

Coffee and Conversations

Organizer Guide

A structured community connection event using color-coded lanyards to facilitate small group conversations with One Small Step questions. The casual format creates natural conversation groups while maintaining enough structure to keep discussions focused and meaningful.

Advanced Planning: Goals and Steps

Goals:

- Create a casual, yet structured environment for community members to practice skills for meaningful connection and dialogue.
- Build connections between people with different perspectives through guided small group conversations
- Introduce One Small Step conversation techniques in a relaxed, low-pressure setting
- Foster a culture of respectful listening and sharing in a group of mixed points of view.

Steps:

The first step is establishing the framework for Coffee and Conversations. This casual, structured networking event uses color-coded lanyards to facilitate small group discussions with One Small Step conversation prompts located in participants' name tags. The format creates natural conversation groups while maintaining enough structure to keep discussions focused and meaningful.

Next, prepare the color-coded question cards and lanyards. A sample sheet for printing is linked below, or you can select questions from the OSS question bank that work well for small group discussion. For each color group, prepare 4-5 lanyards with question card inserts.

Design a simple orientation script that explains the purpose and format of the event. Include conversation agreements for respectful conversation and clear instructions for how participants will connect based on their lanyard colors. Alternatively,

participants can create conversation agreements together in their lanyard color groups.

Identify a comfortable space that allows for small group seating arrangements. The space should be welcoming and informal, with good acoustics for conversation. Consider accessibility needs including seating options and clear pathways between tables.

For refreshments, simple coffee, tea, and light snacks work well. The refreshments help create a cozy atmosphere but should be simple enough that they don't become the focus of the event. Consider partnering with a local coffee shop!

Two weeks before the event, confirm the space reservation and refreshment plans. Finalize the number of conversation groups based on expected attendance. Prepare all lanyards, question cards, and instructional materials.

One week before, send reminder messages to registered participants if registration was required. Confirm staff roles, including who will facilitate the opening orientation, monitor group conversations, and manage transitions between rounds.

Marketing

Reach a wide audience by using multiple marketing channels:

- Create flyers emphasizing the casual, coffee-shop atmosphere paired with meaningful conversation and connection with neighbors
- Promote through social media
- Include event information in the community's email newsletter
- Add the event to community calendars and local event listings
- Partner with community organizations to reach participants with many different points of view.
- Target outreach to community groups whose goals may align with this program
- Create displays near the circulation desk, with OSS bookmarks and books about dialogue, good communication, understanding, etc.
- Encourage staff to personally invite community members who might enjoy this type of event or bring groups from other regular programming

When crafting marketing materials, emphasize that this is a chance to connect through personal stories and experiences. Highlight that no special expertise is needed—just a willingness to listen and share.

Budgeting

The program requires attention to the following costs:

- Lanyards and plastic holders (~\$30 for 50 lanyards)
- Printing for question cards, bookmarks and instructional materials (\$15)
- Refreshments including coffee, tea, and light snacks (\$25-75)
- Decorative elements to create a welcoming atmosphere (optional) (\$25)
- Staff time for preparation and facilitation

Tips to cut costs:

- Partner with a local coffee shop to provide refreshments at reduced cost or as a donation
- Simplify refreshments to just coffee and tea
- Request snack donations from community partners or participants

Day-of-event Activity

On the day of the event, set up 4-5 conversation stations with chairs arranged to facilitate eye contact and conversation. Each station should accommodate 4-5 participants. A board displaying conversation agreements is recommended.

Set up a welcome table with lanyards organized by color. Have a staff member or volunteer stationed there to greet participants, give them a lanyard, and direct them to refreshments while waiting for the event to begin.

Prepare the refreshment area with coffee, tea, water, and simple snacks (allergens labeled). Set out cups, napkins, and any other necessary items.

The organizer and at least one additional staff member should ideally be present. The organizer will lead the orientation and transitions, while the second person can manage refreshments, assist participants, and monitor conversations.

Document the setup and initial engagement with photos (with appropriate permissions) for future marketing, grant reporting, and program evaluation.

Program Execution

Begin with a brief welcome and orientation (10-15 minutes). Explain the purpose of Coffee and Conversations and how the color-coded lanyard system works. If you have chosen a theme for the questions, review the theme. Review conversation guidelines, ask for any additional, and confirm with a thumbs up.

After orientation, direct participants to find others with matching lanyard colors and gather at a designated table. Each color group should have at least 3 participants.

For the first conversation round (20 minutes), participants use the question on their lanyard as a starting point. Starting with an introduction to their upbringing/background is highly recommended. Encourage them to listen deeply and ask follow-up questions or practice affirmations rather than moving quickly from person to person.

After the first round, announce a brief break (5 minutes) for refreshments and stretching. Then direct participants to form new groups based on a different organizing principle—perhaps finding people with complementary colors.

Conduct a second conversation round (20 minutes) with the newly formed groups. This allows participants to connect with different community members and explore new topics.

Close with a brief large group reflection (15 minutes). Ask what participants discovered, what surprised them, and what connections they made. Provide information about additional One Small Step programs and opportunities to continue these conversations (e.g. signing up for a conversation on takeonesmallstep.org).

Thank participants and invite them to complete a brief evaluation form before leaving.

Capture photos of meaningful interactions and community engagement throughout the program (ensuring proper photo permissions are in place) to document impact, share success stories, and support future funding requests.

Advice

Creating a comfortable atmosphere is very helpful for this event. The space should feel welcoming and informal, more like a coffee shop. Background music during arrival and breaks can help set a relaxed tone.

Pay attention to group dynamics during the conversations. Have your team circulate among groups rather than join one table. They should be available to gently redirect if a single person dominates the conversation or if the discussion veers into debate rather than dialogue-- the conversation agreements can always be referenced as needed.

Keep the questions oriented to personal stories. Questions that invite storytelling such as "What was dinnertime like in your family growing up?" or "Who has been most influential in your life?" often lead to more meaningful exchanges than direct questions about current issues. A relevant political question might be "Are there differences in religious or political perspectives within your family?"

Sometimes, emotional moments come up. When people share personal stories, feelings may arise. Instruct your team to (or choose colleagues who) acknowledge emotions respectfully without attempting to "fix" or dismiss them.

Consider printing take-home question cards (linked below) or providing OSS bookmarks (linked below) so participants can continue these conversations with family and friends. This extends the impact of the program beyond the event itself.

For communities just starting this program, begin with a smaller group (12-15 participants) to work out logistics. The program can then scale up as staff become more comfortable with the format and community interest grows. This program fits in anywhere!