



# Building Community in Dialogue

## PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT BELONGING

### KEY CONCEPTS

**Belonging** is “the feeling that we’re part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us – and to which we feel we have something to contribute” (Geoffrey Cohen, *Belonging*). A sense of belonging is critical in dialogue for people to share their identities, experiences, and feelings, as well as their ideas, generously and openly rather than defensively or antagonistically.

### PRINCIPLES ≠ PRACTICES

**PRINCIPLE:** Affirm people’s inherent worth + humanity without making them first meet a performance standard

**PRACTICES:** Explicitly state that everyone present belongs here • Greet everyone individually as they come in  
Learn people’s names, pronounce them correctly, use them • Incorporate mindfulness + regulation practices  
Curate a comfortable, welcoming physical space for dialogue • Offer food + drink & make sure people get it  
Affirm the person, challenge the behavior when offering feedback • Critique or praise people’s work, not them  
Express genuine gladness + appreciation for people’s presence, including when they are late or quiet  
Design dialogue such that participation is enhanced by but not fully dependent on pre-work or prior knowledge

**PRINCIPLE:** Affirm people’s value as members of the community through invitations to contribute

**PRACTICES:** Have participants help set up or clean up • Open each gathering with a “check-in” (see p. 2!)  
Set an explicit purpose: a destination that the group is trying to reach together (not just individual learning goals)  
Generate norms or dialogue questions together • Have participants help define key terms + examples  
Use democratic processes: vote or come to consensus on lights on or off? Which question to address first? etc.  
Ask participants to share advice + best practices for others based on strengths you observe or they self-identify  
Reframe critique as a request for support (e.g. “Could you help me draw others in?” to a dominating participant)

**PRINCIPLE:** Affirm people’s agency + autonomy + individuality, as well as the other communities they belong to

**PRACTICES:** Use the names + pronouns + identity labels people use for themselves or ask you to use  
Have people set their own goals + name their own purpose + values for the dialogue (along with shared purpose)  
Incorporate multiple modalities to engage different learning styles (visual, embodied, audio, written)  
Strive for diverse representation in texts + authors • Be mindful of what you call “normal,” “typical,” or “neutral”  
Invite participants to share relevant access needs with the group, both general + specific to that day  
Share personal/cultural rituals with one another • Write personalized notes to people or have them do so





## THE ART OF THE CHECK-IN

### WHAT IT IS

An invitation at the beginning of the dialogue for everyone in the group to connect to self and other via reflection and sharing, before “diving in” to the topic

### HOW TO DO IT

The ideal check-in prompt is . . .

- **Low-stakes** (not too vulnerable)
- **Personal** (not knowledge-based; something anyone can answer)
- Not based in **status or identity**
- **Lifting** (serotonin-boosting) or **grounding** (mindfulness-enhancing)

### WHY WE DO IT

- Supports belonging by having people connect first through shared humanity
- Relaxes nerves + makes it easier to keep sharing as the dialogue continues

Logistics for facilitating

- Should take no longer than **5-10 minutes** out of 60
- Share the **prompt** & give **instructions/rules**
- Each person introduces themselves by the **name** they'd like to be called + **pronouns** (if they wish), then responds to **prompt**. Opting out is allowed!
- **Model** with your own introduction + response

### LIFTING CHECK-INS

#### LOWER-STAKES (FOR NEW OR ESTABLISHED GROUPS)

- What's something you are loving right now?
- What's your favorite time of the year in your hometown/in [location of dialogue]?
- As a child, what was a beloved comfort object, favorite toy, or an amazing gift you once got?
- What's some good news you've gotten lately?
- What's something you're looking forward to?
- What's the best part about [current season] for you?

#### HIGHER-STAKES (FOR ESTABLISHED GROUPS)

- What's a nonromantic source of love for you?
- Who or what brings you comfort?
- What's your trick to feeling at home/like yourself in a new place or situation?
- What is a time that you stood up for yourself, someone else, or something you believed in?
- What's something small or simple you can make or do really well and take pride in?
- What is something positive that someone said to you once about yourself that made a big difference?

### GROUNDING CHECK-INS

- What's the color of your energy today? (Don't justify or explain – just share the shade)
- What are up to 3 words to describe your current state? (“alert,” “exhausted,” “apprehensive,” “open,” etc)
- How is the weather impacting your mood today?
- On a scale of 1-5, rate your current levels of each of the following: 1) energy, 2) motivation, 3) peace of mind, 4) readiness to engage with others, 5) comfort in your body.
- Breathe deep and focus on your environment. To yourself, name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste. Share 1 sensory perception with the group.