

How to hold a conversation on belonging



A resource from Inclusive Aotearoa Collective Tāhono



What is a 'belonging conversation'?

When our project set out to strengthen belonging and inclusion in Aotearoa, it was built on a foundation of community engagement.

Community development can only begin *with the community*, so it was crucial for us that their voices lead our mahi. Our community engagement was based on a simple and accessible method that we call 'belonging conversations'.

The approach and questions involved in a belonging conversation resulted in rich, mana-enhancing, reciprocal engagement with communities, much of which continues to steer the work we do today.



What is a 'belonging conversation'?

Many people who took part in our conversations expressed the value they found in talking to others and addressing the three questions we posed.

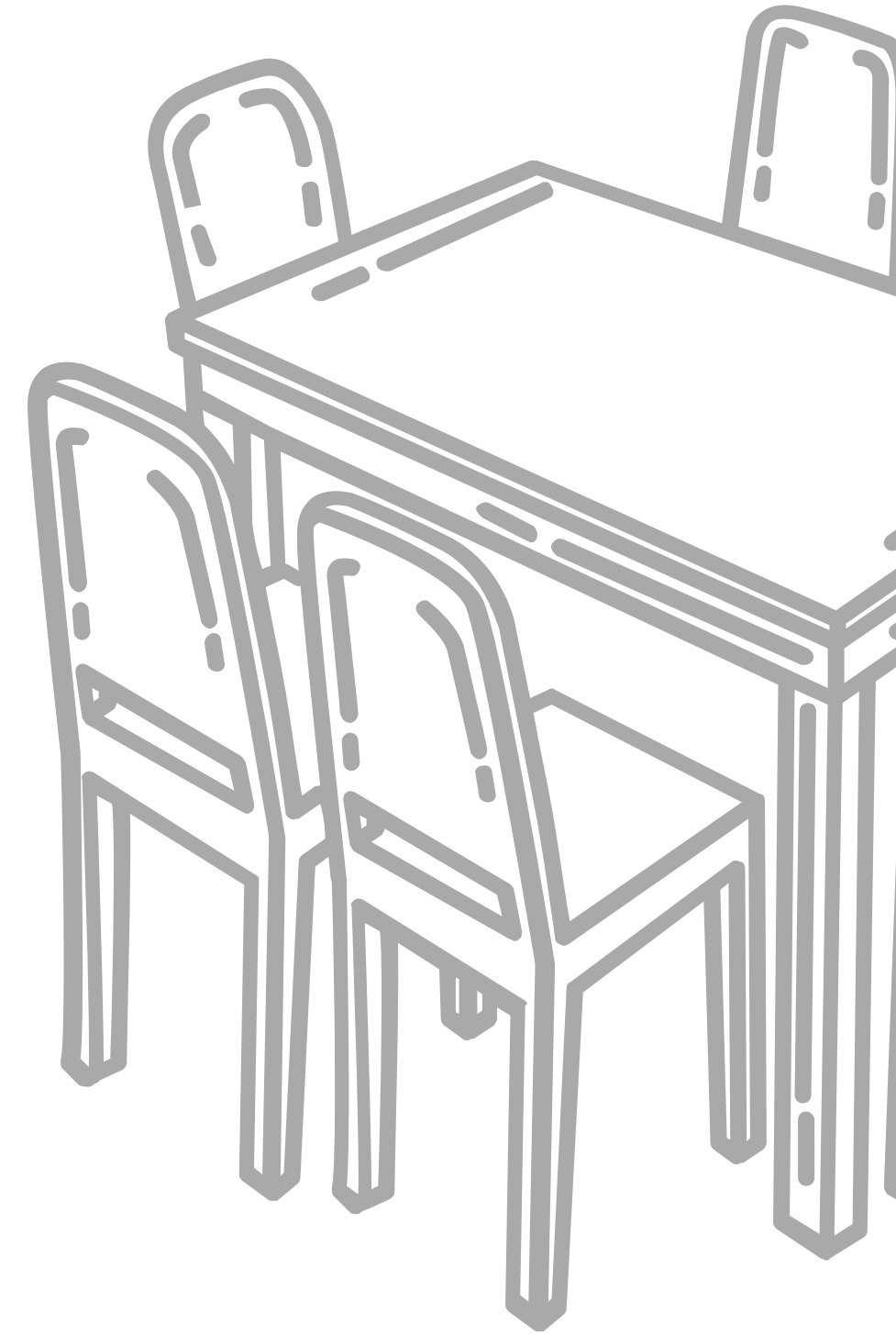
Holding conversations like these helps people to understand experiences that are different to their own, as well as identifying things we have in common.

This document provides a run-through of the conversation method, as well as some tips and guidance on how you can hold your own belonging conversation. These conversations are not limited to community engagement, and are rich pātai for connecting with whānau, friends, and others.



Before the conversation

- Be clear about the time the conversation will take, and stick to that time. People will commit when they have a sense of how long it's going to take. We find the ideal time to be 90 minutes, with refreshments available as people talk.
- Assure them of confidentiality: that nothing they say within the conversation will be shared outside the group in a way that identifies them. Ensure that each participant understands their own responsibility to keep confidentiality.
- Note that the conversation is an informal one, it's simply based on each person's personal experiences and thoughts.
- Give participants permission to leave the room at any time, and to stop whenever they like. Let them know that they don't have to answer any follow up questions, and should only share what they feel comfortable in sharing.
- The best number of people to have in a conversation is four, with an additional person leading the conversation.



Concepts to consider

- **Power** - consider where the power in the room is sitting; allow for participants to direct the conversation; bring humility and don't assume the position of this session being a favour to the people in attendance; avoid micromanagement.
- **Whānaungatanga** - with the first question, it is about more than introductions; it is about connection to people, place, and whakapapa; bonding the group is crucial in establishing space and confidence in the kōrero.
- **Diversity in the room** - think about who and how when you are approaching your outreach; when thinking about diversity there are the bases of discrimination under Human Rights legislation (including family status, political opinion); it also goes beyond (e.g. socio-economic; rural vs urban; fatphobia, etc.).
- **Accessibility** - these conversations engage in complex topics, though must remain simple, open and accessible to all; think about language and concepts – this extends to literacy, second languages, sign language interpreters and other language interpreters; getting into the room - transport, acknowledging time, do they have to take time off work and how are we compensating that?; equity in speaking time.



Starting the conversation

- One person has to lead the conversation. It's better if that person doesn't get involved in the conversation, except for asking follow up questions.
- Before you start the conversation, remind people about equity of time to ensure that everyone gets an equal amount of time to speak if they want it. The lead person has the responsibility to ensure this happens, and can use prompts such as “you haven't said much yet, is there anything you would like to share” or “let's make sure that everyone else gets to speak as well”.
- Begin with **whakawhānaungatanga**: each person does an in-depth introduction, telling the group where they are from, what they do, where they have lived, about their family.
- Give each person at least 5 minutes each to introduce themselves.
- As people begin to share about themselves, ask follow-up questions. For example, if someone says “I went on to study xxx subject” ask them why they chose that subject, what was interesting to them about it. If they say they travelled to and lived in another country or another town in Aotearoa, ask them **why** they chose to leave, **what** brought them back. This phase of the conversation is to slowly open up and get comfortable talking with the group.

Q1: When do you feel like you belong in Aotearoa, New Zealand?

- As you move into the first question, explain it further by saying “*when do you feel comfortable? when do you feel included?*”.
- As people answer, ask follow up questions. For example, if one says “*I feel belonging with my family and friends*”, ask what it is that their family and friends do to make them feel that way. If they say “*when I’m valued*”, explore further what people are doing to make them feel valued. With each answer, you can explore in more depth and seek fuller explanations. Ask for examples or stories that would explain what they are saying.
- In this part of the conversation, people may speak spontaneously, and they might ask each other questions. The lead person’s role is to ensure that any comments and questions are appropriate, and to judge that the person’s reactions.
- The lead person should check in with participants regularly: “*are you ok to discuss this?; do you want to continue?; do you need a break?*”.



Q2: What stops you from feeling like you belong?

- Question 2 leads to more difficult memories and experiences being shared.
- Continue to ask follow up questions and seek more explanation as participants answer.
- On rare occasions, there may be emotions that arise in the group as people speak about what has happened to them. Make sure you give space to the emotion, allow others to express sympathy, thank the person for sharing and make sure they are feeling safe to continue.
- Often people will feel relieved in sharing their stories and having sympathetic listeners. However, if they require more support, make sure you have numbers handy for them to call: 1737 is the best place to start.



Q3: What needs to change for you to feel like you belong?

- Moving on to question 3, the conversation is now focused on what can make things better.
- Answers to these questions might be personal and individual, or it may be bigger things, such as changes to government policy, or changes to culture.
- Follow up questions might involve asking them about practical changes that would make things better. It's ok for people to say they don't know.



Healthy engagement - utu/reciprocity

- Community engagement involves taking something from participants: taonga.
- Communities are often exploited; ideas and stories are taken, and sometimes used for building careers and receiving major funding; at times none of those resources come back to the community which was consulted, and reciprocity is lost.
- Often funding stays in the public sector, while communities struggle to deliver grass roots programmes.
- Rarely do we see people from our communities promoted or in leadership positions within the organisations that are engaging with us.
- Data sovereignty: who keeps control of the data, who benefits from it; how is this information fed back into the community?



And that's it.

Any questions?

Send us an email.



We would love to hear from you.

Inclusive Aotearoa Collective Tāhono

