LET'S TALK IT OVER

A brief manual for discussion groups

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The purpose of this manual is to emphasize methods of discussion which will make the best possible use of facts and opinions in the solution of problems. The help of a specialist is frequently necessary in choosing and presenting the particular facts that have the most bearing on the problem to be discussed.

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Let's Talk It Over

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"TALKING IT OVER" is the natural, democratic way of deciding issues and solving problems—it is an essential part of living in a democracy. Well-conducted group discussions give everyone a chance to state whatever pertinent facts he knows, express his opinions, and offer his solutions. If an agreement is reached after thorough discussion—that is, after every member has been stimulated to think about the problem and express his thought—that action becomes the action of the whole group and is therefore real democratic action.

"Talking it over" goes on in every rural community—across the line fence, at neighborhood gatherings, at the crossroads store, in community meetings and night-school classes, in the meetings of boards of directors, and around the dining-room table. In these discussions people find solutions to many of their individual problems.

There are other problems, however, that can be solved best only by group action. The feasibility of trading work and machinery, the advantages of buying and selling cooperatively, ways of conserving soil, methods of storing or processing food, new developments for protecting health, for providing modern education, for improving religious life—all are group problems. The best solutions are worked out when all the people concerned meet and talk things over together.
Purposes of Discussion

To increase our knowledge. Talking it over helps us to clarify our problems and find solutions to them. Often only by discussion can we see how a particular fact will help us find the solution to a problem which confronts us. When we see how that fact affects our welfare or when we use it in solving our problem, it becomes part of our body of knowledge.

To create better understanding. When we talk with another face to face instead of depending on hearsay for our understanding of his point of view, we usually understand his position better. In fact, we may find our own opinions are much like his. Thus, misunderstanding, wrong information, half-truths—all causes of individual and group conflicts—often are overcome by discussion.

To solve problems. Often a group can solve a problem better by talking it over than any individual member could solve it by thinking and acting alone. Some problems can't be solved at all by individual thought and action. For example, we want to stamp out contagious disease. We can do it only if everyone cooperates to prevent its spread. We want to have a better school; we can make a start toward improving it by getting together and discussing what we want and how to get it.

Individual problems, too, are sometimes more easily solved by discussion. For example, your problems may be like your neighbor's. By exchanging ideas and methods you may each find solutions to your particular problems.

Discussion in Small Groups

Wherever people come together, there will be some kind of discussion. Sometimes it will concern a problem for which solutions will be developed, but usually such informal discussion leads only to an exchange of ideas. Even so, it is important as it has a place in forming public opinion.

A much better way to clarify specific problems and get action on them is to have a meeting of a small interested group—perhaps 15 people, not more than 40. In a small and informal group everyone is more at ease and therefore more likely to take part. If action is necessary, a small group can usually agree more quickly on the course to take than can a large group.
Making plans. 1. Make clear to those who are invited what the problem is that is to be discussed.
2. Ask each person to be ready to express his ideas.
3. Choose a time to meet which is most convenient for those invited.
4. Find a meeting place where all can be seated in a circle or at a table.
5. Select a leader who has the confidence of the group.

In small group meetings the members are usually more comfortable and more willing to talk if all, including the leader, are seated around a table or in an open circle.

Preparing to lead. If you are chosen to lead the discussion, you will have a much more satisfactory meeting if you make the following preparations for it:
1. Think thru the problem, the possible questions which may be raised, and the solutions which may be proposed.
2. Find out who are coming to the meeting—neighbors or people from the community generally or from various parts of the county—and something about their background and opinions. You will then be in position to develop a full discussion and give all sides a chance to be heard.
3. Find out who has facts which will help clear up questions or solve problems. Arrange to have those facts presented.
4. Check on room arrangements to see that everyone will be seated comfortably, that no one will have to face a strong light, that the room will be comfortably heated and ventilated, and that no one will remain out of the circle.
5. Remember that it is your job to get others to talk. As a leader you should always make a special effort to remain impartial. Even tho you may believe you know the solution, do not insist on stating your opinion. Be ready to raise questions and propose solutions but put your solutions in the form of questions, letting the people decide whether your solutions are good.
Leading the discussion. In leading a small group in the discussion of a problem, there are four things to keep in mind:

1. A person will feel challenged to find a solution only if the problem is clear to him and if it appeals to him as worth doing something about.

2. See that each person in the group has a chance to express his views and say how he thinks the problem can be solved.

3. The group should be asked to examine each proposal in the light of all the facts presented. If not enough facts are at hand, postpone the discussion until they can be obtained.

4. Each member of the group may choose a different solution, being convinced that his choice will work for him; or a group solution may be arrived at by common consent or by vote or resolution.

Discussion in Larger Groups

Discussion can be specifically planned, too, for larger groups—that is, for more than forty people. Groups already organized can become discussion groups. For example, members of farmers' clubs, youth organizations, and community clubs, or of school, church, and library groups can decide to meet for discussion of special topics. Such meetings should be arranged ahead of time and probably should not last more than an hour.

To get discussion started in any kind of large group requires "priming." There are several ways to do this, and each requires preparation. The following suggestions will help a leader who has the job of conducting large-group discussions.

Panel discussion. This is discussion by a small group staged before a larger group. To put on a discussion meeting of this kind select five or six people to serve on the panel and have them come together for a preliminary meeting. At the preliminary meeting ask each to state but not discuss at least one point he plans to make in the panel discussion, to be ready to raise questions about points made by other panel members, and to speak out at the meeting so that everyone in the audience can hear. Be sure to caution panel speakers to wait until the regular performance of the panel before they discuss the points stated—otherwise the spontaneous quality on which the success of a panel meeting depends is likely to be lost and you may have a dead panel.
At the regular meeting of the panel, seat the members so that the chairman is nearest the audience and the others are facing the audience. The panel then proceeds as if it were a small-group discussion. Invite the audience to join in whenever they wish to do so. Give them opportunities to break in, but if anyone attempts to make a long speech, interrupt him by asking him a question on some point already made, or refer to someone else any question raised by his point.

Finally summarize the discussion and point it up. Summarizing in the course of the discussion is a smooth way to leave a point which has been sufficiently discussed. A summary at the close of the meeting helps the members to keep in mind the points that have been made.

**Forum.** This type of discussion is usually started by having one or two good speakers give their views of the problem and its solutions. The rules of the forum should be stated before the speakers are introduced. Tell the speakers what their time limit is. Urge members of the audience to be ready to ask questions or give their opinions but request them, too, to keep within an allotted time—usually one to two minutes each.

A good way to get audience response is to give members slips of paper as they come in and ask them to write out any questions which occur to them during the speeches.

Introduce speakers briefly. Remember that a good introduction helps to establish easy and friendly relations between the speaker and the audience.

After the speakers have finished, either have members read their questions or have the questions collected for reading. If you decide to have the questions collected, invite oral questions and comments while this is being done. Be ready to ask some questions of your own at this
time or later in case they are needed. Encourage members to speak loud enough for all to hear, but repeat questions when there is any doubt of their being heard. Summarize or point up the discussion early enough to close the meeting on time even if you have to omit some of the questions.

**Symposium.** When well conducted, a symposium brings out free and lively interchange of opinion. Several people make short challenging statements on the topic or problem selected for discussion. The leader may call for discussion after each statement or may have all statements made before having any of them discussed.

The committee or the leader should decide beforehand how much time to allow for speeches and how much for discussion and should have an understanding with the speakers as to the number of minutes each is to speak. Each speaker should be signaled two or three minutes before his time is up (the timekeepers can do this by rising and standing until the speaker stops).

If it is necessary to stimulate discussion, hand out slips of paper and ask for questions as for the forum type of discussion. Be prepared to ask questions yourself. Limit the time of those who take part.

**Discussion guides.** In any of these types of discussion, it is helpful to have people especially prepared to guide the discussion. At the leader's invitation these people come prepared to keep the meeting lively. They help to get discussion started and to keep it going. They raise questions, present different points of view, offer possible solutions, or state facts bearing on the solutions proposed. They talk when necessary to get others to take part, but they are careful not to monopolize the discussion. They may sit anywhere in the group and they need not be introduced, but it is best to let the audience know that such leaders are present.

### Choosing the Right Questions

**Topics of real concern.** Questions in which your group are already interested and to which they are already seeking answers will make good discussion topics. Educational methods other than discussion can often be used more effectively and profitably for giving out new facts or information, for developing skills, or for spreading knowledge of new practices or activities, but people need to discuss their real problems.
The members of the group—not the chairman—should decide on the topic to be discussed. But before a definite choice is made, the group should ask themselves these questions about the proposed topic: Does it refer to a problem which we, as individuals or as a group, need to solve? Does it represent an issue which we need to understand better? Is it a topic on which we already have some information or opinions? Is it one that will interest all members of the group?

**Controversial topics.** Topics which arouse strong feelings and differences of opinion need not be avoided. Open discussion of such questions in group and community meetings often prevents misunderstanding and unfriendliness. Altho meetings of this kind require skilful handling, any leader of average good humor, understanding, and self control can train himself to conduct smooth discussions of even the most heated topics.

1. Get all sides represented at the meeting—there are more than two sides to almost every question.
2. Create a friendly atmosphere from the start. A visiting or social period to develop good fellowship before opening the discussion makes a good beginning.
3. Make sure that all points of view are considered from several angles.
4. Give individuals with strong feelings a chance to “blow off.” They can often think better after having spoken out and are then more willing to consider other points of view.
5. If arguments get warm, call a recess or shift the argument in a friendly way to an unbiased person.
6. Do not let yourself show surprise or agitation. Remember that a well-timed joke or quip to create wholesome laughter will often ease tension.

When the discussion dies down or gets too heated, calmly summarize what has been said, and then continue the discussion, or if everything has been said, close it with a final summary.

**Leading a Discussion**

**Be prepared.** Announce the rules of the discussion at the opening of the meeting. In order to shut off the too ready talker, limit each speaker’s time to a certain number of minutes. To draw out reticent members, have some questions that can be answered in few words—
perhaps simply by yes and no. Ask a few members to report on something they have read bearing on the topic.

Get the discussion started. As chairman, you are responsible for the success of the meeting. It’s up to you to get the members of the group to do some real thinking about the problem and to talk about it. It makes a lot of difference how a topic is stated. Put it to the group in such a way that it will challenge every person to propose a solution, express an opinion, or relate a fact or an experience that has some bearing on the problem.

To start others thinking about any topic requires some thinking on your part. Ask yourself: What does this problem mean to this group? Why should they be concerned? In what ways is it their problem? How would I solve it? Give the group some of your answers—but give them in question form.

Allow the members time to think. Don’t be afraid of periods of silence. You won’t mind silence if you, too, are thinking about the problem. But if too much time passes before anyone volunteers, direct a question to anyone you believe ready to venture an answer or opinion. Encourage him, if necessary, and make it easy for him to speak, but keep attention on the problem—don’t let it focus on your effort to get him to talk.

Help the group to understand all that is said. First, ask yourself how each one’s answer relates to the problem. Then unless you are sure that everyone understands, ask a question which will help to clarify what has been said, or ask others what the suggested solutions mean to them, or ask the group to give additional solutions.

Keep it going. Encourage the easy flow of discussion from one member to another. When several responses or proposals have been given, ask the group to think over each one to see how it will help to solve the problem. Ask for reasons. Get members to say why they think a particular proposal will work or will not work—on what basis of fact or experience they think it is or is not the solution.

Always keep the discussion from becoming a two-member conversation or argument. Break up such discussion by asking for the opinion of a third person.

Point it up. When it seems that several people have agreed on some point made or some proposal, point this out. Ask the group whether they agree. If they do, go on to the next problem and work in the same way toward an understanding of it and toward agreement if agreement is necessary.
Be courteous and tactful. Encourage the timid ones to speak by keeping the attention of the audience on the problem and not on the speakers. Make every member feel that it is important for him to express an opinion. Give people credit for expressing good opinions, but don’t praise them insincerely. If necessary, be firm in holding down those who are too aggressive. Try to divert the person whose mind is fixed on a certain experience by asking what other members of the group think is a typical or average case. Encourage members to take a long-time view of the problem. Ask questions which will lead the person with a cure-all to examine its usefulness in concrete cases. Keep the discussion on the topic.

Give chance for action. Bring all discussions to a close by summarizing the conclusions or agreements reached and asking the audience to verify them. Then if it seems possible and desirable to take action, ask the group whether they wish to do so. Action by vote, by general agreement or resolution, by the appointment of committees for making plans, or by requests for additional meetings for discussions are all possibilities. It is important to carry out whatever action is decided upon. Individuals or committees may be given this responsibility.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Teachers, pastors, librarians, farm and home advisers, and extension and research workers from your College of Agriculture can suggest books, bulletins, articles, visual materials, and radio programs. See or write them.