

## Focused Conversation Method

**Background:** The Focused Conversation Method is a construct that helps groups process information, make sense of how it impacts them, and then move beyond to decisions.

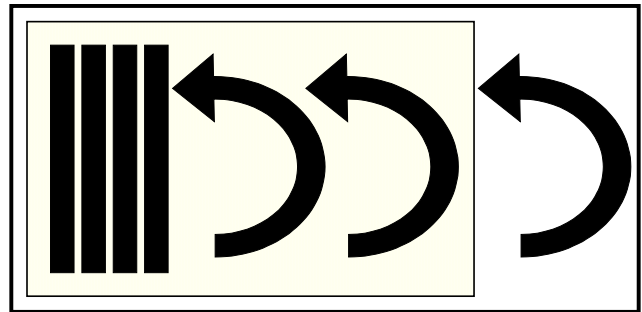
This method was developed following World War II from a desire to help veterans, returning home from the war, to deal with their traumatic experiences and reintegrate them into society. Joseph Mathews, a Chaplain with the Marine Corps in the Pacific Theater during the war, and a university professor sought ways to help these veterans. He and an art professor, discussed how people made meaning from artwork. This was when Mathews connected this with the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard's, thoughts on how people are collections of relationships. People observe what occurs in life, react internally to it, create meaning or insights, and draw implications or decisions from the insights.

Mathews created a format for conversations using this approach within his university. He called it the "Art Form Conversation." A few years later he used it in the Chicago ghettos to help the community address their issues.

The method, slightly changed over the years, has become the cornerstone of the [Institute of Cultural Affairs](#) community-building efforts around the world called the [Technology of Participation](#), or simply, ToP™.

The model is intended to be a complete system that uses questions that engage the full person through their senses, memories and feelings.

The image above reflects that humans are a bundle of relationships, represented by the



four vertical bars. Each bundle builds on the one before. The first arrow is relating self (vertical bars) to self (vertical bars). The second arrow is allowing self to be what it has become - itself. The third arrow is grounding self in the power it possesses. Basically it can take some level of action or create some resolution.

### **Application:**

This method is used by the facilitator to design a "Question Plan" that takes a group from the surface of a topic through deeper reflection, and examination of implications, enabling individuals in the group to relate on a meaningful level and conclude with some decisions.

In the Focused Conversation the leader or facilitator has no intended content point to be made, so there is no wrong answer. Their intent is to openly dialogue on the topic. In most cases there will be a desire to achieve some resolution or action plan.

The questions, planned for each level of the process, are open-ended and usually start with what, why, how, or which. Participants address the responses to the facilitator, the leader, or the center of the table.

The method has four stages that a facilitator designs several questions around a specific topic. Here is a description of each level:

**Objective Level** - This level is designed with questions that gather facts and information about the external reality. This means the data are not tainted by an individual's interpretation of their meaning or intent. Questions here relate to the senses - what is seen, heard, and touched. This level reflects directly observable data and creates a shared image of what is being discussed. It includes questions like: What do we know about this...? What are the issues related to...? What does this bill propose? What are the requirements?

**Reflective Level** - Good decisions need to be based on internal data as well as external. If no reflective questions are asked then no hidden images, associations or moods are shared. Questions of the reflective level call for a personal reaction to the data. This reaction can be feelings, moods, memories, emotions, images, and associations. This level includes questions like: What is your initial response to this bill? What part makes you feel like cheering. How do you feel about these requirements? What does this remind you of?

**Interpretive Level** - This level uses questions that draw out the meaning, values, significance and implications relating to the facts and reflection. They produce the 'story' and may examine the values of the topic. This level often takes the most time to work through. Questions included are like: What are they really trying to get to? What is the real intent of this bill?

What issues does this conversation bring up for you?

**Decisional Level** - This level brings closure to the conversation through resolution and self-conscious choices. Without decisions a conversation is largely a waste of time. These are questions that seek resolution, implications, new directions, close the conversation, or enable the group to resolve the matter for the future. This level includes questions like: What is our response? What decisions are called for? What are our next steps? What actions should we take?

**References:**



Spencer, Laura J.; **Winning Through Participation: Meeting the Challenge of Corporate Change with the Technology of Participation.** Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., Dubuque, IA 1989 ISBN 0-8403-6196-3



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ISBN: 0-86571-416-9

<http://iaf-world.org/confs/old/IAF98/spee.html>

<http://www.icaworld.org/>

<http://www.ica-usa.org/>

Level	Description	Your Questions
<b>Objective</b> Perception	What are the Facts? What do we know about this?	
<b>Reflective</b> Response	How do you feel about this? What do you associate with it?	
<b>Interpretive</b> Judgement	What does this mean to us? Why is this important? What is the real intent?	
<b>Decisional</b> Action	What should we do about this? What actions should we take?	