



Dual Identity Contact

A PRIMER FOR NONPROFITS

Introduction:

Working Across Difference Is Every Nonprofit's Work

Nearly every nonprofit today serves, partners with, or depends on people who are in some way different from the majority of its staff or leadership. Differences in race, class, faith, geography, politics, or lived experience show up in nearly every aspect of nonprofit life — in the communities we serve, the volunteers we recruit, the coalitions we join, and the funders we approach.

At the same time, most nonprofits know that relationships are their most valuable currency. Progress on any mission — whether ending hunger, advancing health equity, supporting the arts, or strengthening democracy — depends on the trust and collaboration of people who see the world differently. Yet building and sustaining those relationships across difference is complex, emotional work. Good intentions can falter in the face of misunderstanding, fatigue, or conflict.

Dual identity contact offers a practical and evidence-based approach to this challenge. It helps organizations engage across deep differences without erasing them — allowing participants to maintain their unique identities while also forming a shared sense of purpose. Rather than asking everyone to “find common ground” by minimizing what makes them distinct, dual identity contact creates conditions where both distinctiveness and connection can thrive.

When nonprofits learn to hold these two truths — we are different, and we belong together — relationships deepen, collaboration expands, and trust becomes durable enough to weather disagreement. Whether your organization works in social services, education, arts, or advocacy, the principles of dual identity contact can help you build stronger partnerships, healthier teams, and more resilient communities.



What is a Dual Identity Contact?

Dual identity contact is a framework from **intergroup contact theory**, the field of social science that studies how people’s attitudes change when they engage across lines of difference.

Traditional “contact” programs often aim to dissolve group boundaries by creating a sense of shared identity (“we are all human,” “we’re all Americans”). While this can reduce prejudice in the short term, it also risks **weakening commitment to justice** and **muting necessary critique** — a phenomenon scholars call the “irony of harmony.” Participants may feel warm toward outgroups but less inclined to challenge inequity.

Dual identity contact solves this dilemma by maintaining both individual and group identities:

- **Subgroup identity:** Participants keep their religious, cultural, or ideological distinctiveness.
- **Common identity:** They simultaneously cultivate a sense of belonging to a shared community or mission.

The result is a context where difference is not erased but engaged — and where empathy coexists with conviction.

Why It Matters for Nonprofits

For nonprofits working in a wide variety of contexts, and especially in democracy, social justice, or community cohesion, dual identity contact offers several advantages:

1. Protects integrity and belonging.

Participants do not need to downplay deeply held beliefs to engage. This inclusivity makes sustained collaboration possible across ideological, racial, or faith differences.

2. Encourages real accountability.

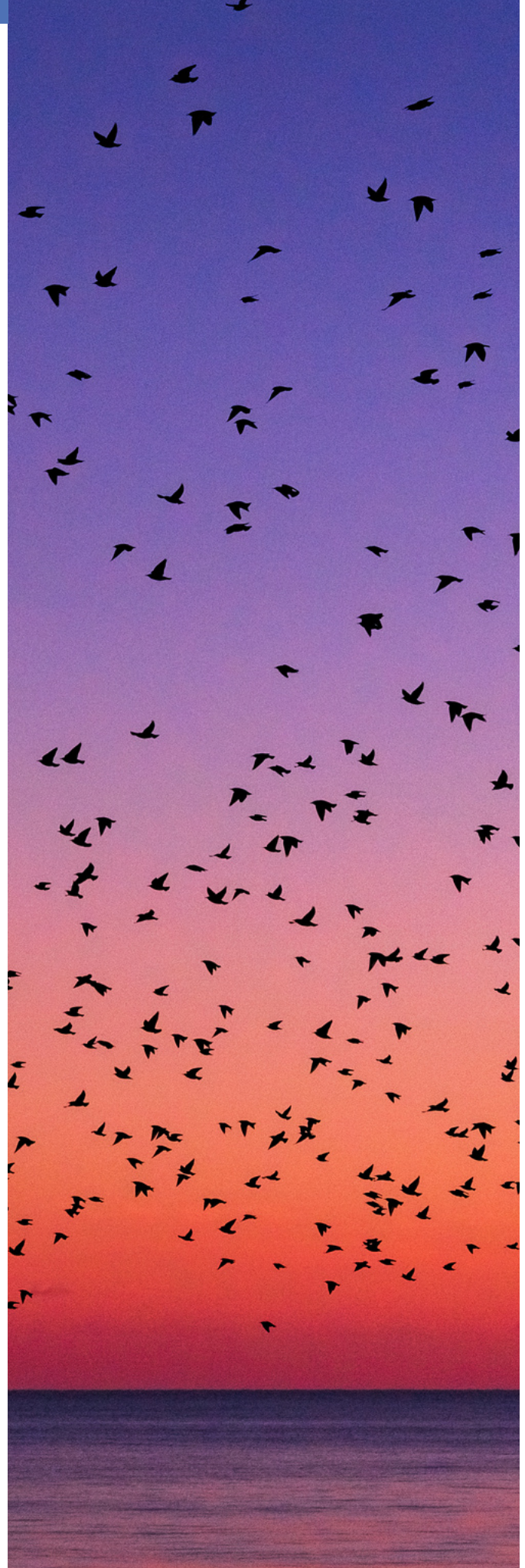
Unlike superficial “harmony” programs, dual identity contact allows honest discussion about inequity, power, and lived experience.

3. Builds durable coalitions.

Maintaining subgroup identity prevents the kind of ideological “purification” that polarizes movements. Groups can disagree on some issues but cooperate on others, creating flexible “shifting constellations” of partnership.

4. Strengthens democratic skills.

Dual identity environments train participants in negotiation, empathy, and principled disagreement — the very competencies democracy depends on.



Lessons from Multifaith Organizations

This primer is based on a peer-review study of 16 multifaith organizations in Michigan written by Cohesion Strategy Founder Allison K. Ralph.¹ The study shows how dual identity contact plays out in practice. These organizations — comprising people from different religious, cultural, and political backgrounds — naturally model the dual identity approach.

1. Maintaining Distinct Identities

Multifaith organizations intentionally resist “melting pot” approaches. As Interfaith America’s Eboo Patel puts it, they are more like a “potluck,” where each group brings its own traditions to the table. Participants are encouraged to express, not suppress, their distinct beliefs and truth claims.

Example: Interfaith Photovoice brings people together to share photographs representing their faith practices, sparking curiosity and learning rather than consensus.

2. Creating a Common Purpose

These organizations pair distinctiveness with shared missions — fighting hunger, reducing hate crimes, or improving housing policy. The shared civic or moral purpose becomes the common identity around which diversity can collaborate.

3. Managing Disagreement

Because ideological diversity is built in, multifaith nonprofits practice what Together West Michigan calls the “both/and of policy and relationships.” They tackle issues where consensus exists (like childcare or immigrant support) while acknowledging and tolerating disagreement on others.

4. Partnering Where Possible

Such organizations embody a “partner where you can” approach — forming coalitions on overlapping issues while allowing autonomy where values diverge. This flexibility sustains long-term cooperation even across moral fault lines.



IMPLEMENTING DUAL IDENTITY CONTACT IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

Step 1: Name and honor differences.

Acknowledge and celebrate participants' unique group identities — whether faith, race, ideology, or experience. Avoid framing diversity as something to overcome.

Step 2: Create shared goals and rituals.

Develop collaborative projects or symbolic acts (shared service days, joint statements, community meals) that express a common mission while reinforcing belonging to both the subgroup and the larger group.

Step 3: Build structures for disagreement.

Design spaces where disagreement is expected and managed, not avoided. Consider shared principles for dialogue that allow moral conviction and mutual respect.

Step 4: Balance advocacy and bridging.

Use contact to build trust and legitimacy; use advocacy to advance justice. Each strengthens the other when held in balance.

Step 5: Support leadership diversity and development.

Include leaders who authentically represent subgroup perspectives and can model pluralism in action. Provide training, support, and external facilitation to bolster the skills of working across difference.

Conclusion: Holding Difference and Unity Together

Dual identity contact helps nonprofits resist the false choice between civility and justice. It creates spaces where people remain true to who they are while working together toward a shared good.

In a time when social and political polarization threatens the fabric of democracy, nonprofits that practice dual identity contact can model pluralism, build durable coalitions, and advance both empathy and equity.

This is not a soft middle ground — it is the hard, courageous work of democracy itself.

