

# ***Neighbor to Neighbor Community Conversations: Bringing Black and White Together***

Highlights of the Story  
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The Cincinnati Neighbor to Neighbor project started dealing with racial tensions following the race riots in 2001. The strategy was to train over 100 moderators to lead 145 forums in neighborhoods across the city.

## **BACKGROUND OF RACIAL DIVISIONS**

### **April 2001**

“No one fully understood the danger of Cincinnati's deep racial divisions until a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black man in April. African-Americans were outraged. Within days, the anger and frustration that had been building for years spilled into the streets. Rioters broke windows, looted stores, burned trash bins and threw bricks at passing motorists. A city once known as a good place to live and raise kids was embarrassed and stunned.”

Dan Horn  
*The Cincinnati Enquirer*

### **1) Adoption Of The NIF *Racial And Ethnic Tensions* Book And The “Forum In Every Neighborhood Plan”**

In response to the riots, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* newspaper staff began to investigate how to shift the focus from the Cincinnati Police/African-American leadership negotiation to a broader discussion of race relations in the Cincinnati area. Two objectives were identified: the first was to involve a much wider segment of the population than had been involved in previous attempts to improve race relations; the second was to move beyond “just talk” to “solutions-focused” discussions.

The *Enquirer* contacted the Kettering Foundation to inquire about the feasibility of using the National Issues Forum (NIF) model for the planned citizen discussion of race relations. Kettering agreed demonstrate a deliberative forum for the Editorial Board using the NIF *Racial and Ethnic Tensions* issue book. The demonstration was persuasive, and the *Enquirer* adopted the issue book and the deliberative forum model for the new Neighbor to Neighbor project.

During the summer the Steering Committee debated the best way to design the community forums. The principal components of the plan that emerged were the following:

- (a) Neighbor to Neighbor would convene a forum in every city neighborhood and surrounding jurisdiction in Hamilton County and Northern Kentucky – an ambitious **145** targeted areas. Local organizations would be identified by *Enquirer* staff in each area and would be asked to host the forum.
- (b) A parallel effort to recruit forum moderators would be led by community groups. A series of orientation/training sessions would be scheduled for October and all moderators would be required to attend one of the sessions.
- (d) Each forum would conclude with a group process that would request (1) personal commitments to do something to improve race relations, and (2) recommendations to be sent to community leaders.

**2) Moderator Recruitment:** a call to engage “in a conversation that identifies where common ground exists on the racial issues that divide us.”

Municipal leaders sent recruitment letters to city and county employees soliciting experienced facilitators. Leaders of political organizations asked for facilitators from among their ranks. Heads of local professional associations that were likely

to have facilitators or qualitative researchers among their membership sent letters such as the following:



Dear Facilitator Friend:

We are a growing group of concerned citizens, brought together by *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, who want to make a difference in our community on the critical issue of race relations.

The Cincinnati Chapter of the American Marketing Association has formed a partnership with *The Cincinnati Enquirer* to identify professional facilitators among our membership to facilitate these conversations. We'd like to enlist your help as a facilitator.

Our goal is to engage the citizens of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky in a solutions-oriented conversation on race. The goal is ambitious because we hope to reach every city, village and township in the region, along with each of the city's 48 neighborhoods. That's about 145 conversations in all.

Imagine, if you will, the entire region engaged in a conversation that identifies where common ground exists on the racial issues that divide us. Imagine the citizens of Greater Cincinnati building a "citizens report" on how the region should respond. Imagine the citizens of Greater Cincinnati giving the nation a model for how a community can rise above its past and become a place where people of all races and ethnicities want to live and do business.

Following the neighborhood conversations, we expect a second, follow-up forum that will become the basis for a televised town hall meeting simulcast on WCET-48, another local TV station and several local radio stations. Also, Cincinnati.Com will host a website to help citizens track what everybody's saying. This is all part of the Cincinnati Media Collaborative announced last week.

We're committed to keeping the initiative alive at least a year, perhaps 18 months, depending on how much energy and community action it creates.

Please help us make a difference by offering your talents to help citizens be heard and understood.

Despite the call for “professional facilitators,” the response ranged from raw recruits to heads of nonprofit organizations skilled in handling group dynamics. The professions drawn from the solicitations included qualitative researchers and also such neophytes to facilitation as professional marketers, advertising agency executives, architects, theatre designer, IT specialists, hypnotherapist, nurses, social workers, administrative assistants, professor of theology, schoolteacher, salesmen, sales trainer, company managers, and housewives.

**By the time the conversations were underway, 106 facilitators had volunteered.**

They came because they wanted to “make a difference instead of grousing on the sidelines,” attracted to Neighbor to Neighbor by a format that was solutions-oriented and that allowed those with previous facilitation experience to use their skills to help heal the city. Sample comments:

- “It sounded like the voice of reason, a way for people to talk and exchange ideas. Part of the problem in Cincinnati is, when the king is naked nobody wants to say he’s naked. The problem is that it’s business as usual.”
- “I don’t speak much about social and political issues in Cincinnati, where people are so conservative. But when the rioting happened and I got the email inviting me to participate as a moderator I thought, this is where I can make a difference because I know how to do this” (market research moderator).

**THE ACTUAL CONVERSATIONS: CHALLENGES IN HELPING TO HEAL THE COMMUNITY**

**Challenge #1. The inadequacy of the NIF model**

Conflict resolution is a matter of getting individual realities that need to be acknowledged by all concerned, then negotiating how to make the changes and spread the resources so that all needs are better met. But when encountered

prejudice and confrontations among participants, they often stuck to the NIF format in effort to impose structure on the “gut-wrenching things involved.” Typically they were the less experienced facilitators. These sessions tended to be the least successful for the following reasons:

- Participants felt offended at being cut off: e.g., “African American participants started to relate stories of prejudice in their lives and started to lecture to the group. I was torn between listening to something valuable and cutting them off so we could hear what other people had to say. I cut them off and they were offended. They felt I didn’t want to hear about their experiences of prejudice.”
- The sessions were “surfacy”: e.g., “The dialogue was approaches to dealing with racism, but we skipped over ‘why are you people so angry,’ ‘why are you white people so blind?’”
- In public deliberation, personal experience and the approaches become the stimulus for meaningful dialogue; but for novices in particular, the approaches made a daunting job harder: “people didn’t come up with things on their own or really think about what the issues meant to them.”

If a black man is shot to death we react. I want to know why he ran. I wanted to hear how other people think about that. I know what baggage I carry with me, what do they bring to the table? The format kept this from being a free-for-all, but the focus on the three approaches kept us from thinking about what we were there for and had to do.
- Inevitably – because such Community Conversations had become pro forma – the action plans were often inane: “People thought, ‘Whatever.’ They were ready to go home. They came up with ‘Smile at people,’ not something concrete.”

In contrast, the more experienced facilitators were able to reorganize the community conversations to enable participants to understand each other’s personal experiences first and political agendas second. Many African-American

experienced facilitators had felt all along that communication between the two races should be the primary objective of the deliberation:

At the very core of the matter is a problem with the way people view each other: a lack of respect for people who were different. If we could all start there and accept that (including African-Americans), we could move into some of the underlying causes as to why we don't all see each other as equal human beings.

In retrospect, it was unrealistic of the Neighbor to Neighbor organizers to expect that two races so disconnected from one another would find “common ground on the racial issues that divide us” in a 2 1/2-hour session.

“There are no race relations. We are two different communities in two different worlds that hardly have anything to do with each other” (NIF issue book, p. 3).

The goal of Neighbor to Neighbor to find common ground was valid, but segregated Cincinnati needed to move in stages: first engage in a new conversation about the issues and perceptions that divide us, then enter into fresh and meaningful dialogue about the solutions that can help us become one.

**Challenge #2. Racial tensions and stereotypes threatened to derail the community conversations.**

The Community Conversations were typically held in homes and churches, with 15-25 participants. The facilitators had been trained to keep the discussion focused on working toward (1) personal commitments to improve race relations, and (2) recommendations to be sent to community leaders.

Frequently, however, white respondents argued there was no racial problem. Usually the co-facilitators were racially paired – one black, one white – and participants in the all-white sessions often tried to make the black facilitator explain or defend the behavior they attributed to his or her race. When the sessions were racially segregated – which happened frequently, since this was a

neighborhood initiative and most of Cincinnati's neighborhoods are de facto segregated – racial stereotypes often dictated people's thinking. Participants sometimes told the facilitator, "You're different from the other black people," and then described black people in subhuman terms.

The few all-black sessions tended to collapse in failure: e.g., "I had one group of all black people, all educated, and they called it a 'crock,' 'blah, blah, blah.' I stopped trying to bring them back on focus." The major reason given for the failure was the inability of facilitators to demonstrate the benefit of public deliberation. The topic was too explosive among African Americans for novices to handle:

It was just the usual discussion. Is this a good idea? Is that a good idea? We've had these things before – we've talked about bussing and such. Hit people where they live. Show me what's in it for me. There was nothing in this for most black people other than sit around and talk. For the good white folks, it was a chance to get engaged, which is fine.

The racially mixed groups were often confrontational. "One of the hardest things to deal with was when African-American respondents and Caucasians got into a confrontation, and before each could explain their thoughts, other people in the groups started taking sides. Trying to diffuse that while trying to maintain the notion that we can all have different realities that cause us to respond differently – to such a hot topic – was very challenging." Also, "people have different abilities to communicate in a non-provocative way, and some people got angry at the provocative things being said."

Staying neutral under such conditions was extremely difficult. A white facilitator who is an established qualitative researcher at a leading research company said that facilitating Neighbor to Neighbor conversations was "extremely challenging. I felt frustrated and inadequate." A black facilitator who tolerated assaults on her humanity as an African American concluded, "White people see what they do as

right and justifiable whether it is or not, and black people can't seem to break through that and make them see that our issues are real." Two of the less experienced facilitators told the participants off.

**Challenge #3. Novices quit. A handful of experienced facilitators took over.**

Of the 106 facilitators recruited, 13 experienced facilitators took over the lion's share, leading between five and thirteen Community Conversations each.

Essentially, the differences between the novice facilitators who quit and the experienced ones who continued are:

- The novices were disillusioned because they lacked the skills to generate meaningful discussion about either the nature of the city's racial divide or what to do about it: "I had a group of people who didn't know each other and had no commonality when they walked in, and they also didn't have any commonality when they walked out. So bringing together people with no particular connection and trying to get them to listen to each other and have a really productive conversation and then decide what they're going to do together – that was very ambitious." In contrast, the experienced facilitators possessed the necessary skills to stimulate meaningful dialogue, particularly about confronting the racial divide.
- The novices who were African Americans took the racism personally: "The group I helped facilitate was very accusatory and unwilling to do more than meet again without any making any personal or group pledges to improve the racial climate in Cincinnati." The experienced facilitators who were African American were committed to breaking through barriers: "My goal was that I wouldn't react to any negativeness or ignorance, not take anything personally. And also, I knew I could make a difference."
- In a few instances, the dropouts were blinded by their own prejudice: "My original attendance was in anticipation of some open, interacting, and meaningful discussions on race relations. From the beginning it became apparent that it was nothing but a pity party for the African-American

people. Was that the intention? With the outline given, that was the only conclusion that could be reached.” The experienced facilitators knew enough to examine their prejudice: “I was concerned with my own abilities to listen, given any racial bias I might have had.”

### **The 13 experienced facilitators allowed personal stories about racial prejudice to infuse the community conversations.**

Their sessions tended to have the following characteristics, reflecting their conflict resolution and diversity management skills:

- (a.) “Keep everybody on track and at the same time validate the different realities. I did 12 sessions and it worked.”
- (b.) “Get out of the way. The information and energy and solutions are with the group. I did six sessions. You have to let them know that and just keep them on track.”
- (c.) Push participants to move beyond their original assumptions: “I had an all white group denying there were any racial problems. I tried to push them. ‘Let’s talk about whether you interact with the African Americans who go to your church.’ Try to find a bit of a step to get them to relate to this problem.” “Give them a point of reference – ‘let’s say your kid goes to college and his roommate is an African-American. Let’s talk about how you feel about that.’”

Keeping participants on track also meant **leveraging the NIF approaches with stories of personal experiences**: “We could, for example, figure out how a personal story fit into one of the approaches and set of values being discussed. The approaches gave people ways to solve racial tension, so that brought to bear that there is a problem of racial tension, and how can I relate to it.”

- “At one meeting there was an African-American woman, and I asked her to tell us how she felt about this. She told how she’d been mistreated all her life – told of the indignities, the shame and

harassment to which she has been subjected. Having people like this in the all-white sessions was a teaching experience. The same thing happened in another session. We talk, but we do not realize. When they talk, and the others listen, then people learn in their hearts.”

- “You could see the confusion in [white] people’s faces. That they had no idea. They needed to hear some real experiences of black people to be able to move on. One man told about his experience with police when he was stationed in Alabama. A white woman started weeping and said she didn’t know a neighbor had been through such an experience. The experience that he related changed the whole tone of the session.”

In one instance, a facilitator **added a videotape** that “a guy brought out to show us on police brutality toward his cousin. I let him show it provided we could go through the Neighbor to Neighbor agenda first.”

**Instead of insisting upon action steps, most of the experienced facilitators encouraged the participants to meet again to build some group cohesiveness out of which community action might develop.** Many of the groups did indeed meet again, led by some of these same facilitators. “So back to goals, there were multiple goals – to accomplish our agenda, but also just to get people to think or talk or listen, and the goal of individuals connecting with each other.”

### **LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING**

1. The NIF issue book is useful when it serves as a framework for discussion. It puts the participants’ attention on moving forward together “instead of just talk about their painful experience or the ignorance that other people have.” This brings focus into which we can integrate the personal experience.

2. But the model should be broadened to deal more effectively with racial tensions. For example:

Bring folks together and allow the emotional discharge. Then add a pronged approach of education and deliberation. Psychologists say education is what happens when people come into differences, so people can distance themselves from their emotions and say, 'oh yeah I'm kind of fitting into that model.' Then get into the deliberative piece: how are we going to work through these issues together and build some bridges."

3. The action steps can be psychological as much as political. For example, "diversity-awareness for kids, parents, business community, and churches," "emphasize the human potential," "identify and listen to problems as well as solutions," "share personal experiences of diverse individuals," "discover deeper understanding of issues," "build on cross-neighbor communications with something family oriented," and story-telling: "reconciliation begins with truth telling: I understand your truth - not argue or debate but understand. - and next time I'll tell you my truth."

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