

# B R I D G E S



## RACIAL POLARIZATION®

### A HANDBOOK TO GET YOU STARTED

*A Program of...*



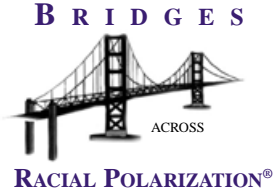
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# INTRODUCTION

**W**elcome to Bridges Across Racial Polarization®, the nationally recognized program of FOCUS St. Louis that is helping improve interracial relationships across the St. Louis region.



Your interest in Bridges is commendable. It indicates that you are committed to finding ways to strengthen your community by improving race relations. You are willing to open yourself up to others and to accept the fact that they may have different, yet valid points of view. You have established yourself as a leader who seeks solutions and is a catalyst for positive change.

Bridges is designed to improve communication and understanding among all segments of our community. Our quality of life is enhanced when we discover how much we have in common with people and how we can learn from perspectives different from our own.

This handbook is designed as a guide for the organizers and/or co-hosts of Bridges groups. It will provide you with everything you need to plan, organize, and implement a Bridges group. The suggestions and samples in this handbook have been developed and tested by other Bridges participants in the St. Louis region. This sharing of ideas and lessons learned is part of FOCUS' ongoing effort to find more and better ways to improve race relations in our community. While this handbook has been written with St. Louis groups in mind, the Bridges approach is easily adaptable for other cities and can be used by groups across the United States to address racial issues in their own communities.

The FOCUS St. Louis staff and the Bridges Steering Committee are ready to work with you to ensure that your Bridges experience is a positive one. We ask that groups stay in touch with the FOCUS Bridges program director so that each group's progress and success can be shared with others.

For more information, please contact the Bridges program director at FOCUS St. Louis, 1910 Pine Street, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63103, phone: (314) 622-1250, fax: (314) 622-1279, email: [bridges@focus-stl.org](mailto:bridges@focus-stl.org).

## A BRIDGES OVERVIEW

**T**he Bridges Across Racial Polarization® program began in 1993 as a way of addressing issues of racial polarization in the St. Louis region. Daniel Schesch and Gregory Freeman, graduates of the Leadership St. Louis program (the premier leadership development program in St. Louis), perceived a lack of interracial social contact among their friends and associates and launched a series of informal, interracial social gatherings. Their goal was to provide people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds with opportunities to interact, develop new friendships, and begin to understand each other better.

Bridges groups are typically racially and gender diverse and consist of eight to 12 individuals, both singles and couples. These groups meet on a social basis every four to eight weeks for a two- to three-hour gathering. This allows time for socializing as well as meaningful dialogue. Participants have the opportunity to develop relationships with people of different races whom they might not otherwise meet, to cross racial barriers, and to use their group as a sounding board when divisive issues arise.

The success of Bridges can be attributed to the stewardship of FOCUS St. Louis, the St. Louis region's foremost organization for developing leaders, engaging citizens, and influencing community policy. The Bridges program is a



major component of FOCUS' priority of promoting racial equality and social justice in the St. Louis region and beyond. Many of the initial participants in Bridges were graduates of FOCUS' various leadership development programs and/or community policy initiatives. Their involvement has led to a rapid expansion of the program to other groups and venues. Participants in Bridges programs to date roughly reflect the racial composition of the St. Louis region, with approximately 43% African Americans, 4% Asian Americans (West, South, and East Asia), 4% Hispanics, and 49% Caucasians.

## **What Is Bridges?**

*The Bridges program seeks to build better communication and understanding among all segments of our community. The program emphasizes informal, interracial social gatherings among groups of eight to twelve people who meet on a regular basis. The program strives for participants to get to know people from other races whom they might not otherwise meet, cross barriers, hear different ideas and perspectives, increase awareness and understanding, and provide a sounding board when divisive issues arise.*

## **A National Movement**

As a participant in Bridges Across Racial Polarization®, you are part of a growing national movement to improve race relations in our country. The President's Initiative on Race named Bridges as a "Promising Practice" in 1998. It has also been included as one of only 19 programs across the country in the Pew Partnership's "Wanted: Solutions for America" recognition program.

The Bridges program is growing in numbers and stature because it is a simple, common sense approach. People of different races discover they have more in common than they thought. They learn that friendships made in social settings can be a powerful force for understanding and for the elimination of fear, distrust and hatred.

# GETTING STARTED

**S**tarting a new Bridges dialogue group is a fun and exciting challenge. Among the initial steps are:

1. Identifying and recruiting potential program participants.
2. Identifying and recruiting co-hosts to lead the group.
3. Ensuring that all participants understand the purpose of the program and the commitment required of them to have a successful Bridges group.
4. Deciding where to meet.
5. Establishing a schedule for all social gatherings.
6. Preparing an agenda for the first, and possibly subsequent, gatherings.
7. Ensuring that participation is a positive experience for all group members.



This handbook will help you succeed in each of these responsibilities. In addition, FOCUS St. Louis will make informational materials available, such as brochures describing the program and newsletters for your organization or group to disseminate.

## Identifying and Recruiting Participants

Potential members for new Bridges groups are your co-workers, friends, neighbors, or members of your religious or school community. They may be couples or singles. These individuals will be grouped to form a mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds. This racial balance is important because it helps keep any individual from feeling isolated. It also increases participants' chances of engaging with people of different racial backgrounds and perspectives.

There are a number of ways you can identify and recruit participants for your Bridges group.

- Start with friends, family or people with whom you work. Ask them to recruit others that they know or recommend people you should contact.
- Make a list of people of different backgrounds that you remember from school, previous places of employment, or other activities.
- Use organizational newsletters or bulletin boards to make an announcement about starting the program.
- Ask your clergy to recommend members for your group.
- If your group or organization is not already racially diverse, you may want to partner with other groups, religious communities, or schools to see if they are interested in forming a group with you.
- Consider placing an advertisement in a local paper.
- Always make sure you include a contact name and telephone number.

The program brochures that are included with this handbook include a participant form which can be detached and returned. You may also create your own forms if you prefer. Forms should include space for the participant's name, address, phone numbers (day and evening), email address, race, and gender. They should indicate if they will be participating with a spouse, significant other, or a friend and provide the same information for that person as well. On this form, individuals can also express interest in being a co-host (see page 6). Ideally, your group or organization should identify two co-hosts early in the process so that they can aid in the group formation. One co-host must be a person of color; the other should be white. It is important that the co-hosts be an interracial team as they will be modeling interaction, trust, and relationship-building across racial lines for the other participants.

An initial meeting among the co-hosts and others involved in organizing your Bridges group should be held to form a working relationship, review this handbook, delegate responsibilities, and learn about the interracial dialogue process. FOCUS and the Bridges Steering Committee can provide additional orientation sessions for the co-hosts as needed.

Once potential participants have been identified, the co-hosts should contact them by telephone or letter and invite them to join the new Bridges group. The invitation should outline the purpose of the Bridges group and the logistics (date, time, place) for the first meeting.

## Sample Invitations

A sample invitation for recruiting new Bridges members is included with the materials that accompany this handbook. You may use this invitation or create your own. The invitation should emphasize the following points:



1. Bridges is a nationally recognized program with proven results.
2. Bridges is a fun way to meet new people and be exposed to new and different perspectives.
3. Bridges is voluntary, but carries the expectation that all members will attend gatherings and actively participate in discussions. Participants are asked to commit two to three hours every four to eight weeks for gatherings.
4. Bridges can help improve race relations in your community.

These invitations should be mailed with a return response form to confirm the potential participant's interest. They should also include a return response deadline.

## The Role of the Co-hosts

While the co-hosts are group participants, they also assume a leadership role with a few extra responsibilities. Co-hosts are primarily responsible for organizing regular Bridges gatherings. They help ensure that the group follows its agreed-upon process. They act as nuts-and-bolts coordinators with the group to delegate assignments and encourage all participants to assist with, support,



and attend the group's gatherings.

Co-hosts should also help make other group members feel comfortable participating in the discussion by demonstrating their own willingness to share their ideas and opinions with the group.

The key to being an effective co-host is preparation. This means managing all logistics and assisting, as needed, with facilitation of the discussion. Solid preparation will enable the co-hosts to give their full attention to the group discussion and ensure that the gathering runs smoothly. Co-hosts do not have to be experts on the topic being discussed, but they should be adequately prepared to ensure that the gathering is a positive experience for everyone. As your group progresses, you may wish to rotate the co-host responsibilities to other group members.



## **Communicating the Bridges Commitment**

It is important that new Bridges participants fully understand the goals of the program and the expectations that participation in Bridges carries with it. While Bridges can be a powerful and positive experience, it is only as good as the commitment of those who participate.

Failure to attend social gatherings or to participate fully in the discussions will limit the group's ability to make progress. Participants should come with an open mind and be prepared to hear very different points of view at times. They should also respect each other's right to speak and be willing to listen carefully and attentively. Everyone should abide by a set of discussion ground rules that the group establishes for itself. In most groups, there is also an expectation that each participant will share in the planning and other aspects of the group's gatherings, such as bringing a potluck dish, helping on a telephone chain, or hosting one of the gatherings.

## **Deciding Where To Meet**

Although many groups meet at members' homes, there are no restrictions as to where groups can meet. Attending social events together will help foster a sense of friendship and break down racial barriers. Coffeehouses and restaurants are also good places to talk and socialize. Your group may choose to go to a movie or attend a lecture that addresses racial issues and discuss it afterward over dessert. The Bridges newsletter, published regularly by FOCUS St. Louis, provides a community calendar of events that lists activities in the St. Louis region that your group may wish to attend together. Additional information on community activities can also be found on the FOCUS St. Louis website ([www.focus-stl.org](http://www.focus-stl.org)) and at [www.makeadifferencestlouis.org](http://www.makeadifferencestlouis.org).

## Establishing a Schedule

To ensure that all participants have adequate time to plan for your gatherings, you should establish a six- to twelve-month meeting schedule as soon as your group is formed. The first meeting date should be decided by the co-hosts and included in the invitation letter that goes out to all group members. This gathering should be no less than three weeks and no more than six weeks from the receipt of the invitation to allow participants time to schedule for it.

Co-hosts may elect to establish a meeting schedule for the entire year, or they may choose to let the group help decide future meeting dates together. Be sure to remind all participants to bring their calendars to the first meeting so that any scheduling issues can be addressed and resolved.

A group that fails to meet regularly will not be effective. A six- or twelve-month meeting schedule with a consistent time and day every four to six weeks seems to work best. Forming a phone chain to make reminder calls or sending reminder emails or postcards seven to ten days before the next meeting also helps.

## Creating a Positive Experience for Everyone

The Bridges program can help facilitate new ideas and understanding that will overcome some of the myths, biases, and barriers that have long prevented people of different races from seeing eye-to-eye. Effective Bridges groups

*“The benefit for me has been to engage in frank discussion with peers who are comfortable challenging the conversation, offering a different viewpoint, and questioning perspectives.”*

A Bridges Group Participant

measure success by the extent to which each group member feels engaged and develops a new appreciation of and respect for others’ points of view. Improving race relations is an intensely personal issue. Each participant must feel that his or her own ideas and opinions are valued and respected by the group.

Creating a positive experience for all group members starts with the principle of democratic discussion among equals. Begin by having all members develop and agree to a set of ground rules that ensure each individual will feel respected and want to share his or her experiences. If all participants feel like they make an important contribution toward the group, they will want to stay engaged and will feel more committed to making the Bridges group a positive experience for everyone.

## GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR PARTICIPATION

The Study Circles Resource Center suggests a number of guidelines that will help every participant in the dialogue have a positive experience. These include:

1. **Maintaining an open mind.** Participants should feel free to explore ideas that they have rejected or failed to consider in the past.
2. **Keeping the discussion on track.** Individuals' remarks should be relevant and as concise as possible.
3. **Making room for everyone.** Participants should be encouraged to speak freely, but not monopolize the discussion. Be aware that some people may want to speak but are intimidated by more assertive people.
4. **Asking for clarification.** Chances are you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.
5. **Valuing and respecting your own and others' experiences and opinions.** Everyone in the group has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all.
6. **Feeling free to disagree.** An effective group is one that invites friendly disagreement. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself whether reason or emotion is running the show.
7. **Using humor to make your points.** Keeping the discussion pleasant and fun is usually more effective than adopting a belligerent attitude.
8. **Being aware of your body language.** Understand what it says to the group.
9. **Listening fully and actively.**

*(Adapted from The Study Circle Handbook, 1993 Topsfield Foundation, Inc. Study Circles Resource Center P.O. Box 203 Pomfret, CT 06258)*

# PLANNING YOUR FIRST BRIDGES GROUP MEETING

**Y**our first meeting is critical to forming an effective group, so it is important that you take the time to plan it carefully. You can use the following guidelines to help ensure the success of your first meeting:

1. Provide nametags for everyone for the first few gatherings.
2. Encourage members to bring a potluck dish they can share with the group. This will relieve any one individual from having to prepare food for everyone and may also provide the basis for initial discussions on different ethnic foods.
3. Begin with an icebreaker activity at the gatherings so members can become familiar with one another.
4. Collect contact information from members so that a group roster can be drawn up and distributed.
5. Identify and address individual expectations. Understanding why participants choose to be involved and what they expect to gain from their participation will help your group structure its gatherings to meet these needs more effectively. This is a critical step in helping participants feel like their involvement in the group is valuable and worthwhile.
6. Establish ground rules the first time the group meets. If your group gets into trouble, these rules will be a point of common ground. Participants should not only agree to follow these rules, but should contribute to creating them. The rules may include defining participants' roles, determining meeting times, and guiding how discussions will be structured.

## **A Sample Plan for Your First Bridges Group Meeting**

Plan to have the first meeting at the home of one of the co-hosts or in a centrally located establishment over a two- to



three-hour time period. A co-host planning worksheet and a sample agenda are included in the packet with this handbook to assist you with your first gathering.

When all members arrive, the co-hosts should introduce themselves and conduct a brief icebreaker activity to allow everyone to feel more comfortable and get to know each other better (some icebreaker suggestions are included on page 13). An icebreaker will also immediately involve everyone in the discussion and help individuals overcome shyness or a reluctance to speak. The icebreaker could be followed by a potluck dinner or coffee and dessert. Casual social conversation provides the group with time to get to know one another better and begin to build a sense of trust.

After the potluck meal, the co-hosts should provide an overview of the Bridges program, such as the one found in the front of this handbook. This can lead to a discussion where the participants are asked to share their hopes and fears with respect to participating and their expectations for the group. Be sure to give everyone in the group an opportunity to express their expectations. This will help the group decide what topics to discuss, as well as provide everyone with

## THE ROPES APPROACH TO ESTABLISHING GROUND RULES

ROPES is an effective tool you can use to advance and enrich your discussion. Have group participants suggest ground rules that begin with one of these five letters, such as those shown below.

**R**espect one another and group confidentiality. Act **R**esponsibly.

**O**pen up with your group. Take the **O**pportunity to socialize across racial lines and address tough issues.

**P**articipate in the process, activities, and conversation. **P**ass if you are uncomfortable or do not want to speak.

**E**xperience one another. Perceive your Bridges group as an **E**ducational opportunity. Use **E**mpathy, not sympathy.

**S**ensitivity is important. Use your **S**ense of humor. Challenge yourself to **S**tep outside of your comfort zone.

some insights about each other early on. Identifying expectations also allows every participant a chance to get involved in the discussion and feel like their participation is meaningful.

Next, lay out some suggested ground rules so that discussion can begin. These rules will determine how the group will operate. Be sure to let the group discuss these and add or change them as they see fit. Follow this with a short discussion emphasizing the importance of effective and meaningful dialogue in building relationships.

## **ADDITIONAL GROUND RULES**

The following are some suggested guidelines that your group may want to consider adopting for their own use:

- A. Each member's views and opinions should be respected.
- B. Disagreement should never be personalized. Putdowns, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks will not be tolerated.
- C. Everyone will have a chance to speak. The co-hosts may interrupt someone who speaks a lot in order to allow others the opportunity to speak.
- D. Agree to disagree. If there is disagreement on points of fact, table that part of the discussion until someone can verify the facts.
- E. Be respectful of issues that offend others. A group member may say "OUCH" when they feel offended or feel that the speaker is not valuing another's opinions or experiences. If this occurs, it is important for the group to stop and ask the offended individual if he or she would like to address the issue. The group can then explore it in more depth or look for ways to handle it more sensitively.
- F. Use a "parking lot" to keep the discussion on track. Issues raised that do not relate to the current discussion can be "parked" for later discussion. A parking lot usually consists of a piece of paper where participants can list issues that they would like to pick up for discussion at a later time.
- G. Start and finish on time unless group members agree to extend the gathering and continue the discussion.
- H. Everyone must assist with the meeting logistics as appropriate.
- I. All discussions are confidential and should not be shared outside the group.

One of the co-hosts should then present an initial topic for group discussion. Since this is your first meeting, you might want to start by asking each member to share an experience where he or she felt uncomfortable or witnessed racial prejudice of some type. You will likely be surprised by the stories members will relate and the depth of their feelings. Be sure to engage everyone in the discussion, so that all group members become comfortable expressing their beliefs.

Keep an eye on the clock and begin to wrap up the discussion when your agreed upon time for adjournment is near. As some members may have other places to go or things to do, do not exceed the planned time unless the group agrees. Look for an appropriate point to summarize the discussion, ask for any final thoughts, and conclude.

Save a few minutes at the end of the meeting to discuss logistics for the next meeting, such as the date, time, hosts, location, and directions. The group should also reach consensus on a future meeting schedule for the year, so that everyone can plan accordingly and stay involved. It's important that all members bring their calendars so that firm dates can be set for future gatherings.

Following all gatherings, each dialogue group is asked to complete a brief meeting summary form and return it to FOCUS St. Louis. Any member of your group can assume this responsibility. FOCUS St. Louis tracks attendance, the nature of discussions, and the progress of groups, so it can better meet the needs of existing and future groups. A meeting summary form is provided with this handbook for you to copy and use.

## **Icebreaker Activities**

Here's a few proven icebreaker activities to help get you started.

- A. Have everyone say their name and tell why their parents named them that.
- B. Have all group members bring an object that has a comical meaning to them and have them share its story when they introduce themselves.
- C. Prepare a list of 10 to 12 questions that all begin with "Who has..." and have your group members mingle to answer the questions. Put a 15- to 20-minute time limit on gathering the answers. Then each member of the group can introduce another member based on the information he or she found out about this person. Some examples are: "Who has children and how many?" "Who has a job they love to talk about?" "Who has lived in another city for an extended period of time?" "Who has traveled to another country?"
- D. Divide up into small groups of four people each. Have everyone give their

name and state four things about themselves. Three of these things should be facts and one should be false. Have the three other members of the group try to determine which statement is false and explain why they think it is the false one. Afterwards, have the speaker reveal which statement is false. This is an excellent exercise for individuals to explore stereotypes and assumptions in a safe and fun way.

## **Possible Topics for Discussion**

The group discussion is central to the Bridges gathering. It is an opportunity to learn from each other through dialogue. Keep the perspective broad enough to keep everyone engaged. Encourage participants to challenge their own views and opinions. Participants should ask one another why they have a particular opinion and help one another become comfortable in sharing experiences that have helped form their beliefs.

There are many topics of discussion pertaining to racial issues, and each group's discussion will vary depending on the personal interests of its participants.

- Ask members to share their personal experiences with racism or prejudice.
- Discuss different family traditions around holidays or other events.
- Talk about the most important individuals in each person's life.
- Discuss a famous figure in history.
- Select a current events topic, and ask each member for his or her perspective on it.
- Assign a fiction or non-fiction book to read and discuss.
- Gather media articles to read that address racial issues or differences.

## **Wrapping Up the Discussion**

Always reserve adequate time for closing the discussion and ensuring that everyone leaves feeling good about his or her participation. During this time, you should ask the group for any last comments and thoughts about the issues you discussed. See if group members have developed any new ideas or thoughts as a result of the discussion.

Before leaving, remind the group of any readings and preparation they should do for the next session. Be sure everyone knows the date, time, and location of the next gathering and has recorded it in their calendars. Thank everyone for their participation and ask them to evaluate the session, either aloud or in a brief written evaluation.

# TOOLS AND TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE

**K**ee in mind that a Bridges group discussion is designed for dialogue and not debate. The following tools and tips will help make your group's dialogue more effective, resulting in a more positive experience for everyone.

## Group Dynamics

Most groups move through four predictable phases of development during their life cycles. Understanding these stages can help you ensure the success of your group.

**Stage 1**  
“Forming”      At first, group members will be cautious about sharing too much until they get to know the other group members better. Most of their focus will be on understanding what is expected of them and how they will operate as a group. At this stage, one or more members may try to dominate the group discussion; it is important that this does not happen.

**Stage 2**  
“Storming”      As group members become more comfortable with one another, it is likely the group will become more contentious. Group members may be exposed to new ideas and perspectives with which they may not agree. It is important to stress the need for listening, flexibility, and acceptance of others' ideas. Individuals may try to promote their ideas and resist accepting those of others. Getting everyone to resist promoting their own beliefs and focus on the group's goals will be the key to your group's ongoing success.

**Stage 3**  
“Norming”      By this stage, members are much more comfortable with each other and more open about sharing feelings, ideas, and beliefs. A level of trust develops within the group, fostering greater group cohesion. Members spend more time listening and even questioning some of their own long-held beliefs. Disagreements still occur, but members often take it upon themselves to resolve them. As a result, they feel good about being part of an effective group.

**Stage 4**  
“Performing”      The final stage of group dynamics is characterized by high levels of trust and interdependence. Learning and openness are much greater. Members know how to work together and focus on finding solutions more easily than before. Discussions may still be heated, but without the previous traces of personal animosity and anger.

## Useful Discussion Questions

Keep the following questions handy to use when the discussion gets bogged down or to get the whole group engaged in the dialogue. You may also want to pair up group members to consider one of these questions to help facilitate moving through a tough area, then reconvening the full group for discussion.

- What seems to be the key point here?
- What is the crux of your disagreement?
- Does anyone want to add (or support, or challenge) that point?
- Could you give an example to illustrate that point?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your point?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead someone to support that point of view?
- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What do you find most persuasive about that point of view? What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- Are there any points on which most of us would agree?

*(Adapted from The Study Circle Handbook, 1993, Topsfield Foundation, Inc.)*

D I A L O G U E   v e r s u s   D E B A T E		
Dialogue requires two or more individuals working toward a common understanding.	V	Debate requires two or more individuals working to prove the other wrong.
Dialogue involves a genuine effort to understand the other person.	E	Debate involves belittling the other position or person.
Dialogue enhances or alters a participant's point of view.	R	Debate asserts a participant's point of view.
Dialogue assumes that many people share opinions and collaborate to find an answer.	S	Debate assumes that one person's opinion will be the answer.
Dialogue seeks fundamental agreements.	U	Debate seeks conspicuous differences.
Dialogue is about being open to different ideas.	S	Debate is about being closed to different ideas.
Dialogue is a process that remains open.		Debate is a process that strives for conclusion.

*(Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman and included in "A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders," 1993, Topsfield Foundation, Inc., Study Circle Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258)*

## DISCUSSION TIPS FOR CO-HOSTS

1. Welcome everyone and create a friendly, safe, relaxed, and open atmosphere.
2. Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem. In this way, the tradeoffs involved in making tough choices become apparent.
3. Summarize the discussion occasionally or encourage others to do so.
4. Help participants identify “common ground,” but don’t try to force consensus.
5. Use questions to help make the discussion more productive.
6. Pay attention to the power dynamics in the group. Who is speaking? Who isn’t? Who interrupts?
7. Be prepared to initiate the discussion if other group members seem reluctant to go first. Lead by example.

*(Adapted from “When You Are Facilitating — Be Aware,” Lucky Altman, The National Council for Community and Justice, and The Study Circle Handbook, 1993, Topsfield Foundation, Inc., Study Circle Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258)*



## DISCUSSION TIPS FOR PARTICIPANTS

1. Use humor to focus on ideas rather than on personalities.
2. Think about the concerns and values that underlie your beliefs.
3. Don't be overly influenced by one particular personal experience or anecdote.
4. Check to make sure what you think the other person has said is accurate. Don't make assumptions.
5. Ask for feedback to make sure others understand what you are saying.
6. Resist making judgments. Your first impressions in an intercultural interaction are often inaccurate. Therefore, suspend your initial reactions until further clarification is possible.
7. Be aware of stereotyping by yourself and others.
8. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask questions. Others are likely thinking the same things.
9. Recognize that everyone has "cultural blinders." Don't let them block your view of new ideas.
10. Always be honest.
11. Admit you may have prejudices and don't know how it feels to be a person of another race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.
12. Recognize that members of other groups are entitled to the same rights, privileges, and freedoms you enjoy.
13. Avoid asking an individual how his or her racial group feels about something. By asking an African American, "What do African Americans think about affirmative action?" you overlook the fact that this individual's opinions may not be the same as those held by others of that same racial group.
14. Listen actively.
15. Be aware of your body language and communication style and what these convey.
16. Be aware of what upsets, frustrates, or sets you off, and recognize how that affects your participation in the dialogue.

*(Adapted from "When You Are Facilitating — Be Aware," by Lucky Altman, The National Conference for Community and Justice, from Pusch 1979, and from The Study Circle Handbook, 1993, Topsfield Foundation, Inc., Study Circles Resources Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258)*

# DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

**W**hile many of your discussions will flow smoothly, challenges do arise in any group process. The following are some possible challenges you may experience and some workable solutions to help you to deal with them effectively.

## **Challenge #1:**

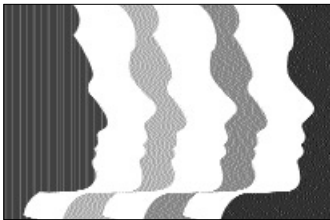
One of our group members appears shy and doesn't add much to our discussions.

### **Possible Solution:**

Usually, people feel more comfortable with others they know well. This participant may just need some time to warm up to the group. Try to make eye contact with him or her to demonstrate your interest in what he or she has to say. If a person makes short comments, engage him or her by asking for more information. Remember, don't alienate this person further by putting him or her on the spot to contribute. You may, however, want to talk with this individual about it informally before or after the meeting.

*“Racial polarization has been a very real problem in our community. Bridges is designed to tackle the problem by bringing people closer together. Bridges is about understanding across racial lines.”*

Greg Freeman  
Bridges Co-Founder



## **Challenge #2:**

One of our members dominates the discussions.

### **Possible Solution:**

It is a good idea to talk to this individual away from the group about how important it is to hear from everyone. Refer back to your group's ground rules that define the participant's role, including being an active listener. Remind this person that they will gain nothing from the experience if only one perspective is heard. If this person continues to dominate discussions, the group's co-hosts can interrupt him or her to ask if there are other viewpoints not yet heard.

*“Bridges provides the opportunity to get to know people beyond our habitual circles, where we can discover what we have in common as well as why we sometimes view things differently.”*

Daniel Schesch  
Bridges Co-Founder

### **Challenge #3:**

Our group lacks focus and direction in our discussions, and members don't seem excited about participating.

### **Possible Solution:**

The co-hosts should redirect the discussion so that it moves in a new and more productive way. Throw out an open-ended question and give the group a few minutes to consider the issue. Then go around the room and share some viewpoints and responses to open up the discussion. Your group may experience a lack of excitement and direction if you all seem to be in agreement. Bring in other views by asking if anyone in the group knows of another person who holds an opposite viewpoint. Ask the group to make suggestions on new topics or other ideas that will help engage them more. The group may want to consider pursuing a different topic than the one planned in order to stir up some group interest. Try turning to local current events because many members may know something about them.

### **Challenge #4:**

There is obvious tension among some of our group members, and this causes our environment to be uncomfortable and unproductive.

### **Possible Solution:**

Address tension directly. Remember, the reason this program exists is to confront this tension and conflict while encouraging tolerance of different views. This conflict can be productive if it remains focused on the issue because different views will keep the perspective broad. However, should this tension turn into a personal attack, the co-hosts need to interrupt it immediately. Refer back to your ground rules. You should have included the need to respect one another and not to turn disagreements into something personal.



*(Adapted from The Study Circle Handbook, 1993, Topsfield Foundation, Inc., Study Circles Resources Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258)*

## **What If...?**

Even those who have experience with interracial dialogue occasionally make mistakes or encounter a situation where someone is confused, offended, angry, or overly defensive. Knowing how to handle these situations gracefully and directly is one of the most important responsibilities co-hosts will have. Here are a few tips to help you get through the difficult times.

### **What If...**

Someone doesn't understand a point that has been made?

Someone takes something you said the wrong way and is offended?

Group members get angry and threaten to leave?

You or some other group member makes a mistake?

### **Then You Should...**

Reinforce that it is okay to ask questions and to ask for help. Make sure everyone is clear before moving on.

Apologize for the effect of what you said and carefully explain what you meant. Ask the person to help you find a better way to restate your opinion.

Remind them that disagreement is part of the dialogue process. Ask them to help the group understand their feelings and use the opportunity to learn from each other.

Be willing to laugh at yourself. Don't get defensive. Remind the group that mistakes can be an effective learning tool.

*(Adapted from "Cultural Diversity: A Workshop for Trainers," by Dianne LeMountain and Bob Abramms, Human Resource Development Press, 1993)*

# BEYOND MEETING #1

**Y**our group's first meeting was a success and the group members appear to be interested and engaged. So what's next?

Keeping participants engaged is perhaps the biggest ongoing challenge your group will face. Group members all have significant demands on their time, so your gatherings need to be interesting and fun to keep them coming back.



Regular communication with group members between gatherings is also a good way to let them know what's coming, how they can prepare, and how they can become even more involved.

One of the best ways to keep your group members engaged is to delegate some of the planning and logistics to

them. Ask two members of different racial backgrounds to take responsibility for planning one of the group's gatherings. Ask them to select a topic, choose a meeting location, and disseminate background materials. Encourage them to be creative and use the opportunity to express their own background and perspectives. For example, one pair might want to plan a menu of ethnic foods. Another might plan to host a meeting at a neighborhood center that other members might never otherwise visit. Giving members ownership of the gatherings they plan will help keep them actively involved and will make the group meetings different and appealing for all participants.

There are many different things that groups can do together. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Attend a play or theatrical production, and have a group discussion over coffee and dessert at a group member's home.
- Attend a lecture on a race-related topic.
- Plan a group celebration tied to an ethnic holiday or special tradition, such as Kwanzaa, Passover, or Ramadan.

- Have members of the group organize a community service project for a Saturday morning (Habitat for Humanity, Operation Food Outreach, a neighborhood clean up, etc.). Encourage them to bring their children as well. Be sure to debrief/reflect after the project is completed.
- Plan a picnic lunch with group members and their significant others.
- Have Sunday brunch together. Organize a discussion around various group members' religions.
- Visit a local museum or historical landmark with racial/ethnic/cultural significance.
- Pick a provocative book to read, and discuss it at your Bridges group gathering; or view a film together and have a discussion following it.

It might be a good idea to have a brainstorming session at your first meeting to determine the various social and educational interests of the group.

## **Building Relationships**

As a result of participating in a Bridges group, participants will get to know people from other races whom they might not otherwise meet, break down racial barriers, learn about different perspectives, and provide sounding boards for one another when divisive issues arise in the community. Usually, after six or more gatherings, on-going personal relationships have been formed among group members. These relationships will create bridges of understanding that will add richness not only to their own lives, but also to the entire community.

## **Annual Bridges Event**

Each year, FOCUS St. Louis sponsors an event designed to bring all Bridges groups together. This event allows participants to meet individuals from other groups, expand their social circle further, and share mutual experiences. The event is also a great opportunity for participants to bring along other interested individuals to introduce to the Bridges program.

## **Bridges Newsletter**

A newsletter is published regularly by FOCUS St. Louis with the help of Bridges volunteers and is distributed to all participants. The newsletter serves as a connector among the different groups by sharing members' ideas and tips for group discussions and activities.

## **Online Discussions**

FOCUS St. Louis is continuing to develop opportunities for Bridges group participants to engage in online discussions. Go to the FOCUS St. Louis website ([www.focus-stl.org](http://www.focus-stl.org)) to find out how you can dialogue with others via the Internet.

# MOVING FROM DIALOGUE TO ACTION

**I**nterracial dialogue is an important form of action. The primary goal of Bridges is for group members to gain better understanding and communication within the group. However, there is also a greater goal — to move from dialogue to taking individual and community action that will help improve race relations and racial equality. Your group members may want to discuss how they can take action on what the group has been discussing, either together or as individuals. This will bring the lessons learned out of the familiar group setting and into each member's daily routine, transferring them to anyone with whom they come into contact.

Here are a few action steps your group might consider to help break the cycle of oppression and racism.

- Learn about the history of another racial or ethnic group.
- Attend a cultural event.
- Read a newspaper or magazine that focuses on a different ethnic audience.
- Challenge biases and stereotypes of family and friends.
- Read a book by an author who is different from you.
- Write a television station manager when you notice stereotypes on the news.
- Shop at a store that is owned and operated by another racial or ethnic group.
- Interrupt a racist joke.
- Speak up if you are offended by someone's comment toward a different group.
- Take a drive through a part of town where you would not normally go.
- Listen to a radio station that you don't usually listen to.
- Contribute funds to an organization that confronts racism.
- Introduce yourself to someone who is different from you.
- Initiate a discussion at work or at home about racism.
- Sponsor a workshop or discussion where you work or volunteer.
- Volunteer with local organizations that are addressing issues of diversity.
- "Make a difference by accepting everyone else's." Check out the Diversity Awareness Partnership website ([www.makeadifferencestlouis.org](http://www.makeadifferencestlouis.org)) for local information and resources in St. Louis.

*(Adapted from the National Conference for Community and Justice)*

Remember that there are no instantaneous solutions and you will not change any one individual in a single conversation. But you can begin the process by expressing your point of view and allowing others to consider it.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are several additional resources which may be helpful to you in planning and leading your Bridges group.

## Organizations

**Anti-Defamation League**  
10420 Old Olive Street Rd., Ste. 208  
St. Louis, MO 63141  
(314) 432-6868  
[www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)

**Center for Living Democracy**  
289 Fox Farm Road  
Brattleboro, VT 05301  
(802) 254-1234  
[www.livingdemocracy.org](http://www.livingdemocracy.org)

**cultural bridges**  
341 Ontelaunee Trail  
Hamburg, PA 19526  
(610) 562-5958  
[ojona@aol.com](mailto:ojona@aol.com)  
contact: joan olsson

**National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ)**  
721 Olive Street  
St. Louis, MO 63101  
(314) 241-5103  
[www.nccj.org](http://www.nccj.org)

**President's Initiative on Race**  
[www.whitehouse.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/america.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/america.html)

**St. Louis 2004**  
211 N. Broadway, Ste. 1280  
One Metropolitan Square  
St. Louis, MO 63102  
(314) 436-2004  
[www.stlouis2004.org](http://www.stlouis2004.org)

**St. Louis Diversity Awareness Partnership**  
[www.makeadifferencestlouis.org](http://www.makeadifferencestlouis.org)

**Study Circles Resource Center**  
P.O. Box 203  
Pomfret, CT 06258  
(860) 928-2616  
email: [scrc@neca.com](mailto:scrc@neca.com)

**Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis**  
3701 Grandel Square  
St. Louis, MO 63108  
[www.nul.org](http://www.nul.org)

**Western Justice Center**  
85 South Grand Avenue  
Pasadena, CA 91105  
(626) 584-7494  
[www.westernjustice.org](http://www.westernjustice.org)

**YWCA of Metropolitan St. Louis**  
3820 West Pine Blvd.  
St. Louis, MO 63108  
(314) 531-1115  
[www.ywca.org](http://www.ywca.org)

## Articles and Books

A reference list of books and articles on topics related to race, diversity, and dialogue is included with this handbook or can be obtained by calling FOCUS St. Louis at (314) 622-1250.

*Good luck with your Bridges group experience!*



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Email [bridges@focus-stl.org](mailto:bridges@focus-stl.org)  
[www.focus-stl.org](http://www.focus-stl.org)