CONVERSATION LEADER'S POCKET GUIDE

Start the Conversation

Help people get to know a place they share. Give them time to look closely at local maps, photographs, stories, and accounts—then make room for what they notice and what they hear from one another.

This guide works alongside any community source set organized around five durable questions.

Look closely. Listen well. Stay curious.

BEFORE PEOPLE ARRIVE

Prepare the room, not the answers.

Read the community source set straight through so you know its sequence and where people may need time. Arrange the room so everyone can see the sources and one another. Use a shared display, printed materials, or both.

Make access visible

Check what people need to see, hear, read, or respond. Offer descriptions, large print, written prompts, and language support when useful.

Keep participation open

People may speak, write, point, think quietly, or pass. Make room for different ways of taking part without putting anyone on the spot.

Know the sources

Be ready to identify what each source can support, what it cannot, and whose firsthand account could deepen the group's understanding.

Let people choose whether and how to take notes.

Offer a shared online space, chart paper, a whiteboard, ordinary paper, or a device when those options fit the room. People may also keep a private note, take a photo of their work, or take no notes at all. Label shared group notes clearly so everyone knows what others can see and what remains private.

DURING THE CONVERSATION

Let the sources do the work.

Your role is not to fill the room with information. It is to create the conditions in which participants can inquire, connect, and decide what they may want to do next.

THE IDEA

If you are doing most of the talking, participants are not getting enough time to do the learning.

WHAT TO DO

Aim to speak for about one-quarter of the session.

Reaching 25% takes discipline. This guide is built to make it possible: let

That can feel backwards—many leaders expect to carry nearly the whole session. But people need time to examine, interpret, question, explain, compare, and connect the sources to their own lives.

people look, read, or listen before anyone explains; use pairs or tables; wait through silence; and offer a light cue only when people need a way in. Move among groups, listen for connections, and carry an idea across the room when it may help others.

Start the room

Invite a brief introduction: a name and a connection to the place—or a reason for coming—is plenty. People can pass.

> "Knowing who's here, what we can draw on, and what gets in people's way helps us look out for one another. Today we'll look at this community together and see what each of us notices."

Agree on how to talk together

Listen to understand. Ask before assuming, and welcome a change of mind. Speak from your own experience. When you make a claim about a source, point to a detail. Question ideas with care for the people offering them. Give silence time to work.

Open the sources

> “What do you notice?”

> “What detail led you there?”

> “What surprised you or changed your thinking?”

With a larger group, begin in pairs or at tables and bring back two or three different observations. Ask someone before inviting them to share an observation with the whole room.

Take it deeper

Revisit one source or question people want to explore. Invite them to compare observations, return to a detail they missed, or name whose account would help them understand.

> “You saw different things in the same source. What caught each of your eyes?”

If the conversation gets difficult

Slow down. Ask what someone means or what in the source shapes their view. Make room for disagreement. If someone is attacked, shut out, or treated disrespectfully, pause and restate how the group agreed to talk.

> “Let’s pause. What in the source is shaping that view?”

If one person is doing all the talking

> “I’d like to make room for a few other voices. Would anyone who hasn’t spoken like to add something?”

Wait. If it helps, give everyone time to jot a thought or talk in pairs before coming back together. Keep sharing voluntary.

A REUSABLE PATHWAY

Five questions for any community

Choose local sources with people who know the place. Each question opens a different window; together they help a group move from noticing toward possibility.

Begin with place

Where are we?

Notice people and belonging

Who are we?

Trace memory and inheritance

What do we carry?

See interdependence

What do we need from one another?

Move toward shared agency

What becomes possible when we see one another?

Build a local source set

For each question, invite residents to help choose a small number of maps, images, oral histories, public records, or firsthand accounts. Keep the set focused enough for people to look closely. Record permissions, scope, context, and required credits before public use.

CLOSE WITH A PAUSE

Stamp the learning.

A brief recap helps people put the experience into their own words—even when they keep those words to themselves.

What are you taking with you?

Invite one sentence about what someone sees differently about the community. Listen for a detail from a source or conversation.

> “Which detail helped you see it that way?”

What might you do next?

Invite anyone who wants to follow up to name one small step, when they might begin, and who might join them. People can also suggest a source, story, place, or local connection that would help others understand.

Optional turn and talk −

Invite people to reconnect with someone they enjoyed hearing from, share what they're taking away, and talk about a possible step. They can exchange contact information if both want to.

AFTER THE SESSION

Reflect while it is fresh.

Note what worked, what you adapted or skipped, what was missing, and what you would try next. Download the note to keep or share.