CASCADE INSTITUTE

Listening Across Difference:

A community dialogue pilot for navigating polarization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Together for Sooke was a pilot project conducted in the fall of 2025. The project set out to test whether a structured facilitation method called presencing could support more productive civic conversation in a community navigating the pressures of rapid growth, climate planning, and local conflict. Working with Fireweed Learning Commons and funded by the ACET initiative, facilitators convened six small-group dialogues with Sooke residents over three weeks. Developed by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, the method guides participants from the surface of positional debate toward a deeper engagement with lived experience, underlying needs, and shared aspirations.

The headline finding is promising but qualified. In facilitated groups of up to seven residents, presencing produced a different kind of conversation: one in which people openly described their lives in Sooke, surfaced what they value and what they fear, and named shared aspirations — even on contested issues. Pre-workshop surveys confirmed real affective polarization on climate-related questions, alongside lower trust in local government than in fellow residents. The qualitative analysis of session transcripts organized findings into four themes: the symbolic and material weight of Sooke's bottleneck geography; tensions between longer-settled and newer residents over belonging and recognition; a sense that governance is neither transparent nor responsive to ordinary participation; and widely shared aspirations for better civic conversation, accessible third spaces, and development that holds growth, services, and ecological protection together. Across all six sessions, participants expressed a clear appetite for more of this kind of engagement.

What the method could not do, in a single 75-minute session, is measurably reduce affective polarization or move participants toward concrete solutions. Presencing deepens with repeated practice; the relational trust it depends on does not develop fully in a single encounter. One-off dialogues are best understood as a tool for surfacing community narratives and generating credible inputs for planning processes, not as a standalone intervention.

The pilot also has a significant limitation that shapes what can be claimed as the sample was politically skewed. Of participants who reported their federal vote, none had voted Conservative, in a district where 37 percent did in the 2025 election. Because the method is designed to bridge political differences, that gap leaves the central question, that is, whether it can do so, unanswered.

Three priorities follow for future work. First, recruiting across the political spectrum, so the method can be tested against the problem it is designed to solve. Second, testing longer and repeated formats that allow the relational depth that presencing requires to actually develop. Third, and most ambitiously, integrating this approach into formal deliberative structures such as citizens' assemblies, where random selection addresses both the diversity problem and the question of whose voices shape decisions. The report includes a full facilitation guide designed to support practitioners in other communities who want to adapt the method to their own contexts.