

Aim Higher, Dig Deeper

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Articulation of Question

What can we do to mitigate fear, anger, and misinformation in order to build the trust necessary to navigate dialogue on the difficult issue of gun violence?

Findings

There are a number of reasons why discussions on gun violence generate strong emotion and often end in impasse.

1. The more complex an issue is, the more difficult it is to navigate. All five of the primary sources of conflict are present in the issue of gun violence, making it very complex. Those five sources are differences in information, interests, or values, and differences in the view of the relationship or how the system for addressing an issue does or “should” workⁱ. Examples of these differences are readily apparent – proponents and opponents of gun control cite different data sources and different personal experiencesⁱⁱ; they offer different views of personal v. communal safety and how to best protect oneselfⁱⁱⁱ; they both invoke “values”; both emphasize “rights,” with some emphasizing individual rights and others emphasizing concepts of community^{iv}; and they reflect different understandings of the government's role or authority, with proponents of gun control invoking the federal government's power^v and opponents asking state legislatures to render federal efforts at gun control “unenforceable”^{vi}. Yet rather than identifying and exploring these differences, discussions relating to gun violence often focus prematurely on action items and are generally posed in dichotomous terms: Should assault weapons be banned, or allowed without restriction? Should background checks be expanded and criminal penalties increased, or would these actions be simply “useless”? Is the “real” issue guns or mental illness? As Dan Yankelovich observed many years ago, trying to force the public to make a choice between two one-sided proposals will generally lead to a dead end^{vii}.

2. The issue of gun violence has been further complicated by the political exploitation of both demographic and regional differences over time on a wide range of issues. This has strained relationships between and among different groups of Americans^{viii}. Even a seemingly simple and “severable” policy proposal like expanded background checks taps into a complicated mix of differing regional and community experiences, and different hopes, fears and visions for the future, along with suspicion and distrust of those who don't “share the same way of life”. These differences are documented in the detailed statistical analysis of 12 different community types across the nation prepared by the Patchwork Nation project^{ix}. Polls run by the project in the immediate aftermath of the Newtown massacre reflected an urban-rural divide when participants were asked if they thought firearms either “protect people from becoming victims” or “put people's safety at risk”, with those in rural areas more likely to agree that guns protect people^x. These regional differences and appeals to the underlying distrust are reflected in the policy proposals of [The National Rifle Association](#) (NRA) and [The Brady Campaign](#)(BC). The NRA's proposal aligns with the fear of being left defenseless without guns and the BC proposal aligns with the fear of being killed by one^{xi}.

3. The different views on what to do about gun violence are often supported by “us” v. “them” narratives. These types of narratives reinforce feelings of fear, anger and alienation^{xii}. The rhetoric that is in many cases used to push or oppose various political proposals related to gun violence has escalated over time and can be mapped to some of the higher levels on Sternberg's “taxonomy of hate”^{xiii}, indicating a depth of distrust that will be hard to repair. The emotions of fear and anger^{xiv} that are generated by prolonged and unresolved conflict inevitably lead to difficulty in processing new information, increases in reactive volatility, and in many cases automatic rejection of new ideas and approaches^{xv}.

4. The public does not receive, and does not currently have a means of receiving, the consistent, coherent and reliable information needed to make "wise choices" and create sustainable, workable policies^{xvi}. In fact, past legislation has made it difficult to both collect and study data relating to gun violence^{xvii}. Both proponents and opponents routinely cite data without the context that is required for its evaluation. Even when it might be useful, available “factual information” is often distrusted by the public both because of its source and the way in which it is presented^{xviii}.

5. There are other systemic, structural flaws in our broader political structures that leave the public distrustful that their efforts will make a difference. This includes the absence of mechanisms for the

average citizen to hold individual decision-makers accountable for the decisions made, or for their lack of responsiveness to citizen concerns as opposed to “special interests”.^{xix} The gap between what the public is offered and how it defines a responsive and responsible government is documented in a recent [research report published by Public Agenda](#). This gap and the resulting resentment and despair relating to how policy is made^{xx} decreases the willingness of citizens to engage in a sustained way on difficult issues like gun violence.

6. There are tools that can mitigate the emotion, misinformation and mistrust that accompany the issue of gun violence. These are dialogue based, although not in the narrow sense of many past “deliberative dialogue” based efforts^{xxi}. To be effective, dialogue on the issue of gun violence will have to allow participants to explore and reflect on the range of emotions, experiences, values and information presented, and incorporate the concepts of self-determination, equality, and empathy that underlie many alternative dispute resolution processes^{xxii}.

7. The tools that have the most promise are aligned with research on “wisdom”^{xxiii}.

Recommendations

Facilitators often say "Go slow to go fast" and that is good advice here. We need to dig deeper and aim higher in structuring our public conversations about gun violence if we are to make progress.

→ Dialogue planners can frame issues in ways that invite and allow the underlying fears, distrust, and differences in values, information and experience that derail most discussions on gun violence to be addressed. This means starting at a level other than positional debate on, or evaluation of, specific policy proposals^{xxiv}. General framing like “Keeping Our Communities Safe: An Exploration of the Issue of Gun Violence” invites engagement on, and exploration of, a range of questions such as “what brought you here today?” “what is your experience with guns?” “what other interrelating factors or issues are present?” “how do these interact?” “how would we like our communities to be?” These kinds of open questions invite the sharing of a range of perspectives in a nonthreatening way^{xxv}. Dialogue framed in this manner not only helps to build understanding and connection between participants, it also avoids the resentment and disengagement that can accompany efforts to focus citizens on "recommendations" or "issues" framed by those outside the group. Giving participants choices on which questions to engage with, and how to engage, also calms emotions and builds trust. There are several models of large group dialogues, including the [Right Question Project's](#) Question Formulation

Technique™, [World Cafe's](#), [Conversation Cafe's](#), and [Listening Circles](#), that help participants shape the direction and content of the dialogue^{xxvi}.

➔ At its base level “civility” means communicating in ways that reflect mutual respect, care and concern, and that support joint action and effort^{xxvii}. This means that participants should know from the outset that every voice counts and all are welcome. That does not mean though that all behaviors are equally welcome. When conversations get heated, facilitators should know how to use reflective listening skills to calm and engage participants^{xxviii}. There are other facilitation skills, often used in transformative mediation, which provide emotional support to those in conflict so that they feel heard and are in turn able to better listen to information and ideas shared by others^{xxix}. Facilitators also should be familiar with the narrative patterns that align with Sternberg's “Stories of Wisdom” and be prepared to use those both to support and reframe when inflammatory language is used^{xxx}.

➔ Transparency regarding information development and evaluation is another key element in building trust. Although dialogue participants need access to clear, consistent, understandable and honest data, they also need to be invited to consider what makes data understandable and honest^{xxxi}. Engagement with data, along with ongoing and collaborative information development, integration and evaluation, helps participants to integrate the different factors – information, interests, values, relationships, and systemic effects and needs – that underlie complex issues. This means providing opportunities for participants to both give and get feedback on the information that is brought into the process. Framing that provides these opportunities helps participants work through the data-wisdom continuum^{xxxii}.

➔ Dialogue processes that are multi-layered and more organic than linear, not only allow participants to make choices as to how and when to engage as they proceed to work through the issue, they allow the necessary time and space for reflection^{xxxiii}. As a first layer, a diverse group of stakeholders might be asked to help plan an initial dialogue process. Participants at each dialogue might be asked for input on next steps. As you move forward, allowing for a range of dialogue structures, from in-depth small group dialogues around a particular component of the overall issue, to opportunities for on-line input through surveys and moderated blogs, to occasional large group events where both updates and additional input can be provided, allows individuals to choose their level of involvement. It also allows them to engage in their area of greatest concern – values, information,

interests, etc. In addition to providing the reflective time and space needed for individuals to process new information and new ideas, this kind of approach helps to accommodate the busy schedules of modern life. Knowing both that there are or will be next steps and that they can control their level and area of involvement encourages citizens to invest their time and energy in the dialogue process^{xxxiv}.

➔ Starting dialogues on gun violence at the local and regional levels among groups and organizations that are non partisan and have both a diverse membership and a common bond, such as Rotary or other service clubs, faith communities, or professional groups^{xxxv} can also help to mitigate fear and distrust and set a good foundation for expanding dialogue into the broader community. Initial dialogues can be framed around a standard or value that the group holds in common^{xxxvi}. These groups can model civil dialogue, and then informally and formally engage others within a network that spans more than one community^{xxxvii}. They can also help in training and recruiting facilitators.

➔ Another powerful way of framing that builds toward wisdom and minimizes negative emotions is to engage participants in thinking about how they would like their communities to be^{xxxviii}. To be effective though, dialogue processes must be separated from the political process. This means both that the existence of dialogue should not be an excuse for delays in the political process, and that the political process should not be allowed to disrupt the dialogue process^{xxxix}. To trust the process, participants need clear, consistent and honest information from the outset about what parts of the dialogue, if any, will be used or made available to others and by whom, what the next steps are following the dialogue, and how the process is or will be evaluated^{xl}.

➔ The types of dialogue outlined above can evolve to a “national conversation” if local and regional conversations are coherently linked through on-line tools. Processes for linking knowledge built through various dialogues, and looping that knowledge back to citizens for additional dialogue, can be used to knit together the emerging body of knowledge. These could include not only posting and organizing of various types of information, but also opportunities for participants to be involved in evaluating, refining, reporting, and inviting further input on the ideas that emerge^{xli}. Any such structure must be easy to navigate, monitored to ensure its consistency with the “wisdom” approaches outlined above, and clearly nonpartisan. If willing to work collaboratively, the nation's education institutions might be the best “hosts” of such an on-line workspace^{xlii}.

The above will take perseverance and focus from a wide array of civic groups and political will. Establishing a sustained dialogue between and among communities and regions can, however, not only help us find a way forward on the issue of gun violence, it can help heal some of the rifts that have eroded our national problem-solving capacity.

- i Christopher Moore. 1996. The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict. Jossey-Bass.
- ii Consider the differences in the experiences utilized by the NRA's "Armed Citizen" feature and the "Victims and Survivors" section of the Brady Center website.
- iii Compare, for instance, the GOP's position on the second amendment indicating guns are the best form of protection as compared to the framing used by the Democratic Party and the White House in which the focus is on safety through gun control.
- iv On the one hand it is argued that the right to possess specific firearms should be defended on the grounds that "Semi-automatics are needed across the country for home protection or sports... If they're successful at doing that, then they can take the rest of them away." On the other, firearms are seen as creating only destruction when arguing for greater regulation: "I came out today with my son because I think it is important that we share our voice that this idea that anybody can go and buy these kinds of weapons of destruction, and my son's life is at risk, is insane to me, and I have to let our legislators know this is wrong."
- v Senator Ron Latz made his case in this article, claiming: "I think most people agree that universal background checks is the first place we should start... We need to focus on what we can accomplish right now to make our state safer. The outright banning of guns is a conversation that is more suited on the federal level."
- vi Zarkhin, Fedor. Feb 16, 2013. "Missouri Senate committee hears support for gun bill". Columbia Missourian: p3. In summarizing a hearing "on a bill that would make unenforceable federal laws or executive action that would restrict access to guns", one witness testified that "The states have to step up to tyranny. The states have to step up to a federal government that is overstepping its bounds".
- vii Yankelovich, Daniel. 2001. The Magic of Dialogue. Touchstone.
- viii The tendency of media to reduce complex policy decisions to an allocation of the spoils between "winners" and "losers" can turn this suspicion and distrust into fear, anger, and a determination to protect that way of life. In his New Pragmatism address, Yankelovich focused on the cultural causes that undermine our national "problem-solving capability" which included the tendency of the media to report politics as entertainment or a sporting event, a growing expert-public gap driven by 'top-down' talk, and a decline of structures for collective civic learning. It is this kind of structure that is addressed further in the Recommendations section of this essay.
- ix The Jefferson Institute created the Patchwork Nation project in order to better understand how communities across the country experience culture, the economy, and politics. Their team's analysis led to the identification of 12 community types with different mixes of attributes. These community types help to illustrate both the consistencies and differences in interests and values in communities across the nation. Note the regional breakdown of those who argue that gun rights should be protected and those who argue guns should be controlled aligns with positive and negative ratings in the NRA's rating of legislators.
- x There are also areas of agreement despite regional difference. Gallup has illustrated that a majority of Americans believe courtrooms and classrooms would be more dangerous were judges and school officials armed and also that handguns, the weapon that results in the greatest number of deaths by firearm, should not be prohibited.
- xi On the one hand the NRA argues that "when it comes to the most beloved, innocent and vulnerable members of the American family—our children—we as a society leave them utterly defenseless, and the monsters and predators of this world know it and exploit it". On the other the BC claims "Every death is a tragedy, whether in a mass shooting that horrifies our entire nation, or one of the 32 gun murders or 90 gun deaths in our communities and homes every day."
- xii Corry, Geoffrey. Fall 2012. "Political Dialogue Workshops: Deepening the Peace Process in Northern Ireland". *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*: 30(1): 53-80.
- xiii Sternberg, Robert J. 2005. "Understanding and Combating Hate". The Psychology of Hate. Ed Robert J. Sternberg. American Psychological Association. Sternberg identified three components of hate which alone, and in various combinations, allow us to identify 7 different forms of hate, escalating in scale in both danger and intensity. These range from "Cool Hate" reflected in disengagement from, distrust of, and lack of compassion for an individual or group, through to "Burning Hate", a desire to annihilate ones enemies, even at the cost of one's own life. As he points out, we as individuals develop stories that help define our values and interests, explain our relationships, and define the rules of right or wrong or "systems" we live with – the way we think the world "should work". These stories or "narratives" are key to individual identity. This is why challenges presented in terms of who is "right" or "wrong" are often perceived as a personal threat or rejection. Consider the following Jan 13, 2013 quote, reported in Achenbach, Higham, and Horwitz's *The Washington Post* article, "How NRA's true believers converted a marksmanship group into a mighty gun lobby": "Grover Norquist, the influential tax activist and an NRA board member since 2000, believes gun control advocates fail to recognize that their efforts are viewed by many gun owners as a message that says, 'You don't like me.' That message blots out all other efforts to communicate, he said. And no one, he said, votes for a candidate simply because that candidate is in favor of gun control. Millions of voters, however, will vote against a candidate on that single issue, he said. He thinks Democrats' efforts to pass new gun laws will backfire. 'The D's keep coming back to this. This is so visceral to them,' Norquist said. 'Again, it's an expression of contempt for Middle America. They don't like you and yours and don't think you should be in charge of the capacity to take care of yourself.'"

- xiv Stains Jr., Robert R. “Reflection for Connection: Deepening Dialogue Through Reflective Processes”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*: 30(1): 33-51. *See also*, Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. 1999. [Difficult Conversations](#). Viking. *See also*, Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. 2011. “Don't Count Us Out”.
- xv Sternberg, Robert J. 2005. “Understanding and Combating Hate”. [The Psychology of Hate](#). Ed Robert J. Sternberg. American Psychological Association. *See also*, Cloke, Ken. 2001. [Mediating Dangerously](#). Jossey-Bass.
- xvi Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. 2011. “Don't Count Us Out”. *See also*, Nadler, Gerald and William J. Chandon. 2010. [Smart Questions](#). Jossey-Bass.
- xvii Koper, Christopher, Daniel J. Woods, and Jeffrey A. Roth. 2004. “An Updated Assessment of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, Report to the National Institute of Justice: Impacts on Gun Markets and Gun Violence, 1994-2003”. Report to the National Institute of Justice, United States Department of Justice. *See also*, Associated Press. Jan 20, 2013. “Tracing Firearms a slow, difficult task”. *Columbia Daily Tribune*.
- xviii For example, Fox News and MSNBC are both known for pushing a particular point of view. A recent [New York Times article about MSNBC](#) stated “Many progressives (and conservatives) now view the channel as a megaphone for liberal politicians, ideas and attacks against those who disagree. Such a megaphone — clearly marked, always on — has never existed before on television.” *See also*, Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. 2011, “Don't Count Us Out”.
- xix It is not enough to say that elections hold decision-makers accountable. Some decisions, like limitations on the computerization of data or failure to adequately fund enforcement activities, may not be widely reported when made. Elections may occur too late or too early in the decision-making cycle to have an effect. Citizens may not live in the district of those legislators who are making decisions that affect them (consider, for example, the 2003 vote in Missouri to pass concealed -carry legislation four years after voters narrowly rejected a related ballot initiative in a statewide election). Retroactive long term analyses of contentious political decisions, their consequences, and the “lessons learned”, are rarely undertaken by political leaders and reported back to the public in a transparent, collaborative way that would promote public understanding and the type of personal accountability the public is looking for. *See Don't Count Us Out*, 2011 which documents the gap between information provided and the information the public wants with respect to accountability.
- xx In discussing [his New Pragmatism](#) in 2008, Daniel Yankelovich noted 85% of Americans feel the country is “on the wrong track”. In the 2010 “[Our Budget, Our Economy](#)” discussion held by America Speaks, 89% of participants agreed the “system isn't working”. According to one survey cited in the 2013 [Millennials Civic Health Index](#) published by National Conference on Citizenship, CIRCLE, Mobilize.org, and Harvard University's Institute of Politics, 43% of likely non-voters between the ages of 18 and 29 indicated it did not matter who got elected because Washington was broken, 31% indicated the elections didn't matter because nobody represented their views, and 25% indicated elections didn't matter because political parties “are more or less the same.” In [The Magic of Dialogue](#), Yankelovich argues “[many of] the social bonds that once unified us as a people now appear to be eroding. . . . People feel their dignity and sense of self-worth are being assaulted in countless ways, small and large” (2001, p 29). Finally, in his 2005 [Hope Unraveled](#), Richard Harwood argues “[if] people once gave their leaders and fellow citizens the benefit of the doubt, now people withhold their support until leaders and fellow citizens prove their worthiness. This attitude has an enormously corrosive effect on society, leading people to wonder at each turn about the veracity of public statements and the sincerity of endeavors by others, and to waver in their own commitment to the public realm.”
- xxi McIvor, David W., Derek W.M. Barker, and Noelle McAfee, Eds. 2012. [Democratizing Deliberation](#). Kettering Foundation. *See also*, Yankelovich, Daniel. 2001 [The Magic of Dialogue](#). Touchstone.
- xxii In [The Magic of Dialogue](#), Yankelovich pointed to the “silos effect” of people in different communities being “locked into their own frameworks” of viewing things and the corresponding need for the kind of “semantic bridge building” that cross cultural dialogue models provide (2001: p 152-155).
- xxiii There is an emerging convergence in the literature on what supports wise choices. In [The Psychology of Hate](#), Sternberg defines wisdom as “the application of intelligence, creativity, and experience towards a common good by balancing one's own interests with others' interests and institutional interests over the long and short terms” (2005: p . 47). In [Smart Questions](#), Nadler and Chandon offer a “data-wisdom” continuum that ranges from “raw data” to “wisdom” (2001: p 23-27). They define wisdom as follows “Wisdom is pragmatic. It applies a sense of values and beliefs, like justice and compassion, to knowledge and understanding in particular circumstances to come up with desirable results. It is about making a decision and getting into action. It is the insight into what is called for by the absorption of raw data, information, knowledge and understanding. It is about asking the right questions.” In [The Magic of Dialogue](#), Yankelovich introduces the same concept when he writes “in helping people move from raw opinion to considered judgment, dialogue engages them in a complex, time consuming, intensely involving process as they agonize over how to take the perspectives of others into account as they match the facts with their values and feelings on troubling issues” (2001: p. 184). Wisdom then requires an integration and synthesis of the same five elements that are reflected in the sources of conflict – information, interests, values, relationships with others, and a process that allows for that synthesis to occur and be translated into action.
- xxiv In [The Magic of Dialogue](#), Yankelovich, 90-109, discusses how expressions of empathy, and honest expression of

personal experiences and values helps build trust and create productive dialogue (2001: p 90-109). In his Fall 2012 Conflict Resolution Quarterly article, "Political Dialogue Workshops: Deepening the Peace Process in Northern Ireland", Corry argues "The primary purpose of political dialogue is intergroup understanding and relationship building, not interpersonal healing, negotiation, mediation or agreement... In effect, the aim is to discover the reasoning behind what a party is saying or doing" (p 55-56).

- xxv For examples of the types of questions that might be asked to promote reflection see Cloke, Ken. 2001. [Mediating Dangerously](#). Jossey-Bass. *See also*, Corry, Geoffrey. Fall 2012. "Political Dialogue Workshops: Deepening the Peace Process in Northern Ireland". Conflict Resolution Quarterly: 30(1): 53-80.
- xxvi These models can also be readily learned and led by a wide range of groups. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) [maintains a list of resources](#) that includes several other tools, practices, and organizations that can help in forging a productive dialogue.
- xxvii These attributes align with the characteristics of "Stories of Wisdom" (see note xxx below) and the behaviors encouraged in mediation.
- xxviii The importance of inviting and encouraging reflection is also a recurring theme in the literature on conflict and dialogue, and is aligned with the process of developing wisdom. In his 2012 Conflict Resolution Quarterly article "Reflection for Connection: Deepening dialogue through reflective processes", Robert Stains discusses "...processes for self-reflection that can help dialogue participants resist social and cultural pressures to polarize, step back from damaging communication patterns, develop greater insight, and expand their capacity for constructive communication" (p 33). In their 2010 book, [Difficult Conversations](#), Stone, Patton, and Heen provide a useful tool for framing, the "how did we each contribute to the problem" conversations (p 60, 70-103). They also have made [several resources, including a planning guide, available for free](#). These can be used to help participants reflect prior to and in between dialogue sessions. *See also*, Yankelovich, [The Magic of Dialogue](#) (2001: p 184, 201), on how dialogue can help participants move away from the "false choices" often presented in partisan politics.
- xxix The importance of being heard was one of the themes that emerged in Kettering and Public Agenda's, Don't Count Us Out report, "Many emphasized that what they really wanted was for leaders to understand and absorb their point of view, to empathize and appreciate their situation even if they weren't able to do what the person wanted or to make all of their problems go away" (2011: p 24). [Learn more about transformative mediation](#). *See also*, the "Shame/Rage Spiral" on page 91 of Cloke, Ken. 2001. [Mediating Dangerously](#). Jossey-Bass.
- xxx As with "stories of hate" Sternberg identified a set of patterns that support "stories of wisdom". *See* [The Psychology of Hate](#) (2005: p. 47), his 2001 Educational Psychologist article titled "Why Schools Should Teach for Wisdom: The Balance Theory of Wisdom in Educational Settings", and [this summary](#) of his research that appeared in the Yale Alumni Magazine in 2004. These patterns of wisdom include identification of a common good (e.g. "keeping our communities safe"); interdependence; acceptance of the fact the we all think in our own ways, and tolerance of (willingness to consider and engage with) different points of view. Sternberg's research on "stories of wisdom" also aligns in interesting ways with Frederic Luskin's work on forgiveness. *See* Luskin, Frederic and Dana Curtis. December 2000. "Forgiveness". California Lawyer. P 23-24; and [this interview](#) with PBS. Both emphasize the importance of focusing on empathy for the individual, and on creating or maintaining connections, and not allowing conflict to define relationships. *See also* Corry, p. 56: "The challenge is to find a way for majority and minority narratives that give meaning to identity groups to exist side by side in the same land."
- xxxi Research by [The Knight Commission](#) confirms that in order to function effectively and work through issues, communities require easily accessible information and strengthened capacities for engaging with that information.
- xxxii In [his New Pragmatism address](#), Yankelovich commented on the public desire for a voice without accountability as one of the cultural causes eroding the "nation's problem solving capacity." During a dialogue, participants can be invited to consider questions like "What data are we using? What other data is there? What would we like to know? Where else might we look? How will we evaluate the data we receive?" The invitation to dialogue can include the expectation that participants share the experiences, data, etc. that underlie their conclusions. Kettering and Public Agenda's 2011 Don't Count Us Out report illustrated the public's expectation that both citizens and politicians be willing to take personal responsibility for their views and actions. The benefits of inviting this kind of sharing and subsequent evaluation of what is shared finds some support in Lerner and Shank's Harvard Business Review article, "How Anger Poisons Decision Making", which indicated that when managers are held accountable and required to explain their decisions to an expert whose views they didn't know, they are more likely to look at facts, engage in reflection, and correct for the tendency to blame others, even when angry (September 2010: p. 26).
- xxxiii Many past dialogue efforts have been reactive, primarily responding to immediate issues and needs, or sporadic, with goals limited to immediate needs and not always well coordinated with past or intersecting processes. More systematic planning and coordination, using processes that are repeatable, and evaluated for improvement, on-going tracking and sharing of relevant information, and regularly obtaining and using feedback from key stakeholders, provides for more sustainable dialogue.
- xxxiv Discussions of this sort are happening all over the nation, consider for instance the long list of city governments

working with [Peak Democracy](#). Peak Democracy has also developed a set of “best practices” for on-line engagement that complement the recommendations made here.

- xxxv For a good depiction of this “multilayer process”, see page 67 of Corry, Geoffrey. Fall 2012. “Political Dialogue Workshops: Deepening the Peace Process in Northern Ireland”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*: 30(1): 53-80. *See also*, pages 39-42, 47-48 of Stains Jr., Robert R. “Reflection for Connection: Deepening Dialogue Through Reflective Processes”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*. 30(1): 33-51. *See also*, Chung-Mei Lensen, Kristin, Mark Chesler, and Nancy Brown, “Practice Note: Responding to Civic Conflict: Developing Intergroup Dialogue Co-facilitators”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*. 29(4): 421-432, and Robert J. Sternberg, “Why Schools Should Teach for Wisdom: The Balance Theory of Wisdom in Educational Settings”, 2001 *Educational Psychologist*: 232.
- xxxvi This minimizes two of the potential sources of conflict – relationships and values. Several groups have value or mission statements that are well aligned with “Stories of Wisdom”. For example, the Rotary Four Way test asks people to consider: “Of the things we think, say or do, 1. Is it the TRUTH? 2. Is it FAIR to all concerned? 3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS? 4. Is it BENEFICIAL to all concerned?” ICMA recently started a [discussion forum on gun control on its Knowledge Network](#) that links professional city managers and promotes the sharing of information and concerns
- xxxvii See pages 60 and 63-75 of Corry, Geoffrey. Fall 2012. “Political Dialogue Workshops: Deepening the Peace Process in Northern Ireland”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*: 30(1): 53-80.
- xxxviii In [Smart Questions](#), Nadler and Chandon provide a framing sequence that moves from 'what is the problem we are considering?' to 'what would be an ideal future state?' to 'what would be a living solution?' to 'what is something that would move us closer to that living solution?' (2001: p 28-41). The authors of this essay have found in their practice that asking parties in conflict “What if .. ? How would that work or not work for you?” reduces defensiveness and promotes positive interaction. Another way of framing dialogue on the issue of gun violence around a common interest would be to invite an analysis of current policy, what it is, and how it came about, and then use that as a case study for developing an accountability structure tied to the public interest in wise decisions on matters of public policy. Although beyond the scope of this essay, it is possible to envision the development over time of an instrument that is aligned with both the public's views on responsible leadership documented in the 2011 Don't Count Us Out report and the factors that we know reflect wisdom. This includes things like providing context for facts used, engaging on the merits of an issue rather than exploiting political divides, follow-through in evaluating the effects of decisions made, respecting dialogue processes and citizen input, willingness to articulate long-term goals, and assumption of some personal responsibility for consequences of actions taken.
- xxxix See page 56 of Corry, Geoffrey. Fall 2012. “Political Dialogue Workshops: Deepening the Peace Process in Northern Ireland”. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*: 30(1): 53-80. “Political dialogue reaffirms the primacy of politics in finding a way out of the conflict. It seeks to build, support, and sustain a larger political process to change the political environment.”
- xl For more on evaluation of dialogue processes, consider reviewing [this series of blog posts](#) by the authors of this article.
- xli Examples of effective frameworks for inviting and linking dialogue can be found in [Peak Democracy](#) and the [White House's Open Government Initiative](#). As ideas emerge, national scale exercises like the America Speaks “[Our Budget](#), [Our Economy](#)” discussions, can be used to synthesize and “loop back” information to support ongoing local and regional conversations.
- xlii The Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda's Don't Count Us Out report indicates that the nation's universities are one of the few institutions that retain sufficient public support to lead this type of effort. The recent “[Open Letter to President Obama](#)” that was recently signed by over 280 college presidents indicates that they may be willing to do so.