

THE HOW AND WHY OF COMMUNITY SPEAKS



 WHY

 HOW

Why

The purpose of a Community Speak is for community members to work together to explore issues and solutions.

Community Speaks are often confused with other forms of gathering, while the event may look remarkably similar, the difference is the purpose. Examples of other similar events with different purposes are:

Town Hall	Purpose: for community members to ask questions of people in positions of formal authority
Focus Group	Purpose: for community members to provide their thoughts to researchers on a given subject
Knowledge exchange	Purpose: for community members and organizations/institutions to learn about each other's realities/perspectives on a given subject



How

Community speaks can take various shapes and forms and ideally are co-designed with residents. The following are some ideas that can be adopted and adapted to your own context.

Participants:

- The number of participants will depend on the venue, budget and your reach in the community. Successful Community Speaks have been held with as few as 20 and as many as 100 participants.
- Community members can be defined any way that makes sense for the topic. You can restrict a Community speak to residents or include businesses/organizations in the community or on the specific project. Either way, participants should have some prior relationship with local community building activities.

Venue:

- Community Speaks should be held in an accessible location.
- One of the key elements of a Community Speak is the idea of breaking bread together, therefore, food is an important element of the event. If your budget allows, a sit down dinner is most desirable, with people sitting at tables of 4-8 people.
- While there isn't a presentation per se at a Community Speak, it is important that the facilitator can be heard. Depending on the size of the venue, you might want to consider a microphone.
- The venue can be anywhere from a church hall to a restaurant. Wherever the venue, it should be set up in such a way that people feel that they are participating in something special.

Format:

Generally, an in person Community Speak is about 2 hours long and takes on the following format:

- People are greeted by staff or volunteers and seated at their tables (an enthusiastic greeting adds to the sense that each person is a valued participant)
- Food is served and people have a chance for informal conversation
- The host facilitator (could be a staff person or a resident) welcomes everyone, while the dishes are cleared away and flip chart paper and markers are distributed
- If Community Speaks are part of a regular cycle of community events, this is a good opportunity to reflect back on the last Community Speak and, ideally, itemize the things in the community that have taken place in relation to the ideas generated.
- The facilitator poses the first of three questions:
 - Question #1: what is your experience with the the topic (participants are experts of their own context)
 - Question #2: where do you see potential for community building activities related to the topic (asset based)
 - Question #3: what do you see as your role, the role of local organizations and the role of institutions related to the topic. (personal ownership, collective solutions)
- Report backs: Giving people the opportunity to address the group is an important part of the event. In order to keep it from getting too long, asking for each table to discuss what the one key point they want to share is before their representative addresses the larger group.

To adapt to a virtual format, make sure that you keep the original intent in mind:

- Encouraging people to bring their dinner to the event or even sending gift cards so that they can “share” a meal are ways to keep the “breaking bread” part of the event even in a virtual environment
- Breaking into small groups allows for everyone to speak and gives the feel of exploring something together
- Casual conversation is more difficult virtually, so the early part of the meeting should have a good check in question that helps people find common ground can be a good start (e.g. what games you played as a child, a random act of kindness you’ve seen)

Follow up:

Community Speaks can be worthwhile stand alone events, they become more impactful when you facilitate a series with report backs on who has done what since the last one:

- Write up the notes and share them back with the participants
- Identify your role on the topic and share that with the participants
- Send a survey asking participants what their commitment to the topic is
- Identify the policies or initiatives of governments or institutions related to the topic
- Use Community Speaks as a springboard to co-design a project and report back on the progress of that project

The purpose of a Community Speak is for people to explore issues and solutions. As with most community building exercises, people’s involvement can be light (attending one event), medium (attending a series of events) or heavy (helping to plan events, following up, co-creating etc). Whatever the topic, whatever the format, honouring people and their contributions to community building should be at the core.

We hope you find these tools useful in continuing the momentum to build on local strengths, facilitated collaborative processes and learn together. Catalysts' Circle offers workshops, coaching and strategy design services that can further help you dig deeply into these keys and explore the others that can help you make a truly Connected Community.



Catalysts' Circle can be found at www.connectedcommunities.ca or email agloger@catalystscircle.ca for more information