, a warm-up, and time to debrief.

The requirements are as follows:

1. **Ask to speak** - The chairperson monitors the procedure and does not become involved in the content. The conversation takes place through the chair; participants raise their hands before saying anything. Strict monitoring produces calm and encourages mutual respect.
2. **Listen to understand** - The chairperson can ask participants to repeat what has been said to make sure that everyone really listens to each other.
3. **Start from your own experience** - Participants should not appeal to authority or say things like "it has been scientifically proven that ..."
4. **The dialogue itself is the goal** - The participants work towards common understanding, and there is no pressure to produce a specific outcome.

Note: This format version comes from [THNK School of Creative Leadership](#).



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The Framing and the Question

Usually, a fundamental, preferably philosophical question is selected around a topic central to the group assembling. The question should be around a simple, singular theme. For the Civic Season research, we explored: **What is independence? What does it mean to celebrate? What is interdependence?** All of these were in the context of considering American Independence Day (July 4th) and expanding our appreciation of history as a means to shape the future. You may want to select a compelling question with immediate relevance to your community.

Preparation

The host should select a chairperson, who will **not** participate in the content of the conversation. They are responsible for setting the tone, running the session, explaining the process, and calling on people. If the conversation happens on Zoom, it's helpful to ask participants to use the "raise hand" function to keep the order clear. When guests are invited, it is also helpful to share the rules and format notes in advance to help set expectations. And, if possible, it's best to request everyone appear on video to aid connection and understanding.

Considerations for Candid Conversations

You can opt to record the session, but we suggest you do not share without explicit permission, as privacy creates more open dialogue. Services like otter.ai offer live closed captions or transcription, which can be used and shared during the session to aid communication. It's useful to remind the group that speaking from first-person experience is requested.

Concrete Examples

The conversation begins with the fundamental question. Participants, voluntarily and one at a time, share a personal example to illustrate what informs their perspective on the chosen topic. This should not be a hypothetical example or citation or appeal to authority; the participants must have experienced it themselves. The other participants may pose clarification questions but not debate the experience shared. The focus is on 'who, what, where, when, and how' questions. The chairperson can ask every third or fourth participant to repeat some of what they've heard from previous speakers to check for understanding and to keep the threads weaving together. As an example, in our session on "What is independence?" a participant shared that for her mother, a naturalized immigrant, it meant the freedom to make her own career decisions for the first time; the next speaker summarized this comment before adding their own experience. To conclude, the chairperson or one of the participants summarizes the key themes surfaced.

Post-Event Follow Up

We invite you to share the outcomes that emerged with us so that we can gather more input from more communities on the Civic Season themes. If you transcribe your conversation, there are many [free online word cloud generators](#) that create an image of the top words used. Feel free to share the word cloud and tag #CivicSeason or send questions to civicseason@gmail.com.

