

Vermont Attractions Associations
Fall 2019 Professional Development Meeting

From Debate to Dialogue: Listening to Understand: Report

I. Program Summary

The session began with an introduction to the “Debate to Dialogue” model and discussion about the pros and cons of debate culture. We emphasized that the program emphasis would be on gaining a method for engaging in dialogue that moved beyond the typical and so-common dynamics of win-lose or debate approaches to better understanding diverse perspectives about difficult topics to explore.

We also emphasized that an important goal for the day was for participants to be able to take away applications for the model and the content — racial inequality — in their everyday lives (professionally and personally).

The main focus for the session was on three dialogue cycles, with participants in small groups of 4 or 5 people. The first invited groups to introduced themselves with attention to the topic and their own beliefs and experiences related to race and racial inequality. The second cycle, after watching excerpts from “Cracking the Code” (World Trust), invited groups to explore their responses to the experiences and ideas from the excerpts, in several staged rounds of prompts — from less to more in depth and potentially challenging. The last cycle was devoted to “walking the talk” — how participants might make use of the model and/or the content in their roles at work and beyond.

In whole group discussions, we explored a rich and challenging range of questions and ideas, including: what it felt like to listen and be heard; the limits and possibilities of the model; practical strategies for responding to bias or disrespect; and more.

II. Highlights

As during our May session, VAA members entered the process with admirable enthusiasm, curiosity, and openness. They demonstrated risk-taking in their willingness to “try on” what can be an awkward form of “dialogue” — forced listening (not forced sharing) — that prioritizes understanding over fixing, being right, reacting, or becoming defensive/divisive. Also, the group offered generous patience and understanding during our extended technical delay. They went with the flow gracefully. The balance of tough-minded inquiry, critical thinking, humor and kindness kept the day engaging and provided options for engagement that allowed a diverse range of perspectives, types of learning, and application ideas to surface.

II. Recommendations

As in the spring, participants expressed interest in continuing these kinds of conversations and skill-building activities, under the auspices of VAA and within their individual attractions. They indicated a desire for VAA to continue coordinating related opportunities and to keep up the productive momentum — with regard to both semi-annual meetings and the structures of the membership organization (i.e. tools and resources on the website, the diversification of messages and images supportive of inclusion, etc.).

We can recommend that at some point VAA offer a follow-on program focused on one or more other potential challenging topics, i.e. gender identity or religious differences.

Lastly, in the interest of insuring that work focused specifically on diversity and inclusion on traditional ways (protected categories, for example), VAA commit to building on the already strong impulse and skill of its membership to delineate and develop the continuum between excellence in general (customer service, productive/respectful working relationships, etc.) and non-discrimination/inclusion more broadly.