

Living Room Conversations: Building Analysis, Building Power

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The Rural Organizing Project promotes a community building culture where food, children and our friendship circles are all a part of our social justice efforts. Relationships of trust are a priority especially at a time of wedge politics, where topics that people are less familiar and thus comfortable with are used to divide. A core part of our work is talking about the most polarized issues of the day: who should be allowed to get married, is it possible to be an illegal person, why control over your body is critical. By raising these topics, we defuse their power and allow us to reduce them in size and to focus on more community critical issues of the day like the rise of global war and corporate control.

Establishing a culture of trust, though, is not that easy. Where we talk can matter. ROP recognizes that and has developed a culture around living room conversations – that phrase is used even when the gathering may in fact happen beyond a living room. What a Living Room Conversation symbolizes is important. It communicates:

- that we gather in a place of relative security and comfort
- that while our topic might be of great importance, it is scaled for a living room
- that all who gather come in friendship even if we share a range of views
- that, in fact, there is no better place to identify our differences than in a living room
- that we are here to share ideas not to be talked to.

ROP relies on LRC to build a shared understanding of an issue or a strategy, especially in the early stages.

Typically, we seek a host that offers a central location. While we want a space that can accommodate 10-20 people we do not want to pick the showiest home. It is fine if people are cozy and some need to sit on the floor – in fact, that creates a certain excitement. The role of the host might be limited to preparing the space including some snacks. Other hosts also handle greeting arrivals and parts of the agenda.

It's the organizers who should decide who is best positioned to create and complete an invite list – the skills required here are diligence and warmth. There are no shortcuts in inviting people – they have to be given the basics at least once, asked for a solid commitment regarding their availability and then reminded. The more comfortable the inviter is, the better results. A mix of email, mail and phone is ideal – all email or all mail outreach is the least effective.

The pitch – most people are too busy and do not need another obligation. Most people, though, are also feeling isolated and a slightly desperate in this wild political moment – they do want to engage in meaningful discussion. Therefore, we do want to invite people to help us problem solve a tough topic of the moment (immigration) but we don't want them to feel like showing up commits them to more than just the LRC. Because in fact, just being there does matter.

The purpose of most LRCs is to give people a chance to process a more evolved look at an issue and to allow the host organization to better identify ways to be effective in communicating and developing leaders on the topic.

This means that the agenda of the LRC is designed to first present information in an engaging and compressed manner (under 15 minutes) and then a skilled facilitator works the room to get folks to comment on the issue from a very personal, local frame. The format combines popular education with political education – yielding participants who feel great ownership of new information.

Standard Agenda Basics

Opener: should allow people to really share but in limited time. (What motivated you to attend this discussion? And when folks joke around w/comments like “I’m here cos Pam made me.”, it is good to challenge with a gentle “I bet there is a reason you listened to Pam – what do you think that was?”)

Overview: Presenter **welcome folks**, says **why we are here** - eg there is a tough topic being used to divide communities right now. We thought it was critical that we give ourselves space to talk about it before we find ourselves unprepared in public. Plus, the folks in the room have been invited because you have some special gifts in building community. We are hoping that you will each help us feel more effective at puzzling out best ways to handle this topic. **Agenda Format Shared:** a. Brief but global overview of topic in under 15 minutes, b. Discussion of people’s take on the topic and how it is playing out locally – this is the majority of them time! And c. Wrapping up both what was said but also where the LRC process/info is going next (10 minutes.)

15 Minute Overview – anchors the wedge topic (immigration, reproductive choice, queer rights) in a less emotional frame of how they are marketing the issue (immigrants are stealing our jobs) to a frame that we are more comfortable with (history of populating this country, cycles of immigration backlash, who benefits, how do human rights and inclusive democracy impact this topic.)

Discussion of Overview and local experience with issue: Facilitator aims to not only get everyone involved but also to move discussion from being factual and in our heads to observable at the local level and rooted in our hearts/experiences. Having thought through questions in advance helps.

Closure: Goal here is to get participants in to thinking about their own next steps as individuals, community members and supporters of the host organization. There should be some clear but reasonable asks here.