Optional Activity: Lay It On The Line

The Skills for Bridging the Gap curriculum consists of four, sequential modules: “Why Build Bridges?,” “Listening,” “Sharing Your Story,” and “Approaching Tension Constructively”. The following “Lay It On The Line” activity is offered as an optional learning experience to accompany this core curriculum.

We recommend that this Lay It On the Line activity be used only after learners have completed at least modules one through three. The exercise works best if learners have worked on the listening and storytelling skills encountered in modules two and three. It can also be used after all four modules have been completed.

Time: 45 mins

Format: Synchronous; in person

Supplemental Materials: Lay it on the Line Slides

Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this activity, learners will be able to:
- Recognize the ways that personal experiences can inform complex worldviews
- Recognize that a person’s position on a topic can be fluid
- Share at least one story about why they believe something that they believe
- Name and practice a specific listening skill for bridge building

Prework for the Facilitator
- Read Habits of Effective Bridge Builders
- Compile a list of Lay It On The Line statements that best suits your community/audience. (See the end of this document for more details.)

AGENDA

PREPARATION: Prior to leading this section, use flipchart paper or something else to label one side of the room “Strongly AGREE” and the other “Strongly DISAGREE.” There should be enough room between the two signs for participants to move along a “spectrum.”

Listening and Storytelling Refresher (5 mins)
Using slide #2, collectively recall the five listening skills for bridge building. As time allows, ask participants to share a summary of each or offer examples.

Turn and Talk—Ask pairs to reflect on the following: Which one of these skills tends to be most challenging for you? Which would you like to focus on practicing today?

Use slide #3 to recap the storytelling techniques from Module 3 as needed.
Lay It on the Line (30 mins)
Explain to participants that this next activity is an opportunity to practice both storytelling and listening. The facilitator will be reading a series of statements that are meant to encourage people to "get off the fence" and share their opinions. The point is NOT to debate topics, but rather to reflect on what experiences have led us to believe what we believe, and in turn, practice listening when people have opinions and experiences different from our own.

Using slide #4, tell participants that this activity will be done in silence. You will read different statements and ask them to move towards the spot on the spectrum (AGREE or DISAGREE) that feels most true to them right now. They are welcome to stand anywhere along the spectrum.

The facilitator should also explain that they will not be answering any questions or offering clarifications about the statement itself. They can re-read the statement, but will not offer any commentary or conversation.

Using the Lay it On the Line statements you have selected (see the end of this module), begin to read statements. It’s important to begin with statements that are less charged or emotionally activating. As you warm up, you can progress to more controversial or potentially emotional statements. It can still be useful to move between more- and less-charged statements as needed.

Each time after students have taken a position in the room, prompt them to look around and see where others are standing. Ask them to silently reflect on what experiences (not opinions or ideas!) have led them to stand where they are.

As appropriate, the facilitator can also note the following:

- There may be times that we are right next to someone on several issues and then, they are across the room from us on others. What surprises us? What assumptions might we have about that person or what we believe are contradictions?

- There may be times when people are the only ones standing in a particular position. This takes courage! (It can be supportive for the facilitator to stand next to those participants and note this bravery before they go on to read the next statement.)

- Notice what we might imagine we know about people, or their stories, based on where they’re standing, without even talking to them.

- There might be statements or groups that do not seem to yield many gaps or differences. In these instances, the facilitator could highlight the different reasons we may be standing next to someone. We have not all arrived at our understanding through the same experiences.

- Especially as topics may become more charged, the facilitator can prompt participants to notice their own capacity to deeply listen. When might they feel reactive or tempted to withdraw? This can be a good time to pause and engage in some deep breaths as we try to recenter and remain open and curious.

- If someone chooses to remove themselves from the spectrum (e.g., they sit down or seem to be off to the side, away from others), they should still be invited to reflect on where they are
positioned in the room and the stories or experiences that have led them to demonstrate the opinion they’re sharing now. It can also be a useful time to acknowledge that bridge building is always a choice and there may be certain topics or contexts that we are not willing to engage. We can offer grace to ourselves and others who may recognize they are not ready to bridge certain gaps in certain moments. Even if we ultimately choose not to bridge, it can be important to reflect on our choice and how it may or may not align with our purpose.

As participants are warmed up (perhaps after a few rounds), look out for a statement that yields a larger array of opinions in the room. The statement does not need to be a charged one—it can be one of the “lighter” topics. At this point, ask participants to stay where they are and take a few minutes to reflect on a story that speaks to their position. They are welcome to jot down notes on a piece of paper. You’ll find these guiding prompts on slide #5, which encourage stories (rather than opinions) to be shared:

- When did you first come to notice this topic? What were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with?
- Have you personally experienced a challenge or opportunity related to this subject? Has someone you know?
- What do you feel when you hear this statement?

Next, after students have had time to reflect silently, pair participants with someone who is standing on a different part of the spectrum from them (the further away, potentially the more fruitful practice). Show slide #6, and remind participants that as we begin to engage with people who may hold views different than our own, it’s a good time to focus on the listening skill they identified at the beginning of this activity.

Give one person in each pair two to three minutes to share their story about why they were standing where they were standing. As they share, the person’s partner should practice their listening skills. Then pair-mates will switch roles. Remind participants that if they’re sharing second, they are not being asked to “respond” to their partner’s story. Rather, they should still focus on sharing their own story about why they are standing where they are.

To end the sharing, ask the participants to thank each other. Then, read another statement and continue the activity, again with folks silently choosing spots on the spectrum.

As time allows, facilitators may choose to repeat this cycle multiple times (statement, reflecting on a story, and sharing the story) as often as they would like. Remember to always pause before pairing people up so that participants can individually reflect and prepare themselves to share a story.

Closing (10 mins)

Using slide #7, ask participants to individually reflect in writing on the following:

- What emotion(s) came up for you during this activity? What felt easy? What felt hard?
- What questions do you have? What are you curious about?
- Are you feeling attraction or aversion towards certain people or ideas? Is there someone you might be inclined to distance yourself from? Who could you learn more about?

As time allows, the facilitator can ask each person to share with a partner or the whole group one takeaway from the module. This can also be a useful time to address the last bullet point: instead of distancing ourselves from the people or ideas we resist or reject, can we find a way to learn more about them? If this session is followed by a meal or unstructured time, encourage participants to grab a snack or go on a walk with the people to whom they want to remain open.
Lay it On the Line Statements

The following is a list of statements you can choose from for your Lay It On The Line exercise. Facilitators should also feel free to brainstorm their own statements based on their own knowledge of gaps or divides that exist in their particular setting.

As a reminder: It’s important to begin with statements that are less personal and less emotionally activating. As you warm up, you can progress to more controversial or more potentially emotional statements. Ideally you end on a statement that’s less tense, to ease participants out of the activity.

**Statements**
*(loosely in order of intensity)*

- Apple Music is the superior music streaming service.
- Dunkin Donuts over Starbucks any day of the week.
- A house is not a home without a pet.
- Love is the answer to all problems.
- College is more of a gamble than an investment.
- Social media improved communication and connection among people.
- My faith has made me who I am.
- The lack of a class-based system in America is part of what makes the U.S. great.
- American democracy was fatally flawed from the start.
- The work ethic in America is in decline.
- Military service is the highest form of service to our country.
- Terrorism poses a real threat to America’s way of life and security and requires a willingness to compromise some rights and protections to maintain our safety.
- America should get rid of the death penalty.
- All religions have more in common than that which is different between them.
- The breakdown of the traditional family is a big problem facing America.
- Immigration to the United States should be encouraged.
- The system is to blame for the cycle of poverty – not individual people.
- The government should leave reproductive medical care between a patient and their doctor.
- Choosing only to live and spend time with members of your own religious, racial, or ethnic group is a type of segregation.
- Vouchers should be given to parents that want to send their children to private or religious schools.
- America has never fully reckoned with the legacy of slavery.
- Discrimination against white people has become a big problem in the U.S.