



Transforming the Us/Them Polarization: The Practical Potential of Restorative Processes

Exploring methods to bridge
divisions and promote healing

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Preferred Solutions

Workshop Overview and Learning Objectives



Understanding Polarization

Explore the roots and impacts of 'Us/Them' polarization affecting communities and workplaces.

Restorative Principles

Learn restorative processes that help bridge divides and foster mutual understanding.

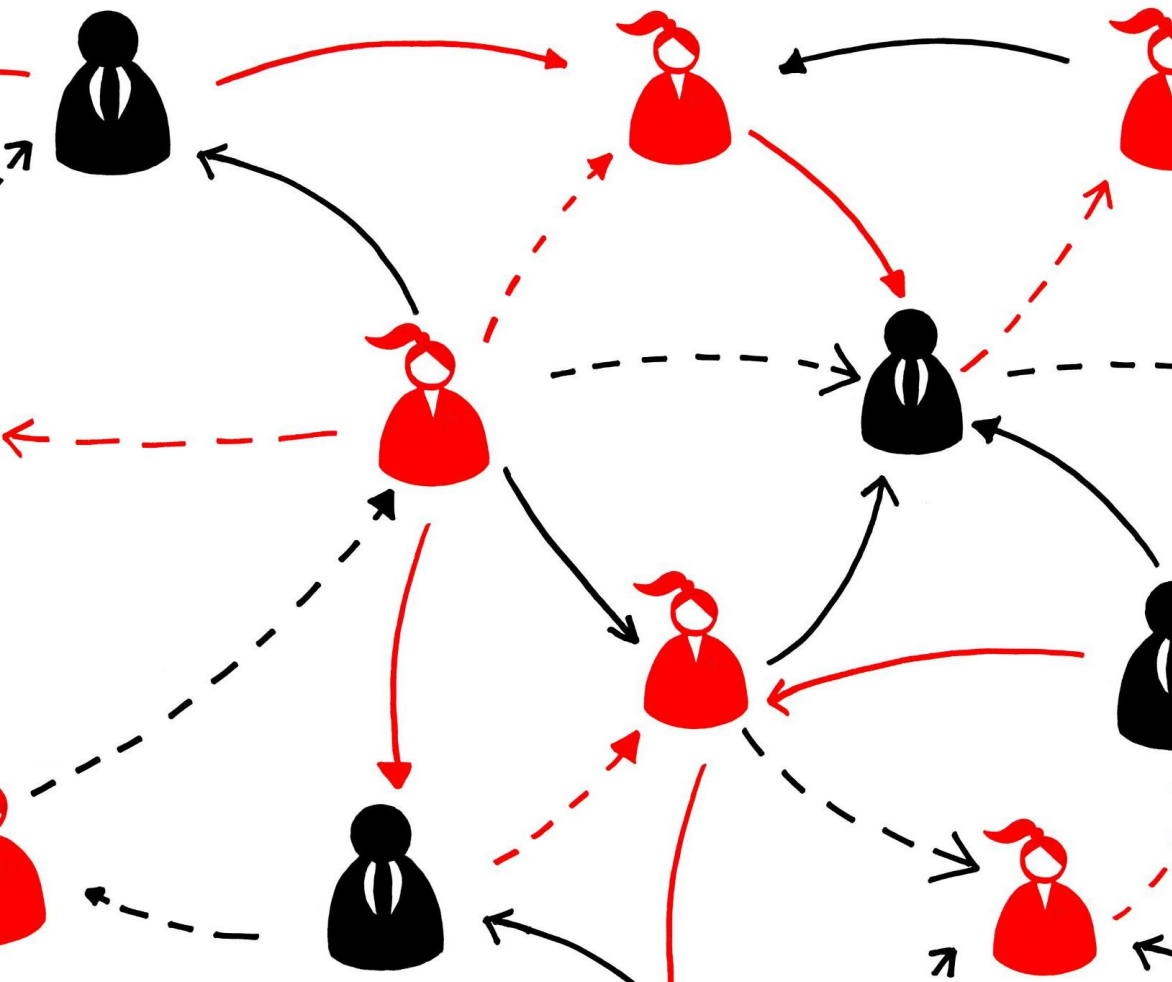
Facilitation Techniques

Practice strategies for facilitating conversations in polarized and challenging environments.

Actionable Steps

Identify practical steps to reduce polarization in professional and community contexts.

Understanding Polarization



Definition of Polarization

Polarization divides individuals or groups into opposing camps with an 'Us' versus 'Them' mindset. Polarization is when communication shifts from dialogue to defending sides, where people are opponents rather than partners in communication.

Psychological and Social Roots

Polarization stems from identity, power struggles, and perceived scarcity of resources among groups. Polarization is fear driven, fear of losing values, belonging, and sense of self as a “good” person. Our group identity is tribal, and self protective.

Impact of Polarization

Impact on Society

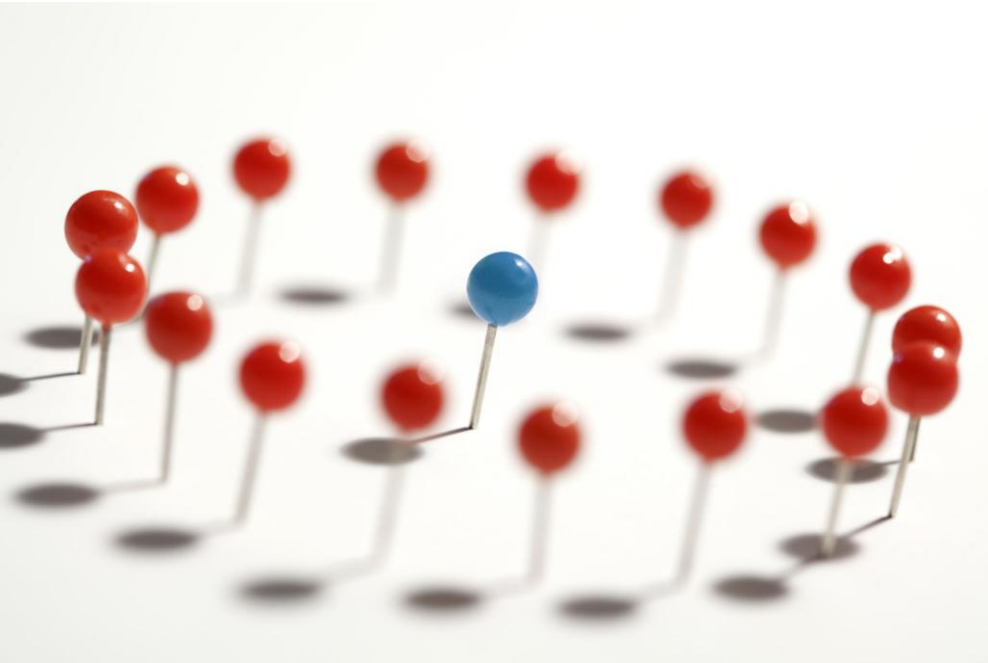
Polarization affects communication, collaboration, decision-making, and trust in communities and workplaces. It is a barrier to good decision making and social order.

Addressing Polarization

Recognizing polarization patterns is the first step to transforming and improving societal dynamics.

Exercise: Open your social media and see if you can find examples of polarization in action.





Social Polarization

“It’s Political”

Communities are deeply divided along ideological, cultural, and moral lines, disagreement increasingly tied to **identity and belonging** rather than policy details.

How polarization shows up socially:

- People sort themselves by media, geography, schools, and even family relationships
- Disagreement is often framed as moral failure rather than difference
- Trust in institutions and “the other side” is low



Polarization in Restorative Contexts

In restorative contexts, polarization is significant because it:

- **Blocks repair** by preventing people from hearing harm and impact
- **Undermines dignity** by reducing individuals to positions rather than whole people
- **Escalates conflict** by reinforcing fear, blame, and retreat into certainty

Common Triggers and Escalation Patterns in Us vs Them Thinking.

1) Identity Threat: A person feels their identity, values, or moral worth is being questioned.

What it sounds like: “People like you always...” “How can anyone think that?”

2) Moral Framing: Differences are framed as right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, or righteous vs. immoral.

What it sounds like: “There’s no excuse for that view” “ You must be complicit”

3) Assumed or Attributed Intent: Someone’s words or actions are interpreted as intentionally harmful or malicious.

What it sounds like: “You’re just trying to control people,” “You don’t actually care about this community”

4) Uncontained Emotion: Strong emotion without structure or support.

What it looks like: Raised voices, Personal attacks when overwhelmed
What else?





Restorative Principles

Core Values of Restorative Practices

Restorative principles focus on respect, accountability, and open dialogue to repair harm and build trust.

Empathy and Shared Understanding

These practices promote empathy and shared understanding through inclusive and collaborative conversations.

Spaces for Constructive Dialogue

Creating spaces helps participants move beyond conflict and fosters constructive relationships in polarized settings.

Four Core Principles Guiding Restorative Process

CORE PRINCIPLE	KEY FOCUS	RESTORATIVE QUESTION
Relationship-Centered	Repairing and strengthening relationships	Who has been affected and how?
Inclusive Voice	Equitable participation and dignity	Who needs to be heard?
Accountability for Impact	Responsibility without blame or shame	What was the impact and what is needed now?
Repair and Reintegration	Healing harm and restoring belonging	What would help make things right and move forward?



Mapping the Divide: Exercise

Group Scenario Mapping

In your group, read the scenario on the template and map what the group agrees are:

a) needs, b) fears, and c) values of both sides.

See if you can as a group answer the question below:

How does mapping both sides help with empathy and insights?

Any surprises?





Techniques for Getting Started

Establish Safety, Purpose, and Shared Agreements

Purpose of this phase is structure and governance

- Lower threat, create **structure**, and ensure participants understand *why* they are here and *how* the space will function.
- Clarify the **purpose of the circle**: restoring understanding, relationships, and community—not winning or persuading.
- **Name polarization explicitly and normalize it as a human response to threat and hurt, not a moral failure.**
- Co-create (or reaffirm) agreements such as:
 - Speak from lived experience
 - Listen to understand, not respond
 - Respect confidentiality and dignity
 - Allow discomfort without harm

The talking piece and or/ and circle structure to slow communication and equalize voice.

- ***Restorative intention*: Reduce threat and create psychological safety before engagement.**

Examples of Facilitator Prompts:

- “What helps you feel safe enough to participate honestly in a conversation like this?”
- “What agreements would help ensure everyone is treated with dignity here?”
- “What do you need from the group or facilitators to stay engaged, even when things feel hard?”
- “What should we do if someone feels overwhelmed or needs to step back?”

Humanize Through Story and Lived Experience

Purpose is to Explore Who We Are Beyond Positions and Reflect

- Invite participants to respond to **low-risk, humanizing prompts**, such as:
 - “What do you care most about in this community?”
 - “What experiences shaped how you see this issue?”
- Emphasize stories, not arguments.
- Allow silence and reflection; do not rush responses.

Restorative intention: Shift participants from “sides” to people with histories, identities, and care.

Getting Started Continued



Techniques to Acknowledge Feelings and Meaning

Surface Needs, Fears, and Values Beneath Positions and What's Really at Stake

- Use prompts that redirect attention away from right/wrong:
 - “What are you most concerned might happen if this issue isn’t addressed?”
- Reflect patterns (without attribution) to highlight common themes.

***Restorative intention:* Reveal shared humanity and complexity beneath polarized stances**

Acknowledge Impact and Responsibility, Naming Harm Without Assigning Blame

- Invite gentle reflection on impact:
 - “How has this conflict affected you or the community?”
 - “What has been lost, strained, or harmed?”

Frame responsibility as **relational**, not punitive:

- Responsibility for listening, for impact, even without intent and for future coexistence

***Restorative intention:* Make harm speakable without escalating defensiveness.**

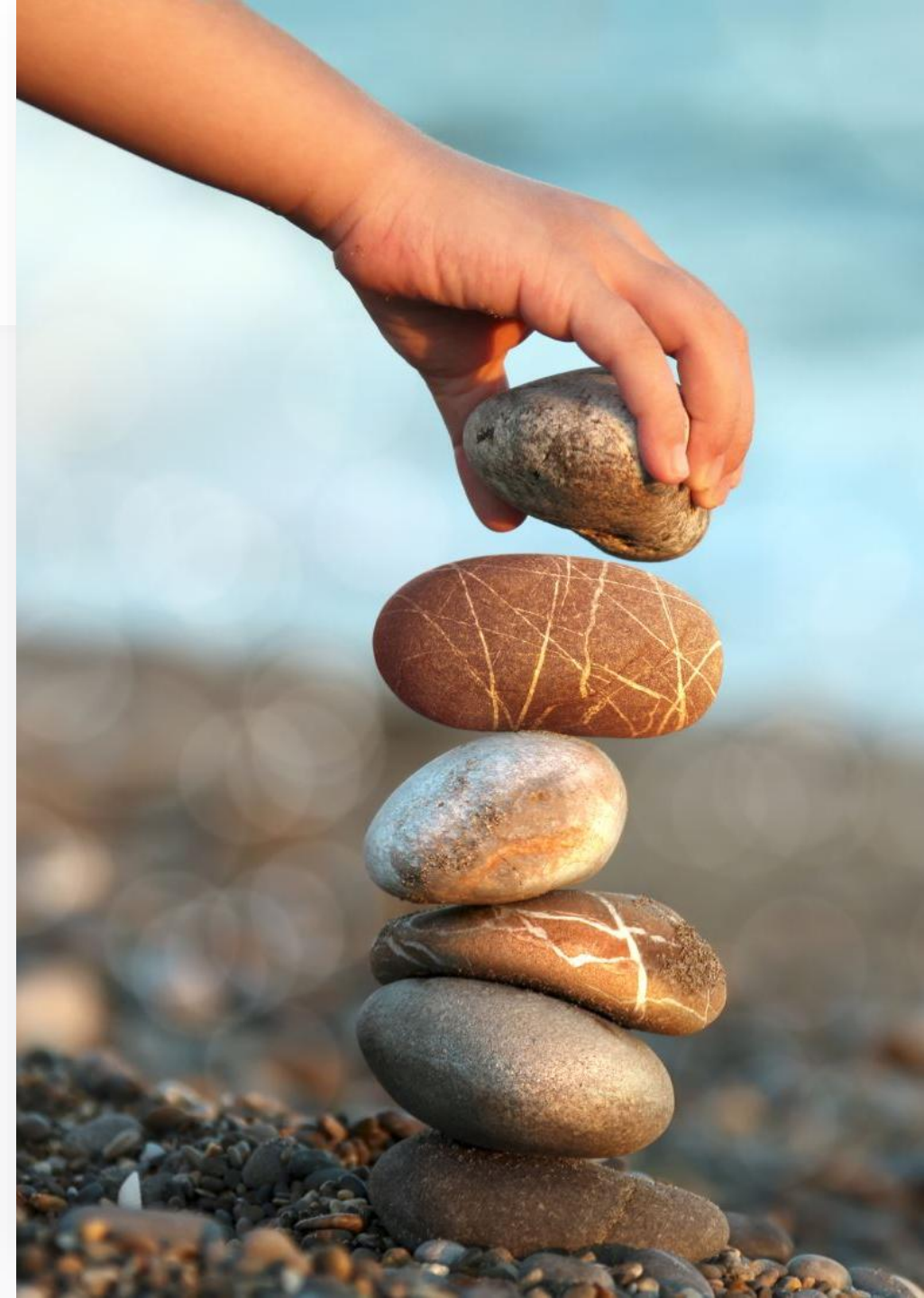
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Technique for Agreed Action

Identify Hope and Conditions for Moving Forward From Polarization Toward Repair

- Ask forward-looking questions:
 - “What would help start to rebuild trust, even slightly?”
 - “What would support continued dialogue?”
 - “What do you need going forward?”
- Capture **small, realistic next steps**, not full resolution.

Restorative intention: Shift from entrenched polarization to possibility, agency, and continuity.



Techniques for Diverse Groups

Trauma-Informed Focus: safety, choice, predictability

- Normalize opting out, passing, or stepping away.
- Explain the circle structure clearly to reduce uncertainty.
- Emphasize consent: participation is invited, not demanded.

Culturally Responsive Focus: respect, voice, relational norms

- Invite participants to name communication norms from their cultures or communities.
- Avoid imposing a single style of “respectful communication.”
- Acknowledge power dynamics present in the room.



Facilitation Tools and Techniques



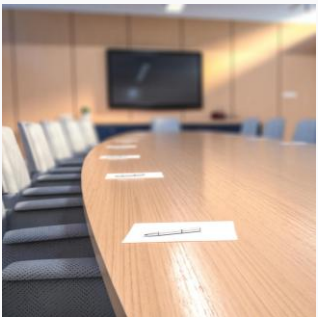
Structured Process

The structure and process enable inclusive dialogue by bringing participants together in a mutually agreed space.



Restorative Questions

Restorative questions promote reflection, accountability, impact, and necessary steps forward.



Safe Space Checklists

Checklists help facilitators create environments that are respectful and open to communication.



Case Study: Pineridge

Read the Case Study.

In your small group select a spokesperson

1. See if you can create a map of polarization
2. Answer the questions on the page.

Closing and Takeaways



Summary of Key Insights

The workshop ends by summarizing important insights and practical applications for participants to consider.

Encouraging Reflection and Action

Participants reflect on their learning and identify actionable steps to reduce polarization in their communities and workplaces.

Providing Continued Resources

Additional resources like books, websites, and training programs are offered to support ongoing learning and restorative practice.

Sustaining Inclusive Environments

The importance of applying restorative principles to build and sustain inclusive, empathetic environments is emphasized.



Questions? Observations?

