



Insights from the Hubbard Brook Roundtables:

*A public engagement with science program at the
Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest in New Hampshire*

Tips for Convening a Roundtable Dialogue Event

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Public engagement with science (PES) is a powerful framework for informal science education, science communication, and developing the broader impacts of research. PES emphasizes the importance of fostering mutual learning between scientists and publics, and recognizes that mutual learning refers not only to knowledge sharing, but also to building new relationships and considering different perspectives and worldviews.

Hubbard Brook Roundtables are a method of face-to-face PES developed by science communication practitioners at a long-term ecological research site in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Hubbard Brook Roundtables use facilitated dialogue with stakeholders and ecologists to harness the power of “ecosystem thinking” to address complex socio-scientific questions. Here we present key lessons from more than ten years of convening roundtables in the Northern Forest region of the northeastern US. Recent development and evaluation of this work received support from the National Science Foundation via the Pathways: Forest Science Dialogues project: NSF #1322871.

Hubbard Brook Roundtables involve:

- 1–1.5-day facilitated dialogue events
- 12–25 invited participants
- Focus on “gatekeepers” of formal and informal stakeholder networks
- Pre-meeting interviews and synthesis report to inform the agenda
- Outcome activities or products co-designed as part of the dialogue
- Post-dialogue report

- 1. Begin planning early.** Get on participants' calendars early! We recommend sending invitations out 12–14 weeks before an event. We also include a list of invited participants with the formal invitation so people get a sense of who will be there and what the experience will be like.
- 2. Snowball your networks to find participants.** Tap your existing networks to build out your guest list—the acquaintances of your acquaintances, and so on. Strive for a diversity of views, perspectives, and backgrounds. Look for participants who can speak as “gatekeepers” about interests and concerns from their respective networks and who are also willing to entertain new perspectives and ideas.
- 3. Beware of overpowering voices.** Strive for a mix of voices from different domains, including traditional, experiential, scientific, and other forms of knowledge. Be aware that not all participants will have the same comfort level expressing themselves in a roundtable setting.
- 4. Work with a trained facilitator.** Facilitation can make or break an event. Invest in facilitation training for your staff, or hire an outside professional. A good facilitator will be neutral and attentive, serving as a guide for the group. It can be helpful to have a staff member work with the facilitator as a scribe.

- 5. Gather input and feedback on your agenda.** Pre-meeting interviews with participants can inform agenda items such as planned presentations and lists of dialogue-generating questions. Feedback on your plan ahead of time from trusted advisors can help avoid the common pitfall of an overly ambitious agenda.
- 6. Begin the day with personal stories.** Distribute short bios of all the participants ahead of time so people can access that information when needed. This opens up the agenda for participants to introduce themselves with personal stories.
- 7. Set the tone and course-correct when needed.** Don't underestimate the importance of enjoying one another's company! The facilitator and the organizers can create an atmosphere that is both relaxed and vibrant. Participants should feel encouraged to express themselves while being open and curious about other ideas. Use breaks in the agenda to consider the tone of the dialogue and if new facilitation questions or techniques are needed.
- 8. One-way communication sets the stage for multi-way dialogue.** Shared experience or knowledge is the basis of productive group dialogue. Pre-meeting interviews, summarized and distributed in advance, along with short presentations at the beginning of the event establish rapport and common ground. Design agendas that allow for participants to feel like they are receiving (i.e., learning something new) as well as giving (i.e., sharing their knowledge and ideas) over the course of the day.
- 9. Create opportunities for informal engagement.** Some of the most productive interactions happen outside of structured activities. One of the strengths of roundtable dialogue events is the opportunity to build new relationships among scientists and stakeholders. Creating time in the agenda for informal networking and engagement, such as extended coffee breaks or field trips, can foster these connections.
- 10. Beware the post-lunch lull.** Group energy levels are almost always low in the hour just after lunch. If your site allows, try building in a quick field excursion, hands-on activity, or small-group dialogue after lunch to break through the lull.
- 11. Set expectations, and have a plan for follow-up activities.** What happens after the event? What resources are available for follow-up activities? Co-design outcome activities or products with participants as part of the ongoing dialogue. For example, Hubbard Brook Roundtables have led to op-ed articles in local and regional newspapers, follow-up workshops, and follow-up research. Having an initial plan in place ahead of time can help to set participant expectations and guide the process.

For more information, visit: <https://hubbardbrook.org/>

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