A Seat at the Table Guide for Radical Listening

Learn How to Listen to Promote Diversity, Equity, Access, + Inclusion
**TAKE A SEAT...**

Today we live more and more within echo chambers, reinforced by technology and physical segregations. It is more important than ever to have conversations with people we don’t spend every day with and people we don’t agree with. But how do we do that? How do we do that in a way that leaves us feeling understood, heard, and maybe even a little better about the world. How do we do that while remaining true to our values and being inclusive to diverse people, experiences, and opinions?

These questions are hard to answer; there might not be a perfect answer to any of them. However, does that mean we stop trying to find or create the answer? No. A Seat at the Table (ASATT) is an attempt to create an answer and enter into more difficult conversations while creating space for diversity, inclusion, and equity.

ASATT reimagines civic discourse starting from the premise that everyone deserves to have a seat at the proverbial table and be a part of the conversation, and everyone deserves compassion, empathy, and understanding. Everyone can have the opportunity to enter and engage in these important conversations even with different levels of understanding and exposure to the topics through structured conversation guides that can be used in various settings.

If we can create brave and safe spaces where people want to opt-in to the conversation without fear of judgment and admonishment, there will be opportunities to learn from, better understand, and grow to empathize with different people and their beliefs. Even more, we might learn to disagree respectfully, if disagreeing is where we even land.

Compassion, empathy, and understanding are especially challenging to achieve when listening defensively. Defense is a natural reaction to feeling like our values and personhood is under attack. The amygdala is to blame, here. Bad habits—even how we communicate and listen—can be broken; it just takes practice.

**Radical listening** is the practice of intentionally quieting the internal voices and judgments thereby offering our full mental space to the speaker. This practice can create a safe and brave space to ask informed questions, get well-thought-out answers, which enable worthwhile conversations. (Sidebar on page explaining radical listening and how it’s been used and defined differently).

The goal of the ASATT Guide for Radical Listening is to expose ourselves to the ways we enter and exit conversations, how to ensure conversations are prioritizing populations that are frequently silenced, and even more how we can change both with a little awareness, introspection, and practice.
Use this guide to prepare for a tough conversation with your partner, boss, or team. Radical listening is helpful in any situation, and is an incessant practice because we believe everyone deserves a seat at the table. We all deserve to be heard even when it’s really hard. Let’s be kind to each other by creating a table where listening is standard.
FOUR PRINCIPLES OF RADICAL LISTENING

PATIENCE + ACCEPTANCE

Be patient with yourself in this process. Accept that perfection in this process doesn't make you a better or worse person. What's most important is that you keep going.

EXPLORATION

Don’t be afraid to dig deeper. People are created equally, but are not treated equally which results in a myriad of experiences. This means there is much to learn from people; we need only listen radically and ask exploratory questions.

MINDFULNESS

Awareness of our thoughts and judgments is needed in a way that one might not be accustomed. Radical listening doesn't require being a mindfulness expert; just try to notice when emotions and attitude are changing and do something about it.

CARE

Care for yourself and for others. This principle connects with patience because we think the combination of the two results in empathy and compassion.
HOW DO I LISTEN RADICALLY?

1. BREATH

If you know you’re going to enter a conversation that might produce some anxiety or reactive response, take a few deep breaths. Center yourself for practicing radical listening. If you stumble into a frustrating conversation, take a few deep breaths when you start to feel your flight-fight response kick in.

2. BE MINDFUL

There’s a great deal of mindfulness that’s required to listen radically. You have to be aware of your thoughts and judgments in a way that you might not be used to. Mindfulness is “the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us. You don’t need to be a mindfulness expert, just try to notice when you’re getting upset or frustrated or even “over it.”

3. BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER

Once you notice those feelings, try to counter them with active listening techniques.

1. **Pay attention.** Redirect your attention from your own thoughts, frustrations, and anxiety to the speaker and what they’re saying.
2. **Show that you’re listening.** Eye contact, some nodding, and maintaining an open posture (no crossed arms, here!).
3. **Ask clarifying questions.** For an active and radical listener, ask clarifying questions rather than hostile ones. E.g. can you explain how you came to this conclusion? Where did you hear that? (This one is tricky, because tone is everything).
4. **Defer judgment.** Deep breath here; this is easier said than done. Try to remind yourself that a conversation doesn’t have to be about you or the other person joining sides. You don’t need to play devil’s advocate (because that’s very annoying, honestly). Allow the speaker to finish their point before asking your clarifying questions.
4. RESPOND APPROPRIATELY; DISAGREE RESPECTFULLY

Don't check your opinions, beliefs, and values at the door; bring them into the conversation, and learn how to disagree respectfully. This is by far the hardest step because we're taught rhetoric and persuasive communication, so there's a bit of unlearning and relearning that is required. Every conversation doesn't have to end with someone joining your side; let go of that expectation and approach. Speak from your experience (use I vs. We) and ask others to do the same. Explain why you disagree and how you came to that conclusion, and do it in a way that invites some questions and maybe even criticism. Then repeat steps 1-4.

5. BEGIN THE CHANGE

So what's the difference between radical and active listening? The intention. Radical listening begins the process of radical change in our communities, society, relationships, and politics. We need more radical listeners if we are to make a society that's inclusive and equitable for all.
DESIGN THE SPACE

SPACE MATTERS
Whether we know it or not, we are wired to respond to the environment around us. In fact, that is the first thing we do: check out the space. We identify points of entry and exit; we find our spot in the space that isn't too vulnerable. It goes back to that fight or flight response. So, if we are to engage in conversations that challenge our understanding and make us uncomfortable, the space itself cannot be challenging and uncomfortable. We must know that the space we are choosing to enter is a safe and brave space.

PHYSICAL SPACE
While the physical space may change based on where these conversations are happening, it is important to have difficult conversations in power neutral spaces. For example, if you are an Executive Director and want to engage in a difficult conversation about race and white privilege with your staff, it is important to have the conversation in a space where people feel like they are equals. So, try the café where everyone eats lunch, not the corner office or boardroom. Also, the space should have enough room for small group discussion areas, and a larger share-out space to begin and end the structured conversation.

MENTAL SPACE
The mental space may be one of the most challenging to design, however, we do it by acknowledging the hesitance and vulnerability, not ignoring it. State the obvious: difficult conversations are really hard, but the conversations must happen to be more compassionate, empathetic, and understanding. Use the Four Principles of Radical Listening as a contract and the step-by-step as an accountability partner. Get everyone on the same page about the goals and context for the conversation. Hold people accountable for disrupting consensus.

EMOTIONAL SPACE
Complex conversations are difficult and can bring up emotions from experiences or of guilt. It’s important to know this and prepare for it. During emotional moments soothing or explaining someone’s feelings are not the most important. Giving someone space to emote is.
DESIGN THE CONVERSATION

WELCOME FOLKS

It may go without saying, but it is generally nice to welcome people into a conversation. Acknowledge the why behind the conversation (e.g. implicitly biased remarks in the office, or a recent argument with an aunt who is homophobic). Explain radical listening and how to practice it. Allow people to settle into the necessary space to engage in a difficult conversation.

SET GUIDELINES FOR THE CONVERSATION

Guidelines serve as a reminder for the facilitator and participants. Guidelines also allow the act of accountability to be less personal—especially when the guidelines are printed and easily accessible.

Here’s an example of the guidelines utilized at the A Seat at the Table community meet-ups:

1. Check around. If you know more than one person intimately, move to sit next to someone you do not know well. We ask this so that you can talk to someone you typically don't talk to! Is someone looking to join? Welcome them to yours!
2. Be a radical listener. That means being mindful of how you’re listening. We encourage listening to learn and understand. Try to leave questions and responses for the after the questions have been answered by everyone.
3. Appreciate our time and your community members. Try to answer the questions as directly as you can. Try to share time and space; make sure there is enough for everyone at your table.
PROVIDE EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS
Exploratory questions allow participants to dig deep and unpack stuff—whatever stuff it might be. We recommend asking five types of questions and in this order.

The heart of the matter: Ask participants what is in their hearts as they enter the conversation.

Define themes and offer personal context: We often assume we’re speaking the same language, but we aren’t. Ask folks to define themes that the conversation will explore, and their connection to it.

Intersection and connection: How does the conversation’s topic intersect with another topic? How does it connect to the larger community?

Action and next steps: This last question keeps the conversation going beyond the allotted time. We encourage ending a difficult conversation with next steps—baby steps allowed—that challenge participants to be accountable to what they learned, unearthed, or grappled with.
For examples of the A Seat at the Table conversation guides, please check the appendix.
DESIGN FOR DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, + EQUITY

It goes without saying that diversity, inclusion, and equity are buzzwords right now. Everywhere we look, a company or organization is starting a diversity and inclusion initiative. The trend is needed and welcomed.

We couldn’t offer this conversation without stating that difficult conversations are even more difficult for underrepresented populations. Even more, when engaging in difficult conversations, those same populations are often those who experience difficulty regularly. So, how can we ensure those voices are being heard—dare I say prioritized?

One way is to implement an equity rubric.

WHAT’S AN EQUITY RUBRIC?

A Seat at the Table hosted application-based, family style dinners for a year. Early on, we realized the need to overrepresent underrepresented populations in the dinners. So, we created an equity rubric that made our diner selection process easy and made the table representative of the diversity we see in the world.

All applications were assigned a score using the rubric. From that score, we select five (5) with the highest points, three (3) with the median points, and two (2) with the lowest points. This process made inviting applicants objective rather, and didn’t exclude anyone regardless of the score. It simply allowed a diversity of voices.

An example of the A Seat at the Table Dinner Equity Rubric can be found in the appendix.
SET THE TABLE AND HAVE A SEAT

Radical listening and difficult conversations are not easy. However, we hope this guide will make it less exhausting.

Here’s the thing: we need to listen to each other more. Point, blank, period. Our world depends on humans empathizing with other humans; we argue that we must also empathize with the natural world, too. The only way to learn is by watching and listening, and sharing. This world that seems so icky requires our vulnerability and humility; it yearns for our kindness and respect toward everyone and everything.

We are not expecting people to cast away their experiences and adhere to a particular agenda. What we need are people who acknowledge what they don’t know, and do something about it.

Radical listening is a necessary step to affecting change in our interactions. When we listen radically, we enable learning that can grow empathy, compassion, and understanding. When we listen radically, we begin the process of radical change, radical inclusion, and radical equity. We can make our world feel less icky.

We can do this.
APPENDIX

I. CONVERSATION GUIDES

a. RACE + PRIVILEGE
b. SEX + GENDER IDENTITY
c. MENTAL HEALTH + WELLNESS
d. CLIMATE CHANGE
e. FOOD + FOOD SYSTEMS
f. WHITE SUPREMACY: A RESPONSE TO CHARLOTTEVILLE

II. A SEAT AT THE TABLE EQUITY RUBRIC
**Race + Privilege**

This is our conversation guide. This is a power hour conversation, which means we provide some questions to dive right in. Our meet-ups are so short because it’s a teaser—we want you to follow-up with people you’ve met and continue the conversation! There are some guidelines that will make this a fulfilling and engaging conversation.

**Guidelines**

1. Check around. If you know more than one person intimately, move to sit next to someone you do not know well. We ask this so that you can talk to someone you typically don't talk to! Is someone looking to join? Welcome them to yours!

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3. Appreciate our time and your community members. Try to answer the questions as directly as you can. Try to share time and space; make sure there is enough for everyone at your table.

**Questions for the Table**

1. What in your heart brought you here?

2. Briefly define what race + privilege mean to you.

3. Given the current political climate, what are your thoughts about race + privilege and how they intersect? Does racism as a system still exist? How have you benefitted from or been oppressed by privilege? Do you want to share that privilege?

4. What can we do to create empathy, compassion, and understanding in our shared spaces, and resist and reject racism and oppression? How can we be accountable to each other? What are 3 next steps?
SEX + GENDER IDENTITY

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3. Appreciate our time and your community members. Try to answer the questions as directly as you can. Try to share time and space; make sure there is enough for everyone at your table.

QUESTIONS FOR THE TABLE

1. What in your heart brought you here?

2. Briefly define what sex + gender identity means to you. What is the intersection/interrelationship between them?

3. Do you feel that social roles and norms have influenced your own gender identity and/or sexual expression? Has this impacted your sense of self?

4. What can we do to create empathy, compassion, and understanding in our shared spaces, and resist and reject prejudice, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia? How can we be accountable to each other? What are 3 next steps?
MENTAL HEALTH + WELLNESS

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QUESTIONS FOR THE TABLE

1. What in your heart brought you here?

2. Briefly define what mental health + wellness mean to you. How do you nurture your mental wellness?

3. What mental health & wellness agencies exist in our community? Are you and others receiving the care that you need? What/who is being left out or misunderstood in our current system/services?

4. What can we do to create empathy, compassion, and understanding in our shared spaces around mental health? How can we be accountable to each other? What are 3 next steps?
**CLIMATE CHANGE**

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**QUESTIONS FOR THE TABLE**

1. What in your heart brought you here?

2. Briefly describe your connection to the natural world. Has it been affected by a changing climate? How so?

3. How has a changing climate affected your community? Where do you see a connection between a changing climate and a social justice issues?

4. What can we do to create empathy, compassion, and understanding in our shared spaces? How can we help each other? How can we promote sustainable behavior, and do our part to mitigate climate change?
5. What are 3 next steps to exercise our activism?
FOOD + FOOD SYSTEMS

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QUESTIONS FOR THE TABLE

1. Briefly describe your connection to food. What’s a food that reminds you of your childhood?

2. What food options do you have in your neighborhood? What options are missing? How are the food choices influenced by people who live there?

3. How is access to fresh, healthy, affordable food affected by gender? Race? Class? Environment?

4. How might we promote sustainable behavior and practices, and do our part to mitigate access to food and food insecurity on an individual, community, and legislative level? What are 3 next steps?
WHITE SUPREMACY: A RESPONSE TO CHARLOTTESVILLE

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QUESTIONS FOR THE TABLE

1. What in your heart brought you here? What are you expecting from this discussion?

2. Do you personally know white supremacists or people who justify it? How do you interact with them? In other words, do you call them on it? Why or why not?

3. How do you see white supremacy practiced in your community? How do you benefit or are oppressed by white supremacy?
4. How will you dismantle white supremacy in your community? What are your next steps? How will you move emotion to motion?
A Seat at the Table Equity Rubric

Background Information:

On social media, Chanel saw a graphic with three people, three boxes, and a fence each person was trying to look over. The graphic depicted the difference between equity. Equality is making sure that everyone has a box; equity is tailoring everyone’s box to make sure they can see over the fence. The A Seat at the Table rubric is an attempt to ensure everyone has a seat at our tables.

Equity Rubric:

Race
Non-white (Includes: mixed race, biracial, etc.): 2 points
White: 1 point

Gender Identity
Female/woman: 2 points
Male/man: 1 point

Sexual Identity
Non-heterosexual: 2 points
Heterosexual: 1 point

Income
$30,000 or less/year: 3 points
$30,000 - $59,000/year: 2.5 points
$60,000 - $99,000/year: 2 points
$100,000 - $249,000/year: 1 point
$250,000 or more/year: 2 points

Age
18 or under: 1 point
19 - 34: 2 points
35-44: 1.5 points
45-64: 1 point
65 or over: 2 points
POLITICAL VIEWS
Democrat/Liberal/Progressive/Independent: 1 point
Republic/Conservative: 2 points
Other: 1.5 points