



# Building Together 2026

# Practice Guide

MAY 4-7 | SEATTLE, WA



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## for access to the schedule, maps, and more

Open your app store and search for "Council on Foundations" or "Council Events." Once you have downloaded the app, log in with your first name, last name, and the email address you used to register for Building Together.

Scan the QR code for more detailed instructions.



## CARE TEAM

If you need a little support to process your Building Together experience, a licensed psychotherapist is available for virtual drop-in appointments at the following times:

- Wednesday, May 5: 10:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. | 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.
- Thursday, May 6: 10:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. | 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.

Scan the QR code to access Care Team instructions.



## RESOURCES

Pick up a printed copy of our recommended read, **Coming Together, Not Apart: Building the Hearts, Minds and Skills for Leading Across Differences**, which introduces you to the heartset, mindset and skillset framework that is referenced throughout Building Together 2026.

Go beyond the guide with recommendations for additional reading, meditations, and more. You can access links to all resources by scanning the QR code below or visiting [cof.org/bt26guide](https://cof.org/bt26guide)



# Welcome!

We're delighted you're here with us in Seattle to build the **heartset, mindset, and skillset** to work across differences and strengthen the communities you serve.

Real talk: **things are really hard right now.**

Many of the systems and institutions meant to solve problems feel strained or brittle. Trust is low. Division is high. And for many people, the consequences of that division are personal and immediate, and compound existing inequities. People are experiencing rising hostility, threats, and violence tied to identity, belief, and belonging. There are actors and forces in our society actively working to inflame fear, deepen division, and make cooperation feel impossible.

If things feel heavy, uncertain, or even dangerous, **you're not alone.**

The work of engaging differences has never been easy. The effects of widespread division and mistrust show up in our communities and influence the everyday interactions with the people around us. Conversation and collaboration can feel frustrating, fragile, and sometimes, impossible.

Part of **the reason it's difficult is simply because we're human.**

Many factors that make collaboration difficult are rooted in biology, psychology, and the way humans are wired to navigate threat, identity, and belonging. The obstacles we face aren't failures of effort or goodwill, and our way forward isn't simply to "try harder" or "care more." It's to better understand ourselves and each other, and to build the conditions that make working together more possible.

**Another way is possible.**

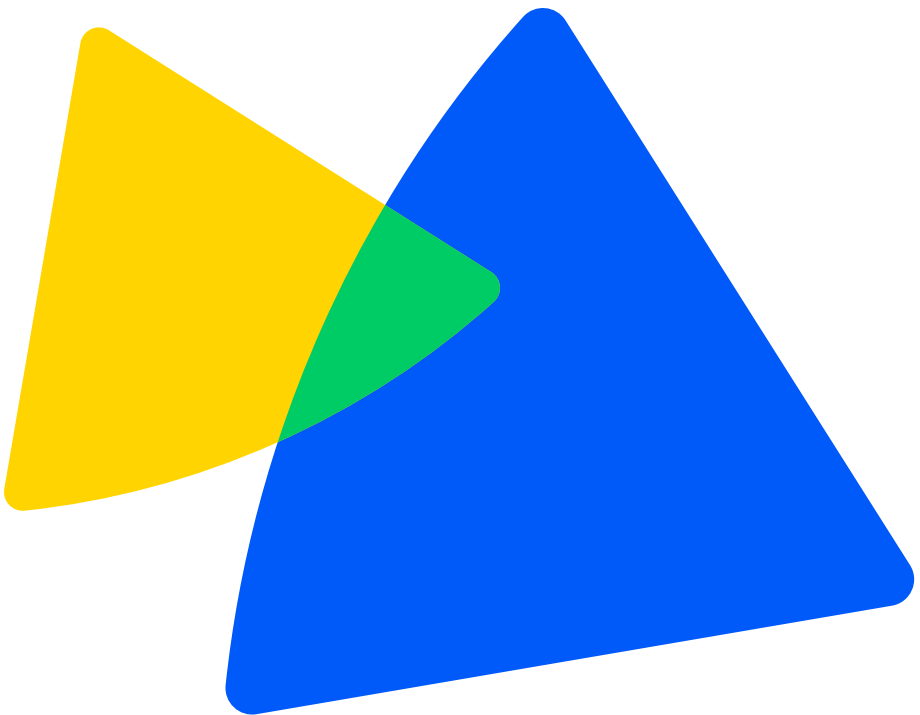
Most people don't want to live in a world defined by division. In fact, our recent national survey found Americans overwhelmingly want to work together and believe collaboration across differences is possible. Beneath the noise of our current moment, the desire for connection, problem solving, and shared progress remains remarkably strong.

## This is where you come in.

You can create powerful coalitions for good and model a better approach to leadership. Building Together is your opportunity to build the skills you need for the world we're in. To lean into curiosity, to listen and be listened to, and to learn. To practice fully seeing others and being fully seen, and to sit with the nuance and complexity of being human in this complicated time.

This is not easy work, and it is deeply personal. But that's why you're here—to develop strategies and skills to navigate deep differences with compassion, courage, and grace—precisely because the challenges are real and the stakes are so high.

This practice guide is intended to accompany you through the Building Together journey. The framing, resources, and reflections are drawn from partner organizations and philanthropic leaders, like yourself. Each day, you will meet with your Practice Team, a group of colleagues who will support each other over the course of the event and help reflect on key learnings, practice new skills, and consider take-home strategies relevant to your work. This guide offers facilitation prompts to help structure your time together.



# Principles of Engagement

These principles aim to inspire the spirit of participation by creating a shared understanding for good-faith engagement. We know tension will happen; that's natural, and you do not have to perform calmness or agreement. The principles do not ask us to suppress our feelings, beliefs, or convictions—they ask us to be brave enough to hold complexity—and humane enough to hear one another.

## Be Curious

Approach difference with openness rather than judgment. Notice when you're making assumptions and try replacing them with questions. Be willing to learn through awkwardness and missteps. Offer good faith and grace, and don't be afraid to ask others to offer it to you, too.

## Listen Deeply

Listen with the intention to understand, not to win. Hold a posture of learning rather than certainty. Stay present, even when you disagree, and allow yourself to be shaped by what you hear.

## Practice Generous Disagreement

Speak your truth with care. Treat disagreement as a chance to expand understanding rather than shut it down. If something feels important, try to name it while you're in the room—not after you leave it.

## Take Care of Yourself

Stay engaged but also honor your limits. It's okay to pause, step away, or seek support when something feels overwhelming. Self-care is part of staying connected, not a failure of it.



**These principles are invitations, not requirements. Each of us will practice them imperfectly. What is important is that when we drift from them, we return.**

# How to Use This Practice Guide

**The Practice Guide is structured by day, and each offers a framing question:**

1. What do we mean by heartset, mindset, and skillset?
2. What are we up against? What are we working for?
3. What can be changed? What should be changed?
4. Where do we go from here?

**The plenary sessions will explore each of these questions through three angles:**

1. What does the science tell us? Scientists will help us consider what we might not be able to see or understand about human nature, relationship dynamics, and more.
2. What does our work show us? Practitioners will show us what they know and experience in their everyday engagement in the work.
3. What does that leave us with? Funders will reflect on what they've heard and what it leaves them thinking about, and model the type of discussion and analysis your Practice Team could engage in.

This guide offers supplementary prompts for your Practice Team conversations and various optional activities, including personal reflection prompts, links to meditation practices you can listen to on your phone or computer, and resources for further learning.

## WHY SCIENCE?

Our experiences, values, and instincts matter—but they don't always tell the whole story. Many of the forces shaping how humans think, relate, and respond to differences operate beneath the surface. Psychology, social science, and biology help reveal those hidden dynamics: how people form identities, experience belonging, respond to threat, and become open—or closed—to new ideas. Bringing a “civic science” lens into these conversations helps expand our understanding of what's really happening and ensures that the solutions we design align with how humans actually work. Learn more: [civicsciencefellows.org](http://civicsciencefellows.org).

A special thanks to our  
Civic Science Talks sponsor:



# Day One | May 4

## Tapping into heartset, mindset, and skillset

In preparation for your time at Building Together, take some time today to reflect on what has brought you here. What compels you to want to work across differences? What are the leadership qualities you already possess to help you do so, and where do you have room to grow?

Heartset, mindset, and skillset are related but distinct concepts; each is essential, but insufficient on its own. Taken together, they form a spectrum of competencies necessary to engage and collaborate across lines of difference.



## Heartset:

DESIRE

The why—motivation, values, humility, compassion, courage.

Heartsets remind us that engaging across differences is not simply a tactic, but an expression of who we are and what we stand for.



## Mindset:

PLAN

The how—strategies, frameworks, and evidence-based approaches.

Mindsets ensure that engaging across differences is not episodic or symbolic, but intentional, structured, and effective.



## Skillset:

ABILITY

The what—tools, competencies, and practices to enact the work.

Skillsets make it possible not just to aspire to engagement across differences, but to do it well, consistently, and sustainably.



Heartsets without mindsets can lead to goodwill without impact.  
Mindsets without heartsets can become transactional and technocratic.  
Skillsets without either heart or mind can be mechanical and shallow.

Sometime during the day, when you have a few moments to yourself, take a few minutes and respond to the prompts below:

Why are you called to the work of **navigating differences**?

What attitudes or **personal qualities** do you bring to this work?

Which of these do you feel strongest in today—**heart, mind, or skill**?

Which one do you most want to **grow**?





# Resources and Meditations

Find a quiet spot to review relevant resources  
or listen to a meditation.



# Day Two | May 5

## Reflecting on what we're up against – and what we're working for

This day is about grounding ourselves in the moment we're living in. Together, we'll step back to examine the challenges we're facing and the problems we're trying to solve—and how they are shaped by the broader social, political, and cultural context of this time.

It's also an invitation to look beyond what we are working against and reflect on what we are working for. What is your ultimate goal? What kind of future are you trying to help bring about? What would it look like? How would you know if you had reached it?

Your analysis may differ from others in your group and that's okay. The goal isn't agreement, it's understanding. By sharing how you see the moment and the work ahead, you help situate yourself and your peers within the landscape we're navigating together.

### **Practice Team Facilitation**

Once you meet up with your team, introduce yourselves and then discuss the questions below to get to know each other.

#### **Introduce yourselves (30 mins)**

- Share your name, organization and role, and perspectives, skills, or identities you bring to the Practice Team.
- Why did you decide to attend Building Together? What's one thing you hope to get out of your attendance at Building Together?
- Share an "aha" moment you had this morning.







**TODAY'S INSIGHTS, PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS,  
REFLECTIONS, AND IDEAS**

**Moments of inspiration**

**Questions I'm thinking about**

**I'm proud of myself today  
because I...**

**Ideas we might be able to adopt**

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# Day Three | May 6

## What can be changed? What should be?

Today is about getting real and practical. Building on the big-picture context from our first day together, we'll bring those insights into the realities of everyday work and explore what success and impact look like in practice.

This day invites us to think carefully about where we actually have influence, where change is truly possible, and how well-intentioned efforts can sometimes produce unintended consequences or even work against the outcomes we hope to achieve. It also asks us to reflect on the ways our own experiences, perspectives, and assumptions may differ from those of the people and communities we seek to serve—and how those differences can shape both our understanding of problems and the solutions we pursue.

### Practice Team Facilitation

Divide into small groups of two or three for these conversations, and use the prompts below to share the strategies, skills, and tools you've been introduced to over the last several days.

**First, debrief and decompress.** Take a deep breath together. What has felt the most challenging for you in the past few days? What has felt easy or natural? (20 mins)

**Then, apply your learning.** How are you currently thinking about what you're learning and how you might apply it to your work? (20 mins)

**Start to generate a goal for how you will apply what you are learning when you return home.** What are you working on that would benefit from the strategies and skills you are learning at Building Together? (20 mins)







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# Day Four | May 7

## Where do we go from here?

Today is about a call to action. It invites us to explore ways of being and engaging that offer a meaningful alternative to division and othering— and to do so in ways that are real, concrete, and possible in our everyday work and lives.

Our focus is belonging. Cultivating belonging may not be everyone’s mission, but it is everyone’s responsibility. When people feel seen, valued, and connected to one another, the conditions for collaboration, trust, and shared problem solving become far more possible.

Belonging is not a cure-all for the challenges we face. But it is a powerful upstream force— one that shapes whether communities fracture under pressure or find ways to move forward together.

### Practice Team Facilitation

#### What? So What? Now What? (20 minutes)

**WHAT:** Choose one of your big, bold ideas or actions from your personal reflections. Take two minutes to journal in this space.

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**SO WHAT?** Articulate here WHY that idea or action is important. Be specific: What values, organizational or personal commitments, or purpose will you lean back on when you face challenges in applying this action? Take three minutes on your own to journal in this space.

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**NOW WHAT?** What are three commitments you can make to yourself to support your next steps on this action (e.g., bring it up at a board meeting, ask your manager about it, do some more personal learning, start a campaign or initiative, change a practice or process)? Be specific. Take five minutes on your own to journal in this space, then share these three commitments out loud with your colleagues.

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**Share your “what, so what, now what” with your Practice Team**

**Sharing Gratitude: Close out your Practice Team time together by sharing what you gained from your team members or what you’re grateful for. (10 minutes)**





**TODAY'S INSIGHTS, PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS,  
REFLECTIONS, AND IDEAS**

**Moments of inspiration**

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# Key Concepts

Find the full citations for these concepts at [cof.org/bt26guide](https://cof.org/bt26guide) or scan the QR code.



**Belonging** (1) Belonging is associated with thriving behavior; it refers to the quality of fit (or potential fit) between oneself and a setting (Walton & Brady 2015); (2) attributes of belonging include social and emotional connectedness, being valued for one's whole and authentic self, and the level of agency or co-creation one experiences in that setting (see Belonging Barometer); (3) the antidote to othering, belonging asks each of us to commit to co-creating new structures built for everyone. (4) describes values and practices where no person is left out of our circle of concern. Belonging means more than having just access, being seen or feeling included. It means that every member has a meaningful voice, that their well-being is considered, and that they have the opportunity to participate in the design of political, social, and cultural structures. Belonging includes the right to both contribute and make demands upon society and political institutions.

**Bridging, or Bridge Building** To bridge involves two or more individuals or groups coming together across acknowledged lines of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities, and allows for a cohesive, more inclusive, durable, and more expansive "we" that can be identified and recognized to bring about belonging and greater social justice. The new "we" that results need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a shared empathy and lasting stake in one another.

**Building Common Ground** (1) A tool or strategy that groups use to get a decision made or problem solved. (2) A process whereby every diverse voice has value and is embraced, and through the process of building common ground, the purpose, processes, functions, and messages become owned and promoted by all. (3) an intentional activity and dialogue that allows participants to share about themselves, discover commonalities with others, and learn more about differences among the group.

**Conflict Transformation** (1) Is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationship. It focuses on helping people investigate differences constructively and come out the other side by framing conflict and strong differences as not inherently destructive barriers that need to be avoided, but instead as a springboard to deeper relationship, learning, and collaboration.

**Civic Infrastructure** The places, policies, programs, and practices that undergird strong communities and foster civic engagement (RAND); The places, spaces, leaders, organizations, and networks that facilitate and undergird civic life (Trust for Civic Infrastructure); "The seams of democracy. Often they remain hidden, but when they start to fray then the entire thing starts to fall apart." - Hahrie Hahn

**Dialogue** People use the word “dialogue” to describe a variety of conversations and communication styles. Dialogue is designed to help people build relationships across differences in order to address their communities’ most pressing challenges.

**Intergroup Contact** Refers to situations where people from different social groups—such as people from different racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups—interact with each other. A large body of research confirms that having people from different social groups meaningfully engage with each other can help to reduce prejudice and increase social cohesion.

**Othering** Treating people from another group as essentially different and generally inferior to the group you belong to (Susie Wise); (2) the denial of a person or group’s humanity based on their identity and the process of generating structural inequality found at every level of society (10 Principles of Belonging)

**Pluralism** The recognition and affirmation of diversity of backgrounds, belief systems, and lifestyles within a political body; it has also been interpreted more expansively to mean a full embrace of difference as a valuable source of creativity, prosperity, and thriving. (Masters, Wikipedia)

**Polarization** Ideological polarization refers to the divergence of political attitudes away from the center, towards ideological extremes. Affective polarization refers to the tendency for partisans to dislike, distrust, and even dehumanize those on the opposing side. (Masters, Kleinfeld)

**Trust** Refers to the belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of a person, group, institution or governing body. Trust in other residents or citizens is termed horizontal trust, while the trust that citizens have for governing institutions is termed vertical trust.

# Acknowledgments

A special thank you to our partners, our working group, and Council staff who helped develop this guide.



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