

CONVENINGS

Town Hall/Forum/Listening Session Planner

This planner is designed to help you convene a town hall, forum or virtual listening session, but with a community engagement focus on serving the information needs of your targeted community. Over the long term, gatherings using this model should allow you to build relationships within this community as well as broaden your source base and understanding of community strengths and challenges.

Overview

Step 1: Determine who are the intended people with whom you'll be engaging.

Step 2: Start a conversation with community influencers and/or possible partners.

Step 3: Schedule and plan the town hall/forum/listening session.

Step 4: Host the town hall/forum/listening session.

Step 5: Send 'thank yous,' follow up after each town hall/forum/listening session.

Step 6: Look for the journalism.

Step 7: Quick debrief about what worked and what didn't work.

Step 8. Do the reporting at the service of that community and be intentional in following up directly with all who made it possible.

Return to step 2 and repeat.

I. Who are the intended people with whom you'll be engaging?

In your earlier work with a [source diversity audit](#), you identified the gaps in your coverage and a community or communities with whom you'd like to engage. You've identified a community and honed in on its characteristics, community groups, demographics and leaders. You've gone through the [Community Portrait Worksheet](#) to identify your assumptions about that community. And in that worksheet you should have identified three to nine different places for engagement as well as individuals and/or organizations that you currently believe are sources of trusted information and news. These are where you should begin your outreach efforts.



Convenings (continued)

2. Identify and start a conversation with community influencers.

- Explain your effort and the intended outcome (to change the way your station does its work)
- Ask the community members:
 - What are the most urgent needs of the community (over the next week, month, year)?
 - What are the biggest strengths of the community?
 - What are the biggest gaps in information needs?
 - What are the biggest issues and/or impediments to progress?
- Pitch them the idea for a town hall/forum and get their ideas on the best ways to build participation.
- Find more tips on this in the [Reporter & Producer](#) section.

Use this script as a place to start (edit to your needs and situation)

Thank you for your time earlier, it really helped us refine our thinking about how to serve you better.

I want to loop back with you and make sure you know about [station name]'s upcoming town hall/forum/listening session.

As you may know, we're trying to innovate how we come up with sources and topics for our journalism. A central part of this work is hosting these listening sessions, loosely organized around [an identified topic].

We're hoping to get a broad and diverse group of individuals from across the community into conversation with one another. Our goal is to really listen and discover what people are concerned and excited about.

Depending on the number of participants, the session will be broken into several small groups of 3 to 10 people. Each conversation will be facilitated by at least one member of the [station name] team. There will also be a larger group conversation.

We expect these sessions to inform our journalism, so some participants may be contacted by one of our reporters or producers afterward.

Convening (continued)

There are a number of different ways you could choose to be involved with this effort. Let me know which, if any, of these fit your interest and availability.

- Partner with us by promoting the town hall/forum to a wider mailing/membership list and/or posting it to social media groups you have a connection to through your reporting or work.
- Suggest town hall/forum guests, we're especially interested in featuring and hearing from individuals who have influence in the community.
- Listen in on the town hall/forum to see what people have to share.
- Be a co-convenor and/or participant working with the [station name] community engagement team to develop the programming of one, or more, of these town halls/forums.

3. Schedule the town hall/forum/listening session and outreach

- Set date time/s.
- Establish metrics and goals for the event/s (i.e. to collect emails, questions or find new sources).
- Develop an outreach/promotional plan to reach potential participants — who will do the outreach and how will it be done? Through partner email distribution lists, texts, membership emails?
- Advertise and market the event on your station's website, social media, on the air, through flyers or direct mail, through mailing lists of community influencers and partners. Here's how America Amplified publicized its series of listening events.

For virtual listening sessions

- Create a meeting in Zoom that requires registration; registrants will be sent a link and calendar invite for the event.
- Create quick intake questions for registrants to assess demographics (ZIP code, race/ethnicity, gender) as well as questions to assess this person's willingness to participate in dialogue with others who may have different views.
- Create a spreadsheet of participants and their responses to your intake questions. You can export this information from Zoom via the "reports" tab.
- Send participants listening session guidelines via email before the event, advising them on the date and time of the event, some of the basic Zoom instructions (chat function, gallery view, mute button, etc) and that these conversations will be recorded.

Convening (continued)

For virtual listening sessions (continued)

- Remind participants of ground rules, such as how dialogue not debate is preferred; to be curious, show respect, speak your truth, etc. Consider creating a slide deck with these points to share at the beginning of the session.
- Day of event — send emails/texts to remind participants.
- An option if you have resources: Partnering with a service like Local Voices Network to help manage, record and transcribe your session.

4. Host the event

- Your goal is to solicit insights, experiences, joys and sources of struggle/pain/vulnerability.
- Remember to minimize your own preconceptions of what might be their responses.
- Consider unconventional questions for your guests that get them to reveal their personal connection and lived experience. Start with general questions that get people talking (i.e. who influenced your views most in life?). Focus on community assets and strengths with positive questions (i.e. What is something that's going really well for you, or your community, right now?). Recognize the negative emotions associated with certain kinds of questions (i.e. What is your biggest source of stress right now?).
 - The Listening Session Conversation Guide is a good place to start.
- Leave room for solutions with questions like, “Can you share a story when you or someone close to you overcame, or avoided, [topic]? What was most important to your or their success?”

5. Send a thank you after each engagement

- Keep a centralized contact list for participants. Over the long term, create a database of community engagement contacts.
- Create a brief survey for participants to give you feedback on the session.
- Set an Outlook reminder to follow up with specific individuals at specific intervals (one month, each quarter, every six months, once a year) about future events.

Convening (continued)

6. Look for the journalism.

- After your town hall, meet with your news team to reflect on what was learned and what were the key takeaways. Pay particular attention to:
 - Moments when individual and community needs and aspirations of the community were raised: hopes, fears, confusion, disagreement
 - Emotional responses
 - Moments when your preconceived ideas about this community were challenged
 - Moments of surprise
- Go back to participants and/or community influencers before committing to the story/journalism. Do they think what you're proposing to pursue conforms to their understanding? Think of these individuals as your assignment editors.

7. Debrief about what worked and what could work better.

- After each engagement effort, look at the metrics you established in step 3 and determine if you hit those goals and you might change next time to improve your desired outcomes.
- Go back to your [Community Portrait Worksheet](#) and update it with what you've learned.
- Be sure to note if follow up was done and how it will be continued and potentially improved. Improvement could mean adding additional or different community influencers or partners.

8. Do the reporting at the service of that community. Share the story with all who made it possible

- Thank each source and those who participated in the community engagement but maybe weren't quoted. Include a link to your story.
- Encourage sources and participants to share their feedback on the work: Did it resonate with them? Was it accurate? What could have made it better or have more impact in their lives?
- Ask sources to share the story with others who may be interested. Say you welcome their feedback, too.

Return to step 1 and repeat the process with the insights you just learned.

Convenings (continued)

LISTENING SESSIONS CONVERSATION GUIDE

This is a sample script for a virtual listening session, hosted on Zoom. Please use this as a rough guide for virtual OR in-person listening sessions and adapt it for your own purposes.

You'll need:

- A licensed Zoom account (that allows sessions to go longer than 40 minutes).
- A main facilitator plus 1 or more co-facilitators to host break out rooms.

Listening Session Conversation Template [Title]

[Day], [Month], [Year]

Facilitators: Remember to verbally hand off when you've decided that your section is complete to the person indicated in the next session, otherwise they won't know when to step in.

| Who | Instructions for Facilitators | Script |
|------------------------|--|--|
| [Facilitator 1] | <p>Pre-Meeting Greeting + Technology Acclimation (20 minutes)</p> <p>Facilitators will be on the call early to test tech and help orient new participants to Zoom.</p> <p>[Facilitator 1] IF ON ZOOM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitor the “waiting room” and admit participants ● Confirm that all facilitators have recording, screen sharing and hosting permissions ● Remind facilitators to verbally hand off to next person who you want to speak ● Remind facilitators to “record to this computer” when they enter their breakout rooms ● (If having more than 3 breakout rooms) Ask | <p>Welcome people as they join the conversation space (digital or physical).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● IN ZOOM: Let people know they can change their name and indicate gender pronouns by hovering over their name and right clicking “rename” ● Ask everyone to mute themselves and to keep themselves muted until speaking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If they are on a phone *6 [star 6] mutes and unmutes. ● Ask everyone to notice that there are two views (accessible at the top right of the screen): Gallery View is recommended. ● Tell them where to find the chat button (bottom bar) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use if you have questions or are experiencing technical difficulties. ● Ask each person to chat what they had for dinner last night just to test out and make sure they know/understand how it works ● Tell participants how to find the reactions button at the bottom of the Zoom screen. Let people know they can use reactions to respond to a comment, can respond in the chat, and can raise their hand (or gesticulate in some way) to ask a question, or post a question in the chat. |

Convenings (continued)

| | facilitators to put that title in their name | |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <p>[Facilitator 1]</p> | <p>Intro to Event (3 minute)</p> <p>This section can be read by the facilitator or by the co-facilitator when available.</p> | <p>Welcome to [this station's] Listening Session.</p> <p>We're so grateful you're sharing your time with us tonight.</p> <p>Intro [station] staff and Co-facilitators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● [Facilitator 1] - [station] ● [Facilitator 2] - [station] ● [Facilitator 3] - [station] ● [Facilitator 4] - [Partnering Organization] ● [Facilitator 5] - [Partnering Organization] <p>Just a bit about [station]...</p> <p>We are a public radio station serving [area]. We are here to foster <i>collaborative</i> and <i>innovative</i> journalism. Instead of basing stories on preconceived notions, we focus on putting <i>listening first</i>. And that's exactly why we're here with you today — we're here to listen and facilitate dialogue.</p> <p>Together, we'll create a space to learn about each other's lives and perhaps discover potential solutions to shared challenges.</p> |
| <p>[Facilitator 2]</p> | <p>Rules (2 minute)</p> <p>[Facilitator 1] If on Zoom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meanwhile, prepare the breakout rooms (can be launched later) ● Take snapshot/screen capture of breakout room name list for future reference ● Prepare the speaking order in the chat <p><i>To transition to the next section, invite all participants to take a breath together.</i></p> | <p>You should have received the ground rules for the conversation via email and they've been cycling through in the slide show.</p> <p>We want to highlight one thing before we start...</p> <p>This conversation is being recorded and is “on the record.” Or put another way, it may be used in broadcast or quoting in a story.</p> <p>Someone from the [station] team will let you know if we intend on using something you say in broadcast.</p> <p>Does anyone have any questions about the guidelines for the conversation before we start?</p> |



Convenings (continued)

If less than 5 participants continue without breakout rooms (skip to “[Opening Questions](#)”)

Intro Breakout Groups
(2 minutes)

FACILITATORS: This is a good time for you to prepare your questions (see: “[Breakout Group - Questions](#)”)

[Facilitator 3]

We’re going to split into breakout rooms. A facilitator will be with you in each group.

You’ll have about **45 minutes** to talk together.

In the breakout group you’ll select someone to share back a few key takeaways of what’s discussed during *your* breakout session so the *whole group* will get a sense of what was covered.

After those 45 minutes in the breakout room, we’ll all return to the main room for that shareback and a closing larger group conversation.

Does anybody have any questions before we break into our smaller groups?

FACILITATORS

CONFIRM YOU’RE RECORDING THE BREAKOUT ROOM
(check top left corner of Zoom window)

Opening Question
(15 minutes)

If anyone is on the phone, please verbalize the names of people in the order that you plan to go. (This will help with transcription after the event.) Let people know we’ll use the same order for each question.

Facilitators post the **order of participants** and the **question** into the chat box

Facilitators, please **do** respond to this question to establish your connections with the group. Include your name, gender pronouns, and

Facilitators

(If in breakout rooms)

Welcome to this breakout group!

We’re gathered to talk along the broad themes of **[theme]**. It is something that will ultimately impact all of us in some way.

We are going to start our conversation with a modified “circle” process, where each person will take a turn speaking.

I’ll help transition us from one person to the next and I’ll post the speaking order into the chat.

You can always pass, or ask for us to come back to you.

Does anyone have any questions about this process?

Let’s start with a quick round of introductions.



Convenings (continued)

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| | <p>where you are from. Please model a brief response.</p> <p>Pause for answers.</p> | <p>Please share your first name (or a pseudonym), your gender pronouns, where you're joining from, and</p> <p>_____</p> <p>For this first round, I'll start...</p> |
| <p>Facilitators</p> | <p>Nominate Share-back person (2 minutes)</p> <p><i>If NOT in breakout rooms then skip to the next section.</i></p> | <p><i>(If in breakout rooms)</i></p> <p>Before we go deeper into the conversation we need to nominate a shareback person.</p> <p>Is there anyone who'd like to volunteer to shareback some of the key takeaways from this group?</p> <p>Of course, if none of you feel comfortable sharing for the group that's totally fine. I'd be happy to share what I've heard you folks discussing.</p> |
| <p>Facilitators</p> | <p>Group Conversation Process (2 minute)</p> | <p>For this next part of the conversation we're going to move into a more conversational style.</p> <p>All of you are encouraged to ask follow up questions of each other, follow your own curiosity—we want to hear from everybody. This is <i>your</i> conversion and an opportunity to get to know each other better.</p> <p>I may jump in to help move the conversation along, ask clarifying questions, or to make sure everybody has an opportunity to speak.</p> <p>Does anyone have any questions about the process before we begin?</p> |
| <p>Facilitators</p> | <p>Breakout group - Questions (41 minutes)</p> <p>Facilitators: these questions are stacked in a <i>suggested</i> order. You can spend longer or shorter amounts of time on any question or sections; use your judgment. Get people into storytelling mode and to speak from personal experience and observation.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who influenced your views on [topic] the most in life? What did they teach you? • What role does [any faultline - gender, race, etc.] play into how you think about [topic]? (personally and/or on a community level) <p>Negative emotion leaning questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you concerned about your community today? • What have you noticed about your feelings, or reactions to events since [big national or local event]? Has anything changed or surprised you? |

Convenings (continued)

Ask one question at a time, allowing participants to pick up threads and ask each other follow-ups, making sure everyone has a chance to respond.

Good follow ups:

- “Can you share a story from *your* experience that will help us understand this a little better?”
- “Where have you noticed or seen what you’re saying?”

It is not expected that the group will get to all of these questions. Let the participants interest and engagement dictate when to, or not, move onto the next question or section.

[Facilitator 1] will give 2 minute warning before breakout rooms close

- What are some of the losses you’ve experienced related to **[topic]**?
- What most concerns you about your community’s/family’s well being at this moment?
- What’s your biggest source of stress right now?
- Are you anxious about your safety?
- Have you, or people close to you, reached a breaking point?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt embarrassed by your community?

Positive emotion leaning questions

- What is something that’s going really well for you, or your community, right now?
- How much is **[topic]** impacting your stress right now? Is financial security an issue?

Solution orienting questions

- Can you share a story when you or someone close to you overcame, or avoided, more serious **[topic]** issues? What was most important to your or their success?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt really proud of your community?
- What do you see as the biggest obstacle for your own **[topic]** right now?
- If you could change one thing where you live related to how it handles or doesn’t address **[topic]** what would it be?
- What role do you think the government should, or should not, play in your community’s future?
- Has your opinion or thinking changed about what your community’s future looks like since **[perceived big community or national event]**?
- Has your thinking about **[topic/issue/community]** changed over time for you?
- Has there been any benefit or positive outcome from **[perceived big community or national event]** in your community life?
- How prepared do you feel your community is to solve problems in the future?
- Is there something you can think of that you’d like to see changed where you live?
- What do you think your community will look like in 6 months from now? What about in a year?



Convenings (continued)

Use clips from other reporting or shows you've done to elicit responses. Make it clear people can push back on what's being shared and add their own perspective.

Media portrait and relationship questions

- Is there a story about [topic] that media is missing or sharing incorrectly?
- What is working well for you, and/or the people who are important to you, when it comes to [topic] supports?

Not easily categorized questions

- What are some stereotypes you think people have about your community?
- Do you have generalizations or stereotypes about other communities? Is there a time when those generalizations or stereotypes changed for you?
- If you were in charge of 3 different reporters who would investigate *whatever* you wanted, what would you assign them to cover or investigate? (put another way, 'what do you need answers to?')

QUOTE/CLIP EXAMPLES

- In our process of reaching out to people to invite them to be part of tonight's conversation, one person replied: "After sleeping on this, I think I'm going to have to pass. I'm just really hesitant right now to go on the record as a Trump voter or even as a conservative. Honestly, I'm also so exhausted with politics and the media in general right now that I don't even feel like taking part in the overall discussion with anyone."
 - As you listened to this, what reactions do you have?
 - Did any personal memories or experiences come to mind?
 - When you think about reaching across the political divide?
 - What do you want to see?
 - Are there issues you'd be willing to personally compromise on? What might they be?
 - What stands in the way of compromise today?



Convenings (continued)

FACILITATORS CONFIRM YOU'VE STOPPED YOUR RECORDING

(Facilitator 1: confirm you've started new recording)

Return to Main Room (23 minutes)

Ask one question at a time, allowing participants to pick up threads and ask each other follow-ups, making sure everyone has a chance to respond.

If you have time here you might hone in on one or two topics or themes that rose to the top of people's list. You might ask people to dig deeper into these topics or ask each other questions.

The most important questions to ask during this closing session are in **bold**. If you only have time for one or two questions, make it them.

Remember to turn the conversation back to the topic by asking, "Where have you noticed or seen what you're saying?"

(If breakouts occurred)

Welcome back!

Let's take a few minutes to quickly hear some of the key takeaways from each of the breakout groups.

If strategies or potential solutions were mentioned to challenges please share how your group thought about addressing them.

Is there anything you heard that resonated with you or that you want to expand upon?

Thank you all for sharing...

We're going to move from the format of taking turns speaking to more natural back-and-forth conversation. I'd invite you to respond to points that resonate for you when they are made by others in the group while being mindful that everyone who wants to participate has an opportunity to do so.

- **What tools or information do you feel like you have? What tools, resources or information do you feel like you're missing to accomplish some of the changes you'd like to see in your life or community?**
- Do you have questions for us, the journalists?
- Do you have questions for each other?

Wrap-up (2 minutes)

You can reach out to me or any other of the [\[station\]](#) staff with additional concerns or questions.

Finally, it would mean a great deal to us if you fill out a [\[brief survey\]](#). It should take less than 2 minutes to complete and will help us assess how to improve these conversations for the future. Thank you all so much.

[Facilitator 1]

[Facilitator 2]



Convenings (continued)

[Facilitator 1]: Press the “stop recording” button at the bottom of the screen.

Stop ALL Recordings

Wait in the main room

(wait until everybody else has left, to make sure nobody has any lingering questions)

**Facilitator 1 +
2**

[Thank you, goodbye now.](#)

** FACILITATORS — Upload Breakout Room Recording**

- Before closing your Zoom application make sure you convert your recording. *(You should be prompted to do this after you ‘leave’ the meeting. This process may take a while, several minutes, be patient.)*
- After the conversion, your recording/s should be saved onto your computer hard drive (*not* the cloud). Consequently, you will need to upload that recording to the America Amplified team
- By default Zoom recordings are saved in the following directory...
 - **PC:** C:\Users\User Name\Documents\Zoom
 - **Mac:** /Users/User Name/Documents/Zoom
- Within that “Zoom” directory there should be a folder with a “YYYY-MM-DD HH.MM.SS” naming prefix corresponding to today’s session, this contains everything needed to be uploaded
- **Please add your first name to both the MP4 (video) file and the M4A (audio) file**
- **Please email [organizing/lead producer/facilitator] once the upload is complete. Thank you 😊**

