**Dinners Across Difference**

*“The first step in leadership is not action; it is understanding.”*

--John Gardiner

**Acknowledgments**: This guide draws heavily from the work of the New Detroit organization, and Jeffrey Walker and Jennifer McCrea of the Generosity Network (Jeffersonian Dinners).

**Who Sits at Your Table?**

For many of us who are co-conspirators in the work of racial justice, building relationships across lines of racial difference has been transformational. So often, we surround ourselves with those who are “like” us -- in political ideology, as well as race, class, sexual orientation -- and despite our best intentions, do not actively work to bridge those differences.

“Through my work in education and my Pahara Aspen Education Fellowship, I have had the opportunity as a white man to build cherished friendships with people of color. One defining characteristic about these friendships was that, in short amounts of time, we talked openly about race. I believe that the depth of these friendships was accelerated by our willingness to talk transparently in this way. Equally importantly, I learned so much about race by talking across difference. When I heard about the Dinners Across Difference concept, I recognized that this could be a way to replicate what I have learned through fellowship. It’s often said that people talk about race all the time but we do don’t do it across difference. With Dinners Across Difference, we can take steps (or bites) to change that.” -- Lars Beck

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**Goal of the Dinners**

To build a sense of community, further individuals’ understanding of the realities of race and racism, and bridge racial divides. We believe that building relationships and developing understanding between people ***is*** doing something.

**Before the Dinner**

For initial dinners, a level of intentionality and “sweating the small stuff” is critical. We recommend over-preparing for the first few dinners in order to have successful experiences.

*Host Committee*

We recommend having a small host committee that convenes the dinner. The host committee should reflect the diversity that you want to have at the table for dinner. The host committee should be leaders with significant self-awareness, humility, comfort with feelings and experience talking about issues of racial equity. This group should meet/talk to discuss the setting for the dinner, the invitation list, facilitation during the dinner and follow up. We also advise doing a “pre-mortem” -- anticipating possible ways the dinner may go off course, and ways you would approach each of those challenges.

*The Guest List*

Guest lists may look very different from one dinner to the next. What’s most important is that the mix of individuals convened “make sense” -- to the host committee, and then to the group who you bring together. The dinners New Detroit hosted, for example, were focused on leaders who had some connection to one another. Their dinners began with New Detroit’s board of directors then grew to include members of other boards, police officers, educational and criminal justice leaders. They are a leadership model. Shirley Stancato of New Detroit emphasizes, “if we have an impact on that leader, they have the authority to go back and make change from a structural perspective with their constituents.”

Your dinners may, or may not, have a similar focus. That may run the gamut: education leaders that work together regularly; the board and leadership team from a nonprofit, school, CMO, or talent organization; parents whose children are in the same class at school; legislators who care about education or immigration or criminal justice reform and advocates for those issues; a group of neighbors who live in close proximity; heads of school throughout a community; individuals involved in communications at the local, city or state level; a conversation with millennials, or between millennials and seniors or high school students. Any group of people that “makes sense” could be included. The ideal number for a dinner is 10 to 12 participants – provided they can all be seated at one table (more on that below).

When thinking about whom to include, at least for the first dinners you will co-host, be mindful about the level of self-awareness and emotional intelligence those guests bring to the table. While it might be interesting to include guests who are passionately supporting either the Democratic or Republican nominee for president and watch the fireworks, that is NOT the purpose of this dinner. Additionally, inviting guests with a fixed mindset around racial equity or those that approach the conversation from a place of extreme judgment is also ill advised. The goal of the dinner is to build understanding, across lines of different. You want to ensure that those who you are inviting to the table have the ability to do just that. When in doubt, one of the members of the host committee should have a one-on-one with the possible guest in order to better understand their perspective and mindset.

We recommend that the guest list *not* include spouses or partners. The relationship dynamic between paired individuals adds a level of complexity to the discussion that can distract from the purpose of the dinner.

*The Setting and Timeframe*

Choose a setting for your dinner that allows for focused and private conversation, ideally at someone’s home or in the private dining room in a restaurant. You want to make sure that everyone around the table can hear and see one another and participate in one conversation. As Jeffrey Walker and Jennifer McCrea write about “Jeffersonian Dinners” on their website, the Generosity Network, “unlike the typical dinner party, guests are *not* encouraged to engage in one-on-one dialogues with their partners on either side. Instead, everything that is said should be directed to the entire group.”

The dinner should be long enough to allow for a rich conversation, but should have a set end time, to avoid people trickling out or feeling trapped. Two hours is a good guideline.

*The Invitation*

The invitation should clearly state the purpose and format for the dinner so guests can opt in or out with full understanding. Understanding the expectations for the evening, including the timeframe for the dinner, the focus of the conversation and the norms for discussion, will allow guests to be prepared to fully participate. These expectations should include a commitment to coming to the table with a deep generosity of spirit, in an effort to create a “no-fault” environment. Here is sample text for that portion of invitation:

We invite you to join us for a Dinner Across Difference. This will be an evening of candid conversation about race among a racially diverse group of individuals. The discussion will be facilitated by XX and YY, and requires a commitment of each participant to come to the table with both a generosity of spirit toward other participants and a willingness to share candidly their own thoughts.

Jeffrey and Jennifer send out bios of the attendees in advance so others at the table can get a sense of who else will be present. We suggest sending out the guest list to all those attending, along with a brief paragraph about why they are attending a conversation about racial equity.

**The Dinner Event Itself**

*A Word on Alcohol*

For those that drink, alcohol can serve as a useful tool to encourage honest dialogue. At the same time, the emotional sensitivity of discussing race benefits from some level of self-regulation. New Detroit found that offering one or two glasses of wine – but no more – struck that balance.

*Facilitation*

Facilitating these dinners and setting the stage for successful conversations is the most critical aspect of the event. Because these are intentionally dinners across difference, the ideal facilitators are a team of two, who represent the diversity at the table. Facilitators should have a specific skillset in managing challenging, emotionally charged conversations, ideally across lines of difference. Because you will be encouraging all of those at the table to share personal stories about race, identity, and systemic oppression the container set by the facilitators at the outset is critically important.

Ideally, the facilitators will set the stage, pose an initial question, and then allow the conversation to take a natural course without heavy intervention. That said, the facilitators should ensure that participants share air time, should elevate opportunities to deepen understanding, and should be ready to intervene when it appears that one participant is not recognizing another’s pain.

G*uidelines for the Evening*

In opening the dinner, the facilitators should explicitly review the guidelines for the evening that were laid out in the invitation, addressing the intended spirit of the conversation. Here is an example of what that expectation setting could be:

We want to affirm everyone’s agreement to come to the table with a deep generosity of spirit. We ask that each of us gives all those present the benefit of the doubt, which means assuming good intention, even when the impact of someone’s words may be hurtful.

In an honest conversation about race, missteps are nearly inevitable, and we may experience breaches of trust. When that happens, we encourage everyone to name the breach in the moment, so we can attempt to make repair.

We also want to remind everyone that each of us will be speaking for ourselves as individuals based on our own experiences. No one is expected to speak for their race or for any other group they might belong to.

Finally, we ask everyone to agree to the confidentiality of this space.

*The Discussion*

After establishing the norms, we recommend that you open the conversation with a basic question that each person answers, without interruption, so that every member of the group has an initial opportunity to share. Here are some suggestions for the opening question:

* What is the first time you were aware of race or racism?
* What is a recent experience you’ve had in which you were aware of your own race?

After each person has answered the opening question, the facilitators might simply open up the discussion with a general question, such as “What struck you as you listened to each other talk about [the first time we were each aware of race or racism]?” Alternatively, if there was an obvious theme or topic that emerged in the opening, the facilitators could invite further discussion on that. That could include a specific current event (with racial implications) that is top of mind for people.

When there are about 15-20 minutes left, conclude the table conversation with a final question, so everyone has a last word. This could be a reflection about the conversation, and/or a specific next step they are committing to take in the coming days.

**Follow up from the dinner**

The day after the dinner, the co-hosts should send a follow up email to participants, thanking them for their participation, encouraging them to share any reflections, and inviting them to follow up with fellow participants to continue the conversation.