RACE: Let’s Talk About It Toolkit

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Race: Let’s Talk About It

The producers of WHRO’s award winning NPR radio program Another View launched a successful campaign to discuss race and racial issues in 2015. We titled our initiative “Race: Let’s Talk About It.” Our goal was to create a safe space for civil and thoughtful discussions about race and its impact on our society from a historical, academic and sociological perspective.

Over six months, we hosted four town halls, each one preceded by discussions initiated on Another View. With each town hall conversation, our audience grew in number and determination, utilizing the forums as a safe place to learn from and about each other, all the while chipping away at the wedge that divides us racially. In this toolkit we share the lessons we have learned to help you develop your own events to discuss race.

What is the purpose of the Race: Let’s Talk About It Toolkit?

Facilitating conversations about race can be tough. How these conversations are conducted can result in a greater understanding or a difficult stalemate. This toolkit is a collection of the tools and materials we used to conduct four very successful town halls centered on race. We have found that talking about race is a pivotal point on the road to racial equality. Whether you’re hosting a small group or a convention hall full of stakeholders, we believe this toolkit will aid in helping launch productive conversations about race.

When should you use the toolkit?

Anytime there is a need to cross the racial divide, be it a single issue or a more complex conversation about policy, the strategies and guidelines we’ve included will aid in developing your particular forum. Regardless of the size of your audience, this toolkit can be used to move the conversation forward. This toolkit is designed to provide you with strategies ranging from effective ways to start the conversation to great techniques for reaching out to participants once the event is over.
Follow these steps to plan your event. In the Resources section of the toolkit, you will find checklists and a template to help keep you organized as you plan.

Choose a Topic

When we first began the planning process, the nation was keeping a watchful eye on South Carolina. The country was still in shock over the shooting deaths of nine people by a gunman in a historic black church. At the same time, the discussion surrounding the confederate flag was heating up. Not even a month later, the flag was coming down for good. As we listened, we heard people inquire time and time again, “Is taking down the flag really going to make a difference?” “Will policies also change?” “Will people treat each other differently as a result?” We felt these were valid questions that should be answered, so we focused our first town hall on just that. We titled it: “The Flag is Down, Now What?”

Deciding what issue or issues need to be addressed in your town, community, region or state is a great place to start.

Recruit Partners and Invite Panelists

Once you determine what area(s) will be addressed, determining who will lead and/or facilitate your discussions is critical. We wanted our discussions to encompass many aspects of race and racial issues—not just between African Americans and Whites, but also to explore challenges faced by other races and ethnicities. We created partnerships with a local college, where we held our first town hall, as well as a local national monument, which allowed us to host two town halls in its theater.

We then put together a group of experts that would be with us at each town hall to help guide the discussion beyond pure emotion and toward understanding. As an example of the types of experts you may want to invite, our panelists included: Michelle Wood-Jones, Former Executive Director of the Hampton Unity Commission, Jonathan Zur, Executive Director of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, Eric Claville, Professor of History and Law at Hampton University and Dr. Mavel Velasco, Batten Professor of Spanish in the Department of Foreign Language and Literatures with Virginia Wesleyan College. Our experts were not used to control or dominate the conversation, but to offer strategies and techniques to move the conversation forward if it stalled. Having our host throw out an initial a question to our panel also proved to be a wonderful icebreaker for getting the conversation going.
You will need a team to help with the organization, promotion, marketing and production of your event. Which organizations/groups will you invite initially? Make sure they spread the word!

Create a timeline and checklist to ensure you’ve locked down partners, experts/facilitators, secured venues, and allowed enough time to promote your event. In the Resources section of the toolkit, we have checklists to help you with this.

Our team used Eventbrite.com to create a page where people could register. We created promotional spots for radio and added the town hall registration link to our Another View website home page. This allowed us to track the numbers of registrants and determine when our venue had reached capacity, if an additional media push was necessary, or if we needed to find a larger facility.
DURING THE EVENT
Engage Your Audience

Because our WHRV-FM radio show Another View, discusses today’s issues from an African American perspective, it served as a great catalyst to begin the conversation on the air. We encouraged listeners to help us continue the conversation by attending the town hall.

We began each of our town halls with a short 5-7 minute video presentation. For our first town hall, “The Flag is Down, Now What?” we chose to create a montage of recognizable clips from recent events but also incorporated the flag being taken down from the state capitol grounds. For our second town hall, which looked at “white privilege,” we utilized videos like “Traffic Stop” which was produced by NPR’s Codeswitch team. This video tells the story of Alex Landau, a black male who was raised by adoptive white parents who taught him that skin color didn’t matter. The video shows how his perspective changed after he was stopped by police in 2009.

The possibilities of how to engage your audience are endless. Some organizations choose to start their conversations with readings, like excerpts from plays that look at race like: James Baldwin’s “Blues for Mr. Charlie.” Some begin with a historic review, for example utilizing a geography professor to analyze the history of a community’s red-line districts and whether or not the districts have changed over the years. Another possibility is using poetry or spoken word that centers on race or racism to begin the conversation.

We found it helpful to have volunteers sign people in and collect contact information. This allowed us to keep them informed of upcoming events and connect with them later if something they shared was something we might want to record at a later date. We chose not to videotape our town halls in an effort to allow for a more relaxed setting and more candid conversation. We also chose to limit the time of the conversation to an hour and half. This enabled us to block off a certain amount of time to discuss possible solutions.

We’re All in This Together

The bottom line is we’re all in this together. If one person is discriminated against or disenfranchised, then it’s not just that person’s problem, it’s society’s problem. The first step to bringing about real change is understanding. Once we look at how racial inequities happened and get a clearer understanding of how that impacts lives, we are in a better position to really make a difference. Race: Let’s Talk About It!
Checklist: Organize a Town Hall

- 4 weeks out: Choose your topic, partners, panelists, facilitator and venue.

- 3 weeks out: Begin promoting event on radio, television, newspaper and emails. Set up website and open registration.

- 2 weeks out: Begin checking registration numbers daily. This is critical in determining if you need to close registration early, boost promotion or choose a different venue. Prepare video presentation or secure the format you’ll use to open the discussion. Make sure it’s something people can relate to so the message will engage the audience. If you plan to stream your event, perform a test to ensure your venue has the connectivity you’ll need.

- 1 week out: Send a confirmation email to panelists. Prepare questions for panelists or conversation starters.

- Day of: Conduct a broadcast run-through if televised. If not, conduct video and microphone tests. Once you welcome your guests, remind them that this will be a civil discussion where we will remain respectful.

- Day after: Thank and follow up with invited guests. Thank panelists and facilitator. Sending out electronic evaluations is an excellent way to solicit feedback from all involved.

Checklist: Organize a Small Group Discussion

- 4 weeks out: Choose your topic and facilitator. Determine how many people you want to reach and the location where you will host your conversation as well as the day and time it will take place. Decide if you’ll record the conversation, and let you guests know your decision. This may impact whether or not they’ll attend and if they’ll be active participants.

- 3 weeks out: Send out invitations to guests (see template letter), and request an RSVP.

- 2 weeks out: Determine how you’ll begin the conversation. Will you tell a story, watch a short video, play a game or prepare a short history lesson? Regardless of the method, make sure it’s something people can relate to emotionally so the message will engage the audience.
• **1 week out:** Follow up with guests who were invited but did not respond. Prepare conversation starter questions and evaluation forms.

• **Day of:** Prepare your location so that seating is conducive to a conversation that involves all. When you welcome your guests remind them that this will be a civil discussion where we will remain respectful of one another. Be sure to pass out evaluations at the end of your discussion, or gather contact information so you can send electronic evaluations later.

• **Day after:** Thank and follow up with attendees for feedback and input. Send electronic evaluations if you did not collect paper forms the day of the event.

**Tips for One-On-One Conversations**

• Talking about race and racial issues can be difficult. The easiest way to begin the conversation is when a topic with racial undertones or overtones is already on the table.

• The goal is to not be defensive. Allow the person you’re conversing with to finish his or her thought. Then, share why you feel differently. You’ll be surprised how deep a conversation can go “if” you can keep your emotions in check.

• When friends or family members use racial slurs, share racist jokes or share unfounded stereotypes, use this as an opportunity to share how these comments perpetuate stereotypes, promote bias and racial inequality.

• If you see someone being discriminated against holding your tongue won’t change anything. If you’re too uncomfortable to speak out then and there, don’t let it slide. Make it a point to fire off an email to someone who can correct the problem detailing the day, time and circumstances. If you don’t get a response, follow up with another email or a phone call, but don’t let it go. If discriminatory practices aren’t ever challenged, they’ll remain in place.

• We’ve been socialized to not talk about race, but the bottom line is if we don’t, we can’t expect circumstances to change.
Adapt this template to invite individuals to your small group discussions or to solicit partnerships for larger events like town halls.

<<Your Name or Letterhead>>                                                                                   <<Address>>
<<Phone>>
<<Date>>
<<Person/Organization Name>>                                                                                  <<Address>>

Dear <<Person’s Name>>

We are reaching out to you in hopes that you will (join us/partner with us) in an important initiative that we’re calling <<Insert name you’ve selected for your forum>>.
We believe that the first step to transforming racial inequity and exclusion is to begin a conversation that not only creates a better understanding but develops a plan for solutions.
Our goal is to hold our first (community conversation/planning session) on <<Date>> at <<Name and address of location>> at <<Time>>.
We hope that you will (join us/partner with us) in helping (guide/plan) this very important and much needed discussion.
If you have additional questions, please call or email (me/us) at << insert contact information>>.

Sincerely,
<<Your Name and Name of Organization>>
Race: Let’s Talk About It

Sample Videos
We used these videos to begin each of our town hall conversations.

The Flag is Down, Now What? (Town Hall #1)
A montage of events including the shooting of nine black parishioners by a white gunman at a South Carolina church and all of the events surrounding that including the removal of the confederate flag from capitol grounds.

Click to view video ➤ http://tinyurl.com/h3kv8ee

Power Privilege and Difference or “White Privilege” (#2)
We used a story produced by NPR’s codeswitch team titled “Traffic Stop.” This video tells the story of Alex Landau, a black male, who was raised by adoptive white parents. Alex was raised to believe that skin color didn’t matter. This animated video shows what he endured and how his perspective changed after being stopped by police in 2009.

Click to view video ➤ http://tinyurl.com/o8a6wxh

Race and Politics (#3)
We launched the conversation with a video we created in house, which we titled: “We the People? The Important Role of Race in Politics.” We used the preamble to the Constitution and inserted statements from political candidates, many in direct contradiction to that famous first few words of the Constitution.

Click to view video ➤ http://tinyurl.com/jgezzca

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