HOPEFUL TOWNS: 'WHAT WORKS?' (6)
HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

At this session, we adapt our difficult conversations training for local authorities and community practitioners working to make their towns more resilient. The session offers effective methods for changing the minds of people who have deeply-held views that are racist or xenophobic, without relying on "myth-busting" techniques. We explore practices that seek to understand deeper perspectives, rather than focus on objectionable conclusions. This allows 'difficult conversations' to be productive and positive.

This learning note summarises key lessons from the sixth and final webinar in our Hopeful Towns 'What Works' series. The aim of the Hopeful Towns project is to better understand how places can be more resilient to hateful narratives in the first place.

CONTEXT

Discussions about diversity, immigration, culture and race can be the most difficult conversations you have at the community level.

Often, they relate to demographic changes in the area or to tensions and flash-points that have arisen. Conversations that were supposed to be about one thing can rapidly end up being about something else, with surface-level issues acting as a lightning rod for deeper anxieties.

What is the best way to approach a conversation about 'difficult issues', especially if someone says something prejudiced? How can you stop harmful language and move the conversation to a more productive and progressive place?

SPEAKERS

- **CHRIS CLARKE**, Policy researcher at HOPE not hate Charitable Trust
- **OWEN JONES**, Head of education and training at HOPE not hate Charitable Trust

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Below are some of the key learnings from the session.

1. Who are we speaking to?
Consider the audience. There is no point preaching to the choir, but there is also no point wasting energy trying to persuade people with deeply ingrained racist views. The most productive conversations are likely to happen with our passive opponents, who might not share our own values but can be moved into a neutral position.

2. Stick to the topic
Don't be distracted, focus on the issue at hand. When people make prejudiced comments, they easily derail the situation. We should feel confident and clear about our values. Remember, the people we're speaking to are not our enemies!

3. Some of the things we think we're doing to improve the conversation don't!
We can come armed with an arsenal of facts and figures, but these might not be the best tools. They can work when put in context, but narratives, stories and things people can relate to are most powerful. Similarly, telling people they have their facts wrong reinforces the idea that you are not on their side.

4. The importance of listening
The best conversations happen when we listen to and show respect towards one another. Understanding where people are coming from and empathising with their experiences rather than focusing on their objectionable views creates a space built on mutual respect.

5. Ask Questions
Open questions, when well chosen, can allow space for people to reflect on their own views and reconsider their position, hopefully for the better. They also ensure that the conversation does not turn combative.

6. Start a positive chain
Difficult conversations do not happen in isolation. You may be the first person to really listen to someone voice challenging views. Friends can change friends, and children can change parents!

NEXT STEPS

This is the last in our 'What Works?' webinar series, as the Hopeful Towns Network moves into its next phase.

Over the next few months, we will be developing a series of practical tools and guides to apply our learning, and rolling them out together with local partners.

Stay in touch by signing up to the network here: https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/network

And if you'd like to be involved in the resources, or have ideas about tools which would be helpful, then email Chris Clarke on clarke@hopenothate.org.uk