

BONFIRE IN A BOX

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What is Bonfire?

Bonfire is a story sharing format intended to deepen our understanding of the people who make up our community.

Bonfire gathers Story Sharers and Listeners in small, intimate conversations through the lens of inclusion. We propose a specific format for Bonfire, but it's flexible. This format requires active listening that may feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar for both the Story Sharers and Listeners; this active listening creates the silence that allows people's vulnerability to surface.

As a guiding question for personal story sharing at Bonfire, we invite Story Sharers to reflect on moments or periods in their life when they've felt included. They will reveal what has made them feel included, why they want to feel included, and what inclusion — or exclusion — look and feel like. Before the event, Story Sharers offer several descriptions they identify with for Listeners to see before story sharing. Bonfire recognizes and celebrates the multiple dimensions of identity each of us has.

We invite Listeners to learn about the Story Sharers through this unique format of personal story sharing.

Why Hold a Bonfire?

How can we build bridges in this fragmented society? How do we strengthen the interconnectedness of our community? To tackle big problems, we have to start with small, focused efforts.

Read how Listeners answered “What did you enjoy the most?” about this story sharing:

“Finding common ground with people I thought were my opposite.”
“How people are using their experiences to make changes that they want to see”
“Being vulnerable together.”
“Meeting people I otherwise would not.”

Here are some takeaways Listeners have provided in the anonymous surveys:

- “Identity is complex, language is imprecise, and it is amazing how much you can learn in a short period of time”
- “Connection, bravery, how words and respect can bring us together”
- “Inclusion = Happiness”
- “These conversations are necessary and had to be had more often”
- “It was wonderful to learn other perspectives”
- “More commonalities than differences across the board”
- “Impressed by how much people were willing to share”

In response to being invited to be a sharer, one person replied:

“Wow, thank you so much for thinking of me! I'm not usually described as unique and/or awesome, so what a nice note to receive. Are you sure you got the right person? I'd be honored to participate in this and share my ‘memoir.’”

How to Build a Bonfire

Organizing Team Roles

- Story Sharer recruiter
- Listener recruiter
- event/logistics planner
- project manager
- marketer (optional, if event is public)
- evaluator (optional, if survey and evaluation is desired)

Planning Timeline

Good Bonfire event planning ensures that all participants will have a rewarding experience. Here is a simple checklist

Before the event (start 3+ weeks in advance):

- Recruiting Story Sharers
- Contact the event facility manager and obtain a Bonfire event date. Verify it with a secondary email as Bonfire day is approaching.
- Determine how many participants will be involved and ensure the venue has enough tables. Ideally, calculate 2-4 Listeners per Story Sharer.
- If the event is public, you may want to use a registration mechanism (e.g., Eventbrite, Brown Paper Bag ticket, etc) to promote the event.
- Prepare materials (see list below)

On-site Materials Needed:

- Nametags
- Directional Signs
- Story Sharers' descriptors printed
- Tape, to adhere descriptions to chairs
- Print out descriptions of Story Sharers for Listeners to review at registration
- Surveys (optional)
- Registration Check-in list (optional)

At the event:

- Story Sharers are expected to come 15 minutes before the event start to prep.
- Organize seating arrangement so that there are enough chairs for each group (1 Story Sharer plus 2-4 Listeners).
- Greet Listeners and ask them to create a name tags.
- Depends on the type of Bonfire (public or private), the organizer can choose to have a registration sign-in list.
- Have Story Sharers' descriptions printed out and tape on the back of the chair.
- Determine a central timekeeper to time each round and announce transitions
- After debrief, pass out evaluation surveys to the Listeners (optional)

After the event:

- Send out thank you letters
- Debrief on how the event went

Event Timeline

This is a suggested timeline for your bonfire event. Adjust accordingly. Offer 2+ rounds so that Listeners can rotate and listen to different Story Sharers.

Setup:

- Set up chairs in close groups, facing in, toward each other (1 chair for story sharer and just enough chairs for listeners). Remove empty chairs from group after people sit down.
- Tape Story Sharer descriptor to one chair that is easily visible
- If possible, do not allow tables in the groups because they create a physical barrier

Welcome and Introduction

Host thanks everyone for participating and explains the format in detail. Remind all participants to be respectful and open minded. Listeners get a chance to read the descriptions Story Sharers provided ahead of time. Listeners rotate to a different group and Story Sharers stay in the same place.

Round 1

Listeners choose which Story Sharer to join. Ensure Listeners are evenly distributed. This may mean moving Listeners from a Story Sharer with too many Listeners to one who has no or fewer Listeners.

- 7-10 minutes Story Sharers offer their story while Listeners are silent
- 5-10 minutes Listeners each reflect while the Story Sharer is silent
- 8-10 minutes small group dialogue

Break

Round 2

Listeners hear from a different Story Sharer following the same format as above.

- 7-10 minutes Story Sharers offer their story while Listeners are silent
- 5-10 minutes Listeners each reflect while the Story Sharer is silent
- 8-10 minutes small group dialogue

Large group reflection & feedback

It’s worthwhile to offer time for everyone to share reactions and reflections. Ask people to pull their chairs into a circle. Some groups may jump right into conversation, while others may benefit from prod- ding. You can jump start the dialogue with a broad question like “what will you take away from Bonfire?” or “what surprised you about your experience here?” You may go around the circle ask the Listeners to offer their 3-5 descriptors.

Participants

Listeners

Recruitment Tips

- Invite Story Sharers to recruit Listeners
- Hold at a public event spaces such as community centers or the public libraries will yield in more Listeners.

Instruction

Remind Listeners to be:

Respectful. We ask you to be respectful to the speakers by being attentive to their story sharing. Actively Listen. It’s hard not to ask questions or respond. Sitting in silence as someone else talks can feel uncomfortable. Be ok with that. Bonfire is an exercise in actively listening so that vulnerability can emerge.

Open-minded. Stories may challenge stereotypes and beliefs, which may or may not align with your notions. Please keep an open-mind and be respectful.

Vulnerable. Listeners have felt compelled to share their own stories in response to hearing from Story Sharers. We invite you to be vulnerable and open to create those connections to reflect on your experi- ences.

Format. Review the format of the event to be mindful of when and who may speak.

Mix it up. Try to sit with different Listeners for the second round.

Reception of the format and enjoyment of this experience can be captured via survey following reflec- tion and feedback of Bonfire.



Example of Listener Survey:
Thank you so much for joining us for an evening of story sharing.
Please take this brief survey to help us improve the experience for future events to come! We would love to hear and incorporate your thoughts. Respond to following questions with comments and/or circle most relevant answer or score ranging from 1 to 5.

1 Poor	2 Below Average	3 Average	3 Good	5 Fantastic
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1. How’d you enjoy the event?
Comments/Suggestions:

12345

2. Length of time with each story:
Comments/Suggested Time or Format:

goodtoo longtoo short

3. Quality of conversations:
Comments/Suggestions:

12345

4. Would you consider becoming a Story Sharer for a future event?
Reasons:

YesMaybeNo

5. What were some takeaways?

6. What did you enjoy the most?

7. How could we improve the event for next time?

8. Did this event give you a greater sense of (circle all that applies):

InclusionConnectionUnderstanding
Other: _____

Story Sharers

Recruitment Tips

Select a diverse group of Story Sharers:
One of the cornerstones of the beauty and power of the Bonfire experience is the diversity of the event’s sharers. While we all have our unique, diverse experiences, intentional effort should be made to recruit a diverse group of sharers -- from different racial backgrounds, personality types, abilities, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc. Consider inviting the introverts who might not normally be invited to share their story--they will feel honored to be able to share their story.

Sample recruitment language:
“You are awesome so we are asking you to consider being a Story Sharer at this Bonfire event. In this age of innovation and technology and go-go-go we’re takin’ it back to the old school with basic, good-ole conversations. You have struck me as unique, awesome, and with a lot to offer the world; we’d love for you to join in this capacity. Below is some more information about the event. Please let me know if you’re up to partake as a Story Sharer at this event. No prep is needed, you’d basically be asked to share about yourself, with a little direction/prompting from our, in small groups of 3 or so. We hope you will consider joining as a Story Sharer.”

Instructions
Remind sharers of the following:

Provide descriptions: Provide 3-5 descriptors for yourself. See “Samples of Descriptors”.
Arrive early. Arrive 15 minutes early to the event so you can see the space and prep for the event.
Theme. Reminder that general theme is “inclusion” – so give some thought to your own story(ies) of feeling included/excluded. To prepare, think about 3-5 memories you might share.
Accessibility. Please let me know if we can make any accommodations so you feel especially included this evening. Interpret this however you like.
Pretty chill. What makes this (hopefully) special is that it’s really informal. We’re trying to facilitate authentic conversations, so don’t worry about rehearsing, or being “on”. Just be you. Tired? Introverted? Skeptical? Amped up? We don’t care.
Expect to be uncomfortable. You will find it’s easy to give an ‘elevator pitch’ for the first minute of your talk but then it gets harder. Expect this. Be okay with it. This is unscripted. Know that the Listeners really appreciate whatever you’re willing to share and there is no right or wrong answer. It will feel unnatural at first because active listening is an uncommon practice nowadays.
Boundaries. While we want these to be authentic and meaningful conversations, please don’t feel pressure to share anything you are not comfortable sharing, especially with strangers. We trust you each to regulate this for yourselves.

Sample Descriptors:

These are examples from the original group of story sharers. Story sharers are expected to come up with 3-5 descriptors that describe them. The listeners will consult these descriptions to choose who they want to listen to at Bonfire.

Deena

Mother of African American Sons
Grandmother to two Brave girls
Inclusion Provocateur
Unwavering supporter of the underdog
Change Angel



Ben

Nonprofit leader
Father
Social worker
Recovering apologist
Namibia lover

Jun

Scientist to Health Tech Newbie
First generation Chinese American
Recovering nerd and rediscovering childhood

Michael

Immigrant
Nonprofit community member
First generation college graduate
One of six children



Nick

Grew up in Seattle
Privileged straight white guy
Somewhat only child
Healthy

Lessons Learned

Most of us don't get a chance talk honestly with people we don't know well. The more we did it, the more we felt like it's something in which we're all a little deficient. Bonfire gives us permission to dive head first into opening ourselves up to others. Listening to personal stories was a privilege for us.

We were unsure of our idea as it first took shape. But feedback at our pilot and prototype events was resounding. The format evolved through helpful critique; it may continue to do so. But at its core, this concept has resonated with participants.

We also found that even organizing something simple takes a lot of energy. Our team of six, bolstered enormously by project managers and other supports, stumbled here and there as we moved through exploration, ideation, collaboration, and eventually creation of Bonfire.

Where did Bonfire come from?

Bonfire came from a team of volunteers convened through Washington Technology Industry Association _ion, a civic collaboration program. Six volunteers from the tech, nonprofit, and public sectors spent six months building relationships with one another and exploring a central question: what does it mean to feel included in Seattle?

We didn't have an answer or a solution to the problem. We weren't even certain what we were hoping to get traction on. We interviewed nonprofit, government, and business leaders, newcomers and long-time Seattle residents. We felt humbled and privileged to hear candid and genuine reflections about small moments that made someone feel included, and also about how hard it can be to feel welcome in a changing city, or a new country. We were moved by the subtle power in inviting someone to share their story, and in realizing what we have in common with each other.

What if more people had a chance to share and hear these stories?

Our team regularly did an exercise called "true stories" where each of us talked about something personal for several minutes while two others in our group listened. It's not easy being vulnerable with people you don't yet know well. But it was also rewarding. We piloted Bonfire, playing the Story Sharer role ourselves, and tested different formats for the event.

That led to a prototype at the Seattle Public Library, where nine invited Story Sharers and 22 Listeners, some of them library patrons who happened upon the event, gathered for two rounds of story sharing.

Bonfire is just a small step towards feeling more included in our community. But it scratches an itch we think everyone has: to feel connected to other people. We don't make enough time and space for this, and we think Bonfire offers a chance at it.

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