SPEAK!
THE CONNECTION-CREATION PLAYBOOK

Insights from the SPEAK! 2018 campaign

OVERVIEW

SPEAK! is a global campaign, coordinated by CIVICUS, to help give a voice to everyone, everywhere.

Launched in 2017, the campaign has provided a platform for people across the world to "speak out" on the issues that matter most to them.

In 2018, in the face of increasing social and political polarisation, the campaign created opportunities for people and communities to come together across lines of division and "speak with" each other – helping resolve conflicts, create connections and build understanding.

This culminated in 3 days of global action from 16-18 November, with almost 200 events held in over 45 countries, attended by more than 10,000 people and reaching well over 4 million online. Beyond the numbers were real and remarkable outcomes: peace agreements signed, prejudices confronted, relationships established.

The following is a summary of the top 10 insights gleaned from the SPEAK! 2018 campaign: a playbook for creating real connections that can lead to lasting change.
1. ASSESS THE PROBLEM – AND OPPORTUNITIES

Before taking any action, the first step should be to thoroughly assess the situation in a given country or region. The issues that divide us – or that appear to divide us – can be hugely varied. In 2018, SPEAK! events addressed a number of topics that people differ over: politics, religion, sectarianism, gender, sexuality, economics, language, ethnicity, race, age, access to power, health, corruption, and more.

Once you’ve decided on your issues(s), ask people with different perspectives about why divisions exist – perhaps there are less visible root causes that are more significant than the obvious manifestations. Even if you can’t identify the root of the division, you might be able to find some examples of hope and cooperation. Look for the positives and find ways to expand them. What do people have in common? What shared interests might they have? What examples of tolerance are already happening that you might be able to take further?

Go where the energy is:

In Colombia, INCIDE had originally planned to run an event focused on the stalled Colombian peace process. However, realising that the most topical and controversial issue at the time of the event was actually migration, they instead organised a conflict resolution game tournament that enabled interaction between Venezuelan migrants, local Colombians and government decision makers. The 150 participants were able to share openly their experiences and perspectives, resulting in seven creative solutions to address migration conflicts. INCIDE is now taking on the challenge of bringing these solutions to life, in collaboration with key stakeholders.

2. MATCH THE AMBITION TO THE CHALLENGE

Once you’ve identified the problem, consider how you can help create positive change. The extent of the division in your community may influence your ambitions. The biggest challenges often take time to overcome, and your efforts could be the start of an ongoing process.
‘Success’ might be bringing together people who wouldn’t normally enter the same room – just interacting with the ‘other’ can help us see how much we have in common and begin to challenge our negative assumptions. Alternatively, you may want individuals/groups to develop a deeper level of empathy or understanding about each other or, if the circumstances are right, to collaborate on a plan to help address underlying issues that fuel the division.

**Be bold:**

Notwithstanding the above, don’t be afraid to be bold! Take inspiration from Mali, where inter-community violence is rife and tensions have been rising between the Dogon and Fulani communities. Despite the complexity of the situation, local organisation Benbere was determined to tackle the issue head-on, hosting a conference that brought representatives from the communities face-to-face for the first time. Following the event, the UN’s peacekeeping mission in Mali invited Benbere to a meeting at which they agreed to finance a peace forum in 2019, co-hosted by Benbere, to build on the success of the conference. Former Prime Minister, Moussa Mara, also offered his congratulations for the initiative and courage shown by the Benbere team.

3. POP YOUR BUBBLE

The desire to bring people together across lines of division can only be achieved if we reach the right audience. Which people should be speaking with each other to break down barriers and find new solutions, but currently aren’t? Do you need to engage youth, men, women, faith groups, businesses, politicians, journalists?

Getting to the right people will require effort and, as civil society, we may need to push beyond our own ‘bubble’. Consider engaging artists and musicians who can attract ‘ordinary’ people; influencers and public figures known to advocate particular points of view; or organisations, groups and communities that can engage a different audience to your own. Think about the type of language that will appeal to the target audience. Are your communications genuinely inclusive or do they rely on jargon that only those within civil society understand?
Go to the people:

Sometimes the best way to engage people is to meet them where they are. In Cameroon, A Common Future took this approach literally, organising film screenings and facilitated debates on board intercity bus journeys. This guaranteed that they reached members of both the Francophone and Anglophone communities, who rarely spend time together and between whom there are rising tensions.

“I have never known that not tolerating others was rather hurting me and society”

Reach out to those in power:

In some cases, it’s important to have government representatives, big business, or other decision-makers present so that any outcomes can be taken into consideration by those with the power and influence to bring about change. But persuading them to turn up is not always easy! Try to show those in power that it’s in their interests – for example, by making them look good, providing an opportunity to meet voters, or a chance for positive media coverage. SPEAK! 2018 event organiser, UNITAS, successfully engaged the Bolivian government by organising their event as a side-event to a larger conference of government and industry leaders. They also drew up a strategic plan with action points for development, which encouraged government officials to engage with the event.

4. CHOOSE THE VENUE CAREFULLY

Just as in real estate, location matters! If you are organising a physical event, be sure to pick a venue that is not only convenient and fit-for-purpose, but also neutral and safe. This is particularly important where you are seeking to bring together groups who hold deep hurt or mistrust, or in countries where speaking out comes with a legitimate fear of retribution.

The set-up of your venue is equally critical. Research shows that one of the most powerful things we can do to build connection and understanding is to help people have a positive experience of interacting with one another, and it’s often the ‘little things’ that create the right atmosphere. Is there a stage with someone ‘in charge’ or is everyone on the same level? Are people sitting in rows behind tables or on chairs arranged in a circle, looking each other in the eye? Is there appropriate background music, so people don’t sit in silence while they wait for things to start? Is there someone to smile and greet people on arrival? Are there translators or volunteers available who speak relevant languages?
The power of technology:

Where physical interaction isn't possible – either because of geographic distance or a lack of basic freedoms – consider using technology. In the USA, where political polarisation between Democrats and Republicans has been rising, the National Conversation Project organised 12 online group dialogues between people from all across the country via the online meeting platform, Zoom. Meanwhile, RNW Media ran online campaigns in 5 countries in MENA and sub-Saharan Africa (Libya, Mali, DRC, Burundi & Yemen), with local organising teams producing social media content on issues including racism, social cohesion, and gender equality that reached a total of over 900,000 people.

5. BREAK THE ICE

Successful interaction across lines of division often begin with an 'ice breaker' to get people feeling comfortable with one another. This could be a practical activity with no direct link to the issue(s) that will be discussed. If so, try to choose something that has clear instructions, doesn't require specific skills or experience, and which promotes teamwork rather than competition.

Alternatively, you can simply give attendees the opportunity to share something personal, in order to create the beginnings of connection and understanding. The key is to have attendees speak about themselves as a person, not as the 'representative' of a particular opinion or community. For example, have everyone stand in a circle, and step forward each time the statement you read applies to them (e.g. “I am a parent”, “I slept through my alarm this morning”, or “I sometimes feel like no one cares what I have to say”). Then, ask each person to share the story behind why one of the statements is true for them.
Trust is critical:
Ice breakers are especially important if participants have opposing viewpoints or may not trust one another. In Argentina, Poder Ciudadano along with a network of anti-corruption organisations brought together young people and government representatives to discuss corruption – a deep-rooted problem that erodes social trust. It was the first time many of the participants had directly engaged with the government. As such, the icebreaker was essential in making these diverse actors feel comfortable and laying a foundation for the productive conversations that followed.

6. SPEAK WITHOUT WORDS

Sometimes, the most powerful way to build connection isn't through words. Instead, consider making use of 'universal languages'...

Food:
URDA – an organisation with branches in Lebanon, Spain and the Netherlands – organised events in all three countries, bringing together refugees and host community members to cook traditional dishes from their homeland, before discussing the root causes of racism, discrimination and fear of the 'other'. The language of food helped to create connection and shared understanding. Follow-up events are already being planned, and a new Facebook group has been set up to coordinate and share news.

Arts:
In Albania, a three-day workshop brought young people from the marginalised Roma community together with non-Roma youth. Artistic expression was critical in helping participants confront their misperceptions of each other and spread messages of inclusion and non-discrimination. This included the painting of an outdoor graffiti mural in the capital Tirana. According to organisers: "Many of the participants said they had never been face-to-face with one another; but mostly the event helped bring them face-to-face with themselves and their own prejudices".
**Sport:**

In Busia, a town straddling the Kenya-Uganda border, a lack of information over cross-border trade tariffs has caused significant disagreements. Youth Environment Service organised a range of activities, culminating in a football match involving traders, customs officials and Busia residents. Over 500 people attended, and a greater understanding of the laws and the reasons behind them helped to ease the friction between the various parties.

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**7. ENABLE REAL DIALOGUE**

Notwithstanding the above statements, the resolution of most conflicts will require meaningful dialogue. To achieve this, you may want to set a general expectation that participants will listen first in order to understand the perspective of those with whom they disagree – even if they regard each other as the ‘enemy’ – rather than seeking to change one another’s minds.

Alternatively, you can outline a series of ground rules, such as the following (based on the work of Living Room Conversations):

- Try to listen to others with an open mind and without prejudging what they might say
- Don't interrupt when another person is speaking
- Listen deeply and repeat back what you hear to make sure you've understood
- Be present – no mobile phones or side discussions
- Set time limits for each person to speak
- If you feel yourself getting upset, take a moment to calm down before responding
- Anyone can leave the conversation at any time if they don't want to continue

If you think it's unlikely that attendees will be able to follow the rules, get creative. Do you need someone to moderate the conversation? What about blindfolding participants so they aren't influenced by their biases? Also, getting participants to suggest their own ground rules can give them a greater sense of ownership and make them more likely to respect those rules.
Having a large number of attendees can dilute the quality of interaction and make it hard for everyone to have a say. If this is the case, **you may need to divide the participants into pairs, small groups or a combination of both.**

**Leave room for informal conversations:**

Sometimes the most important dialogue happens 'outside the room'. The Yemen Peace Mediators, (an independent group of highly-respected Yemeni dignitaries), played a critical role in the landmark UN peace accord negotiated in Stockholm in December 2018. The group helped secure agreement on key issues by conducting their own mini-negotiations outside the venue to align on solutions, which were then proposed inside the formal talks. They have since continued to support the UN, and are pursuing all avenues to bring an end to the four-year war that has resulted in the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

"Breaking down barriers is easier than expected when dialogue is calm, quiet and well-organised."

**8. DON’T FORGET TO REFLECT**

More than simply a 'nice to have', **the opportunity for reflection is often critical to creating real change.** This can be divided into three parts:

a) reflection on key learnings and experiences  
b) defining next steps  
c) collecting feedback on the event itself

For the initial reflection, you may want to give participants time to discuss their experience of the event in pairs, then provide an opportunity for people to share their thoughts with the wider group. Make sure to have someone in charge of recording the feedback to capture key quotes. Useful questions to guide the reflection include:

- In one sentence, what was most meaningful or valuable to you about this event?  
- What new learning or common ground did you discover by interacting with others?  
- Has this experience changed your perception of anyone here today, including yourself?
The process of bridging divisions and building connections often takes more than a single experience. To keep up the momentum from your event and help create lasting impact, allocate time for participants to commit to ‘one next step’ they can take to make their community or country more inclusive. This can be unique to each individual or something the whole group (or a part thereof) agrees on, and should be achievable within 30 days of the event. For example:

- Participants pledge to start a conversation with someone they would not normally speak with.
- Attendees agree to create a Facebook group to continue exchanging, discussing and planning how to overcome divisions.
- The group agrees to start a petition on a topic they discussed at the event and deliver it to key decision-makers.

Feedback on the event itself is often done best by having participants complete a survey just before leaving the venue. This can help you evaluate the success of your event and make future events even better. For more on the use of data, please see the next section.

**Posters for change:**
In Tucuman, Argentina, CONCIENCIA brought together a group of young students to discuss issues of discrimination and abuse in their schools. At the end of the event, the "one next step" they committed to take was to design a series of posters in order to help raise awareness of and prevent discrimination in schools.

**9. USE THE POWER OF DATA**

The only way to know if we've successfully created connection across division is by having the information (i.e. data) to prove it. This means building in a rigorous process for measurement and evaluation from the very start. Define the outcomes you are seeking to achieve, identify the information that will help you know if you've achieved those outcomes, then create the tools to collect that information. A great example is the Net Promoter Score (NPS) – a simple, two question survey that measures the extent to which participants enjoyed their experience at an event, which research says is a precondition for building positive connections with new people.
A key consideration when it comes to data collection is digital security – particularly if you are seeking sensitive information or working in a context where basic freedoms are under threat. One principle to keep in mind is data minimisation: the idea that we should collect the minimum amount of data necessary to complete the task at hand. Think carefully about the data you collect. Does all of it serve a purpose? Is there a way of achieving your goal without collecting it? Collecting only the data that is really needed avoids wasting resources, and the less is collected, the less is at risk in case of loss or theft.

Raising awareness of mental health:

In Nigeria, the Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative held a series of ‘conversation cafés’ across the country for youth with and without mental health issues, to get young people talking about this taboo topic. At the start and end of the event, participants answered 10 simple questions, like: "List the first 3 words that come to your mind when you hear ‘mental health.’" and "Can you work in the same place as someone with a mental illness?" The answers allowed organisers to track changes in perspectives across the course of the event, and fed into the organisation’s knowledge of mental health stigma to improve future work. The act of providing the data also prompted participants to reconsider their own preconceptions, making data collection a key part of the change process.

10. Tell the story

Did your event succeed in building connections and creating change? If so, don't keep the good news to yourself – tell the world! Countering the forces of division and polarisation requires both face-to-face interactions as well as a broader 'narrative' that reminds us all of our common humanity.

By collecting the stories, images and video footage from your event – particularly those powerful moments of laughter, frustration, surprise, or revelation – you can help change the conversation. Share the most compelling content (including short video clips) via your social media channels. Send your best photos to media outlets and tell them about the event. Send an update to key government officials, particularly if the outcome of your event includes a call for specific policy change.
Make sure that any participants featured in the content understand how it will be used and give their consent. This could be via a written notice, a spoken announcement at the start of the event, or giving people the chance to opt in or out of photos or videos by providing a coloured sticker to wear.

A picture tells a thousand words:
Below are some of the best images from last year’s SPEAK! campaign...

(Build Green Group, Albania)
Great because: emotive, captures a moment of authentic connection

(INCIDE, Colombia)
Great because: shows laughter, one person reacting to another

(Dream Factory Foundation, Botswana)
Great because: full of colour, action and positivity, straight to camera

(Build Green Group, Albania)
Great because: outdoor setting, interesting venue, shows all participants

AND FINALLY...

If you are not coordinating the event(s), but rather encouraging others to do so, make sure to set organisers up for success. That means providing the tools, resources and, where possible, funding to make their bridge-building, connection-creating efforts really sing!