

Kitchen Table Discussion

Engagement range	Consult/Partnership
Difficulty level	Easy to Medium
Cost	Low (up to \$1,000) to Medium (\$1,000 to \$10,000)
When might you use it	To communicate an issue To build alliances, consensus To showcase product, plan, policy To discover community issues To develop community capacity To develop action plan
Number of people required to help to organise	One-three, depends on the audience size and level of complexity
Time to organise	Medium (six weeks to six months) to Long (over six months)
Size of audience	Small (up to 10)
Issues/resources to think about	Venue; Catering; Staffing; Facilitator; Children's requirements (e.g. child minding)
Innovation level	Low to Medium

Description

Kitchen table discussions are small meetings within the neighbourhood, usually at someone's home or a local coffee shop. These settings make the meeting informal and participants tend to respond to the more relaxed surrounds. Because they are informal, participants generally are more willing to discuss issues and dialogue is maximised.

A kitchen table discussion group is a small collection of people who get together in someone's home to talk, listen and share ideas on subjects of mutual interest. The host often begins by reminding everyone that there are no right or wrong ideas, and that everyone's contribution is valuable. The host also encourages people to listen, to ask clarifying questions, and to avoid arguing or interrupting.

Kitchen table discussion groups can be a prime vehicle for social change. Kitchen table discussions are now going 'online', and are being held around virtual kitchen tables where anyone can join in to discuss an issue (see Electronic Democracy).

Objective

- To encourage people to continue discussing an issue until all members have had a chance to be heard, and provide an opportunity of sharing not only opinions, but information and alternatives for community proposals or issues.

Desired Outcome

- A sense of community, and may generate feedback and submissions on community issues and proposals.

Uses/Strengths

- Maximises two-way dialogue.
- If issue is likely to be contentious, provides an ideal setting to scope for early conflicts.
- Maximises the likelihood of engagement in debate and allays likelihood of conflict because held in 'neutral turf' setting.
- Builds social networks within the community.

Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- Needs organisers/facilitators who are polite and relaxed.
- Requires creativity and resource investigation to reach a large number of people.
- Needs a diversity of interests to be invited.
- Best for small group discussions (8-10 people).

Step by Step Guide

1. If a kitchen table discussion arises informally, those who wish to follow up on this opportunity should seek advice on how best to encourage participation and how to handle the issues/information that arises. The informal beginnings can be discouraged if the person or people organising further discussions do not understand how to ensure all members of the discussion feel that their opinion will be taken seriously, valued and can be freely expressed.
2. Kitchen table discussions can be formally planned to reach targeted groups by advertising the venue and time.
3. Because these discussions reach groups that are not attracted to formal participation programs, sensitivity must be used in organising and facilitating meetings so as to encourage continued participation.
4. Select a centralised, neutral space (not affiliated with any one interest group in the locality).

5. Use informal neighbourhood networks to organize the first round of events.
6. Set ground rules about respecting other's opinions, and recording all issues for further discussion.
7. Needs sensitive handling to ensure no one dominates the discussion, and all opinions are valued.
8. Encourage group to record the outcomes of discussions and feed back into a broader participation program.
9. Encourage ongoing discussions.
10. Use these discussions as a means of gauging ongoing public response to a participation program.