

Kitchen Table Conversation: Tough Conversations

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The human dignity groups of the Rural Organizing Project are often referred to as providing a “moral compass” for their community. Big issues in small towns can often distort the community – fear-mongers with their own personal, political, or religious agendas get on soapboxes about issues from immigration to LGBT rights to economic issues, whipping up excitement and bringing out the worst in our neighbors. Other times, rural communities seem stuck between a “rock and a hard place” and feel that we have no choice but to give way to big businesses that seek to take advantage of our environmental resources or infrastructure, but give little in return.

At times, ROP groups have used a model called a Kitchen Table Conversation (KTC) to provide that moral leadership on critical issues threatening to divide our community (or worse- send our community running towards destructive false solutions).

What does a Kitchen Table Conversation look like?

A KTC has several pieces:

1. Frames an important topic in the context of our values: human dignity, democracy, racial justice, etc
2. Includes key community leaders (electeds, business leaders, others of relevance to the topic)
3. Goes beyond “the choir” and includes a real cross-section of the community
4. Has both presentations by relevant leaders but also time for small-group discussion, digesting, and responding – elevating voices that have not been heard

Why hold a Kitchen Table Conversation?

The power of a Kitchen Table Conversation is that it creates a way for human dignity activists to have a community-level conversation about contentious issues, but on our turf, with our framing.

The outcomes of a KTC can be:

- 1) We build accountability of elected and other leaders to us and our values
- 2) We frame the discussion, which elevates our messages on a topic
- 3) We grow our organizations, meet new people, and grow our credibility

What kinds of issues might be good to address with a Kitchen Table Conversation?

In general, issues that are being widely discussed in the community, but around which there is little consensus or space for back-and forth dialogue are good ones to tackle. Divisive issues that the community is wrestling with, or issues that could benefit from being brought back to basic core human dignity values.

Two successful Kitchen Table Conversations were held in Scappoose hosted by Columbia County Citizens for Human Dignity in 2010 and 2011. One was a candidate forum for the contentious District 1 Congressional candidates. The other was about the proposed coal transport projects planned for the county. Both forums brought 100+ attendees and buoyed the energy of the group, our visibility in the community, and our power. Both were opportunities to discuss issues of broad interest, but within the framing of human dignity and democracy.

Standard Agenda Basics

Opener: It is important to have a prepared opener and compelling speaker to kick things off. This sets the tone for the evening, and defines terms. The opener should not be about arguing a point or defending a perspective on the issues, but about creating a general “container” for the conversation that lends itself towards decency and respect. We have found that calling on our better selves and shared values of human dignity and democracy (and taking time to define these terms!), make it hard for the conversation to later become mean-spirited. The opener should also present the facts on the issue, to get everybody on the same page. In this way, the opener creates a foundation for the conversation that is “neutral” (can’t be argued against) but that is rooted in our values.

Oh, and don’t forget to introduce the group that is hosting! Take a minute to proselytize; we will hopefully get some new members out of this event!

Overview: Potentially as part of the opener, or separate, somebody should describe the agenda. Also, explain what opportunities for general participation are, and why we have chosen to elevate some voices over others. There should be a rationale for the agenda that goes back to values.

Presentation: Here is what is usually considered the “meat” of an event. This section can be designed as a regular forum, or panel discussion, with speakers presenting on the topic from different perspectives/expertise. We found that in our forums, sprinkling traditional “experts” or “leaders” in with community leaders and people directly impacted by issues elevated non-traditional, but critical, voices, and helped our event walk the talk. It sends the message that we are not here to be talked at, but rather to participate in creating our own solutions and future.

Table discussion: Each table should have a facilitator that helps participants have useful conversation, take turns, and avoid fighting. There might be a goal to table discussion, i.e. coming up with questions for the panelists/speakers, or it might be just open conversation. This is what gives us a chance to meet new people, hear new points of view, and connect. Remember, what is the building block of community organizing? Relationships!

Q & A or full-group discussion: This is another opportunity for leaders/speakers to respond to the concerns and questions of the community. We may also wish to ask leaders to take a stand on an issue, or may wish to get information. It’s important to have a clear process for full audience participation so that people feel that things are fair. Different ways to do this are asking each table to choose one question, collecting written questions and picking them out of a hat, or setting up a microphone and having people line up. It is important in this section to have time limits.

Closure: The closing should reiterate the purpose for the evening, thank people for attending, and discuss any next steps that people are invited to be a part of.

A Kitchen Table Conversation is a structure for having a community dialogue, particularly about highly contentious issues where community tensions are high and civil dialogue has been scarce. Human Dignity Groups are often in a unique position of being values-based groups that don't have "skin in the game" in the same way that local businesses, politicians, or single-issue groups do. This gives us the advantage of being able to frame a dialogue that happens on "safe" territory, but also lets us control the overall frame, tone, invitation list, and facilitation of the event.