

Welcome to the Waging Dialogue Project

Welcome to the Waging Dialogue Project. We are pleased that you are interested in participating in one of our dyads and meta-dialogues. Our hope is that you will find the experience rewarding.

What is the problem that Waging Dialogue addresses?

The Waging Dialogue Project seeks to mitigate toxic political, social, and cultural polarization through a unique discussion model. There are many organizations that actively work to bridge divides, and most employ a variation on listening actively and cultivating empathy. While it is critically important to provide models and opportunities for idealized dialogue, this approach is not sufficient to address the deeper aspects of polarization.

Why don't existing solutions work?

We must recognize that our beliefs and prejudices are baked into our identities, that we tend to attack the prejudices of others by diminishing/denying their humanity, by labeling them stupid or sick or unworthy. When our identities are threatened, our fight, flight, or freeze instincts kick in. We either become increasingly aggressive, “freeze” the conversation with repetitive counters, or shut down the interaction completely. This is the mindset of pathology. Instead we need to embrace a mindset of difference, *and truly seek to know the other person and why they believe as they do.*

- The first step in dialogue for bridge-building is to provide the time for participants to talk about themselves in a deeper and fuller way and listen and try to inhabit the background and experiences of others and how they came to believe as they do.

The second barrier to effective dialogue and bridge-building across divides is a lack of understanding of the aggression that naturally arises when our identities are challenged. Instead of reacting with fight, flight, or freeze, we must face and work through that aggression.

- The second step in dialogue is to provide a safe space for participants to allow the aggression to surface and to provide the support to help them break through impasses.

What is the Waging Dialogue Project and how does it meet this challenge?

The goal of Waging Dialogue is to develop the methodology and tools necessary for this journey, by holding dialogues and studying them, by means of our innovative “meta-dialogue” approach. Dialogues can consist of small groups, but we’ve found greater potential in dyads, or two people meeting online and/or through writing, over a generous amount of time. Participants in dyads, step back and analyze their own interactions, what worked and didn’t work. They also get together with other dyad “alumni” to share experiences and analyze them, and try to find commonalities. Through these meta-dialogues, we begin to see patterns, make generalizations and discover guidelines for the next set of dyads. It is within our laboratory, observing many dyads and meta dialogues, holding experiments and analyzing results, over and over, that methods and tools – creative solutions – begin to emerge.

What is the outcome? What does successful bridge-building look like? Why should I join a dyad?

Participants come to us with different expectations and goals, and often their actual experience and sense of success or failure is different from their expectations. Here are some of the possible outcomes, small and large, personal and sociopolitical:

- Become a better and more empathic listener to those close to you, even when you agree
- Learn something new

- Be better able to have difficult conversations with friends, family members, and colleagues who disagree with you. It's a variation of the classic dilemma as we approach holiday family dinners – how to talk to your Democrat//Libertarian//atheist//gun-carrier/tree hugger Uncle Bob!
- meet other people with similar motivations and perhaps join forces to address those big problems ... or just become friends.
- Find a person similarly motivated to “change the world” and with them, reach out to other potential dialoguers and guide them through the process, take on a small local or community project together
- Get involved in solving larger sociopolitical problems such as antisemitism, racism, etc by working with, rather against, the “other.” (example, Alderdice, Standing Together) A desire to solve big societal problems – like Israel-Palestine – or small ones, like getting bike lanes for your community

Ok, I'm interested! How can I participate in the Waging Dialogue Project, and join a dyad – meta dialogue?

First, we ask you a few questions and encourage you to write a personal statement to familiarize us with your background, communication style, and where you see yourself on the political spectrum. We'll try to pair you with someone with a different perspective, although dyad couples often surprise us and one another by turning out to be alike or different in ways no one predicted! That discovery is part of the fun.

You will introduce yourselves to each other on Zoom. For the first half hour, we suggest doing short introductions – you'll have a chance to get to know each other in a much deeper way in future meetings. Then, take the second half hour to decide how often you'd like to meet, whether you want to meet on Zoom only, or email, or both. We can help you.

We recommend that your first meetings be devoted to deep, personal storytelling, to “inhabiting” each other's background and experiences and explanations of how they came to their beliefs.

Then, you might want to choose one area of difference and try to explore that. As you dig deeper, you will inevitably trigger sensitivity and reach impasses that seem intractable. Try to work with them, face them, and reach a place of better understanding. Come to us for help if necessary, but try to find your own pathway through what has become a difficult journey.

Find common ground, a shared insight, a desire to continue to work together, or end the conversation in a spirit of good will.

Then, do the dyad meta-analysis. Explore the journey you took together and try to identify what worked (allowed you to continue) and didn't work (led you to an intractable impasse) and what might make a future dyad work better.

Finally, let us gather you into a group of other dyad “alumni” to do a group meta-analysis, find common experiences, dead ends, tools for overcoming impasses, and an understanding of what success might look like. Through your dedication and hard work, you may even discover something brand new, a creative solution that advances society's ability to live and work together.

In the best of all possible worlds, join with your dyad partner or your meta-dialogue group to address a sociopolitical problem, and spread the word to your friends, families, and colleagues, so that others may find us, engage in the Waging Dialogue Program, support us financially, and help us grow.