



# The Path Guide Training Manual

The Convergence Project  
A 501 (c) (3) non-profit  
[www.TheConvergenceProject.org](http://www.TheConvergenceProject.org)

## **Overview**

The Convergence Project is an international 501 (c) (3) nonprofit that facilitates diverse or opposing groups and organizations to come together to find common ground without compromise. We then help the groups select a project that they can do together that will benefit the groups and their greater community.

We are neither liberal nor conservative, and we do not reject or endorse any particular life philosophies, creeds or religious beliefs. Instead we recognize and respect all beliefs and values (excluding those that are hate based). We believe that to function most effectively in the world, it helps to find common ground to work together. We believe that this is possible because despite our obvious differences, we believe people are more alike than different.

Based on our observation that the world has become increasingly polarized and divided, we have created an organization that is not about asking people to change what they believe or what they do, but rather, finding an area where they are already in agreement with a different or opposing group and building a working relationship from there.

When we choose to interact only with others who think and believe as we do, we limit ourselves and what we can achieve. We also limit the possibilities of our group or organization. But when we work with others to find common ground, we get more of what we want and what our group wants, while at the same time creating the community in which we wish to live.

As an example, consider the following: A group that holds beliefs consistent with a Right to Life philosophy with regard to reproductive rights may partner with a group that is Pro Choice in its beliefs. The groups may identify as their common ground a desire to reduce unwanted pregnancy in their community, while agreeing to disagree on everything else. In this instance, both groups get more of what they want while compromising

nothing about who they are or what they believe. It is truly a win/win experience.

The possibilities of the kinds of groups that can partner together are virtually limitless. In fact, we define a group as any collection of 3 or more people. Nonprofits can partner with for-profits, civic clubs can partner with social clubs, and so on.

The process we use to find common ground is called “The Converged Path”. This is a unique, research supported facilitation process led by you, our Path Guides. You have been directed to or will be directed to a link for our publication entitled The Converged Path that serves as a guidebook for group members participating in the process.

## **Responsibilities Before the Groups Meet**

Now let’s talk about what a Path Guide’s responsibilities are prior to groups being brought together to find common ground. Our belief is that people who live in communities are uniquely suited to represent us because they know the needs of a community and what groups, factions, and issues exist. They also know what has been tried before and with what degree of success.

So the first place to start is by **identifying possible groups** to participate in the process. You may want to think about what groups or organizations in your area have a history of not working well together or those that have not worked together at all because of value or belief differences. They may be groups that have, in fact, worked in opposition to each other, not realizing that they had common ground.

A good way to approach them is to ask if you can tell them a little bit about The Convergence Project. In addition to making personal contacts, we encourage you to:

--Use social networking sites like Facebook and others to blog about what you are doing.

--Host forums to talk about finding common ground without compromise. We have developed a short presentation called “Common Ground in a Polarized World”. We suggest that you use some version of this as you

speak to groups. The link to the Common Ground in a Polarized World PDF is: <http://www.theconvergenceproject.org/Training-Manual.html>

--Do Press Releases or Public Service Announcements through your local media. Be sure to include the “who, what, when, and where”. It might go something like this:

The Convergence Project, an international nonprofit, will host a forum entitled, “Common Ground in a Polarized World” from 6-8 PM at the Hooper County Public Library. Admission is free and the public is invited to attend. The mission of The Convergence Project is to help dissimilar groups find common ground without compromise and to help the groups identify a project that they can do together in their community. For more information call (your name and contact information here).

--Speak to local groups and clubs about TCP. Many organizations frequently need speakers.

--And most importantly, when doing all of these things, don’t forget to listen to the needs of the people who represent your community. This will help you in the work you do later as the groups select a project.

You may wish to stress the **benefits to finding common ground**. They include:

--Groups get more of what they want without giving up what they believe or value.

--There is an increase in trust and a decrease in prejudice (as supported by research.\*)

--Participants are actively creating the community in which they desire to live.

--Participants have the opportunity to tell and show the other group who they really are, to define themselves.

--Participants replace fear with a more hopeful outlook on the world.

As you do all of the work involved in this process, it is important to **remain neutral and unbiased**. Your personal beliefs may be more consistent with one group than the other. It is vital not to reveal your personal beliefs or show favoritism.

The volunteer form that we require includes a “Hold Harmless Agreement”. This is for our protection and yours. The form is available online and must be filled out by all participants—no exceptions. It may be printed by you or by the group participants by going to the following link:

<http://www.theconvergenceproject.org/Volunteer-Form.html>

## **Preparing for the Facilitation**

Once the forms have been signed, you are ready to start the process of finding common ground and helping the groups identify a project. For this we use our research-supported facilitation process The Converged Path. It is a process that is unique in a number of ways. First, it does not engage in conflict resolution, a process that usually requires a “giving up” or compromise of something. Instead it looks for the area of existing agreement, the common ground.

Secondly, The Converged Path facilitates common ground by asking participants to do a bit of homework a few days prior to their facilitation. It asks them to **think and write** a bit about what they **believe, fear, and hope** about the process. Research has shown that amazing things happen as a result of brief periods of expressive writing\*.

Some groups that you may work with may not be terribly polarized and may ask if they can skip the facilitation and get straight to the project. We ask you to encourage them to give the facilitation process a try. Most groups find the outcome surprisingly beneficial. If they still wish to skip the facilitation, then, by all means, allow them to start to work toward selecting a project.

For those using The Converged Path facilitation process, the guidebook can be downloaded by going to the following link:

<http://www.theconvergenceproject.org/Volunteer-Form.html>

**Please direct all participants to this link.** Encourage participants to print their own. It is possible for participants to do the pre-facilitation writing by

typing online. However, they will be asked to write more during the facilitation, so it is a good idea to print the whole guidebook.

## **The Converged Path Guidebook**

The Guidebook is fairly self-explanatory. It asks participants to write for 5 minutes a day for the 3 days prior to their facilitation. Please make sure you have familiarized yourself with the guidebook before talking with participants about it.

Encourage participants to make the process easy and fun. Stress to them that even people who hate to write can do this. Instruct them not to worry about grammar or punctuation and to just let it flow. Make them aware that no one will look at what they have written. It is just for their use. Ask them to bring it with them to the facilitation.

## **Facilitation Day**

Find and reserve a public meeting space such as a meeting room in a public library or other quiet space. A chalkboard or flip chart may be helpful but are not essential. Allow at least 2 hours for the facilitation process. Participants should bring their guidebooks and something to write with. If your groups are quite polarized, this may be the first time they have met face to face. Be aware that they may not have a high comfort level, and don't encourage too much interaction at first unless they initiate it.

You might start with introductions and an explanation of the process and what The Convergence Project does in communities. Remind everyone that it is not a situation that will ask them to compromise who they are or what they believe. Instead, it is about finding common ground.

Begin by asking the participants to divide into their groups. You may want to have some idea in your mind about how long you will allow for each step of the facilitation. Tell participants to use what they wrote in the pre-facilitation phase as they begin to discuss the **beliefs** of their group or organization.

In a typical facilitation, the facilitator would usually write and summarize these beliefs for the groups. This can result in facilitator bias, and we avoid this by asking the group members to do the writing. This makes groups feel

like they arrived at the outcome themselves. Research shows that writing does remarkable things, some not fully understood by science. We use writing because it makes beliefs and goals “real” in a way that simply speaking about them never could. We feel that it makes for long lasting change. Group members are asked to write down 5 beliefs that they and their group members agree are the beliefs of the group.

While members of each group discuss and write, you should spend a little time with each group to observe the process and answer any questions the groups may have. Make sure that **each of the group members is writing**. This is very important to the process.

Next, building upon what participants wrote in their guidebooks, group members should write and discuss 3 agreed upon **fears** that they have about the process. This is essentially what the groups thought could be the worst-case scenario for working with a dissimilar group.

Finally, participants should talk and write about their 3 best **hopes** for the process. At the end of the process, we want the groups to be more “hopeful” than “fearful”, and this usually happens. One way to help this happen is to ask participants to spend a little extra time writing about their hopes and to strive to be hopeful about the process. This helps a lot.

Again, everyone should be writing something down as this discussion unfolds. In order to get through all of the steps, you may need to move the groups along from time to time without seeming to be rushing.

The next step involves bringing the groups together into one large group to find their *area of existing agreement*. It may be important to remind them of the ground rules. Mutual respect is always required. Ask participants to be mindful of the language they use when describing the other group. If group members use disrespectful language, stop it immediately or it could derail the process. You might say something like, “Now I am going to stop you there to remind everyone that the way you describe the other group should include only neutral language.”

In this step, as in the earlier stages of the process, you as facilitator will take a different role from that of the traditional facilitator. Ask for a **representative from each group** to summarize what each group wrote about their beliefs, fears, and hopes. As each representative summarizes

what their group wrote, instruct participants to write some of their summaries in their guidebooks. This may seem unnecessary, but it is extremely important. It doesn't have to be full sentences. It can be single words. It's just important to write something.

## **Defining a Project**

Encourage your groups to listen for common threads between the groups as representatives summarize. Many people are surprised that members of opposing groups can have many of the same beliefs, fears, and hopes. This recognition is often startling to group members and starts to build a bridge to finding common ground. Even a shared fear (and even if it is a shared fear of one another) is an aspect of common ground. And any shared feature represents a footing on which to build.

Typically, the writing process helps groups find that their fears seem less imposing and that their hopes seem more achievable. And certainly, they find that their beliefs and those of the other group have become clearer.

Sometimes the common ground that the groups share is immediately evident, almost as if the process has revealed it by magic. It is not magic but thinking and writing that help reveal the area of existing agreement. Other times, it will require more teasing out. As Path Guide you may have to point to the common ground that you observe without leading the groups to agree with you. If you find it helpful to write on a chalkboard, or flip chart, then do so. But always ask the group members to write too.

If the common ground is not evident, ask the groups to think about the summaries of the group's beliefs, fears, and hopes. Then ask, "What do both groups want for this community?" At this point in the facilitation, most group members have an answer to this question.

Using our earlier example of two groups that disagree over the pregnancy issue, the facilitation process may reveal that, despite their differences, both groups have a desire to reduce unwanted pregnancy in their community. The task in identifying a project will be to "agree to disagree" on certain topics by putting them off the table while selecting a project that helps reduce unwanted pregnancy in a way in which **both groups agree**. A

possible project using this example might be an education project for teens that the groups can do together to educate teens about the difficulties that teen parents face.

Listening carefully is critical in helping your groups find common ground. During the discussion, make sure that both groups feel their beliefs and values have been respected and not compromised. And let the choice of the project emerge from the participants. Often your role as Path Guide will be to help the groups find the “forest” that may be obscured by the “trees”. In other words, common ground is often right in front of our faces if we will only look to see it.

Typically, TCP does not feel that the Path Guides should define the projects for the groups, believing that if the projects are need driven, the groups will have no problem arriving at a project to do. There are certain needs that all communities around the globe have whether they are large or small. Any number of projects can benefit (or be done by) kids and youth, the elderly and handicapped, and the impoverished. All communities can benefit from projects that support the local economy.

Hypothetical examples are: a project where youth from two high schools partner to do home repair projects for house bound individuals or a project involving different faith groups coming together to refurbish a community center. But the possibilities are endless once common ground and a community need have been identified.

While the facilitation is not a perfect process, it usually works. We believe that this is because **most groups** that get to this stage **want the process to work**, and that counts for a lot. In some cases another meeting may be required. Unfortunately, for certain groups, the process may just not work at all. In those rare cases where the project stage does not materialize because the groups cannot agree to work together, we believe that the value of the *process* has still been significant and perhaps more valuable than doing an actual *project*.

When your groups have identified a potential project, lead them in a discussion of the project’s feasibility by using our guidelines for selecting a project. Start by talking about the **community needs**. All communities have unique features created by their local economy, political demographics, etc. As a result, the needs of a community will be unique as well.

Some questions that a Path Guide and groups should ask when considering a project include:

--Is the project really needed and wanted in your community? It is important to avoid imposing your desire for change on a community that doesn't want or need it.

--Are you duplicating something that some other group or organization is already doing? If the project is similar to something being done, is it novel enough to really be needed?

--Have you checked with the proper authorities to make sure that you have the right to undertake such a project? Don't just assume that you can do what the groups are proposing without checking to see if permission is needed.

--Will the project have a specific beginning and ending time? Projects without specific beginnings and endings often don't succeed. Knowing when you will start and when you will finish will keep momentum strong.

--Can the project realistically be completed in 1-4 months? Remember that projects usually take longer than you planned. Allow for this.

--Will it only do good and create no harm (very important)? Make sure that your project will not cause harm to anyone or anything in your community.

--Are you able to finish what you start? Make sure you do not take on too much. This can be a sure way to fail.

--Are you making sure you are not leaving a void when the groups stop working together? (If your project is to deliver meals to the needy, how will the need you have started to fill continue to be met once the project ends?)

--Will the project require funding? If so, what sources of funding are available to be used? Sometimes businesses in a community will donate paint or other materials that your project may need. You will never know unless you ask them. If they donate, thank them profusely and remember to acknowledge their donation in a public way through your local media. For

some projects, the city or the county in which the groups are based may be willing to contribute funding. Again, groups shouldn't be shy about asking. Finally, help them identify action steps to make it happen. What will be the first step? When will it occur? Who will initiate the action? Ask for someone from each group to come forward to help organize the project.

**Do not conclude the session until a clear vision of the project has been created.** Make sure members of each group have each other's contact information and that you do as well. Conclude with thanking and praising the groups for the work they have done and will continue to do together.

## **Follow up to facilitation**

Rarely will group projects succeed without some follow up or external motivation by you. People's lives are busy, and the best of intentions can drift somewhat. So we encourage you to stay in touch with your groups and to motivate them as needed. *Your interest will keep their interest going.*

You may wish to submit a Press Release to you local newspaper or television station on what the groups are doing. This makes a great community story and also motivates the groups to continue what they are doing. If you contact local media with a story, we ask you to include the mission statement of The Convergence Project and a link to our website. We also urge you to **photograph your group's project**, and we hope you'll share these with us for our website.

At this point, most groups realize that there has been great value to this process. This is a great time to mention to your groups that The Convergence Project is able to sustain itself and do the work it does largely as the result of public contributions. We hope you will encourage them to go to our website and make a contribution if they feel they have benefited from the Convergence experience so that we may continue the work that we do.

No matter how well you follow up, it is inevitable that some projects may stall or sputter out. It is up to you to recognize when a project is terminally stalled and to suspend TCP involvement with the project if necessary. We will keep in touch with you regarding the progress of your project, and if a project appears not to be moving forward for an extended period of time or is having negative consequences, we will suspend TCP involvement with the project.

When the project ends and the groups are about to go their separate ways, you may wish to have a discussion with them about how, if at all, the process has affected them either positively or negatively.

## **Conclusion**

If after reading all of this you find yourself asking the questions, “What did I get myself into? And “Can I do all of this?” The answer is, you absolutely can! The most important factor that produces success is the desire to make something happen, and you have shown this desire with your initial interest in what we do. Remember that we’re here to help, and never hesitate to ask us if you have questions or need clarification. Good luck! Now go out there and make the world a better place!

## **Check List**

### **Before starting to work with groups have you:**

--signed and returned your Path Guide Agreement Form?

--received fully completed and signed Volunteer Forms from all participants with whom you will work? Please hold onto these forms until the project is completed.

--directed the groups to the link that contains The Converged Path document?

### **After the project is selected have you:**

--received approval from TCP to start the project that the groups envision? This can be as simple as sending us an email and describing the proposed project.

### **After the project has begun have you:**

--contacted the local media to tell them about what your groups are doing?

--followed up with your groups to make sure that the process is proceeding as planned?

--photographed the project in action and sent your photos to TCP?

--posted what your groups are doing on social networking site like Facebook?

### **\*References to published research that supports our process**

*On the results of intergroup contact:*

Pettigrew, Thomas F. & Tropp, Linda R. (2006). A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 90, No 5, 751-783.

Tropp, Linda R. The Role of Trust in Intergroup Contact: Its Significance and Implications for Improving Relations Between Groups. Chapter prepared for U. Wagner, L. Tropp, G. Finchilescu, & C. Tredoux (Eds.), *Improving Intergroup Relations: Building on the Legacy of Thomas F. Pettigrew*. Blackwell Publications.

Tropp, Linda R. & Bianchi Rebecca A. (2006). Valuing Diversity and Interest in Intergroup Contact. *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 533-551.

Tropp, Linda R. & Bianchi, Rebecca A. (2007). Interpreting references to group membership in context: Feelings about intergroup contact depending on who says what to whom. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 37, 153-170.

*On how the writing process creates change:*

De Salvo, Louise. (2002). *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Our Stories Transform Our Lives*.

Pennebaker, James W. & Chang, Cindy K. (2007). Expressive Writing, Emotional Upheavals, and Health. *Handbook of Health Psychology* 263-284.

Pennebaker, James. (2004). *A Guided Journal to Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*.