

So, You Want to Have a Hard Conversation?

Whether you are intentionally facilitating a hard conversation, or happen to find yourself in one, here are some strategies that can make hard conversations a little bit easier.

COMMUNICATE THE PURPOSE OF THE DIALOGUE.

A clear purpose ensures that all participants are entering into the dialogue with awareness and, importantly, can choose to opt out if needed.

AIM FOR DIALOGUE RATHER THAN DEBATE.

Dialogue is a communication process that aims to build relationships between people to forge a new and broader understanding of a situation. The purpose of dialogue is to learn and grow, not to be right or persuasive.

In dialogue, each person's perspective is inherently valuable, and we listen to one another in a genuine attempt to more deeply understand the other person's experience and perspective. We embrace questions, prioritize curiosity, and hold complexity.

CONSIDER USING COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS TO FRAME THE DIALOGUE.

Communication agreements can be helpful in framing a dialogue, to set expectations and create guardrails for when things get heated. The agreements will vary based on the needs of the individuals or group in dialogue.

Examples include: "We will speak from our own experiences," "We will not share what's said outside of this group," and "We will listen to understand, not to respond."

REMEMBER, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WING IT (IN FACT, YOU SHOULDN'T).

It can be challenging to have an open-ended dialogue, especially if trust and rapport are not already established. In these cases, prompts and/or questions can be especially helpful to guide your dialogue.

Examples include:

- How has this issue impacted you personally?
- Can you share an experience from your life that would help people understand your perspective on this issue?
- When you think about this issue, what core value or commitment is at the heart of it for you?
- What is a source of strength you've found in these moments of difficulty?
- What is one thing you want to continue reflecting on?

KNOW WHEN TO PAUSE OR STEP AWAY.

Dialogues can become heated, especially when they involve issues that we care deeply about. This isn't a bad thing, but there are times when the temperature of a dialogue gets too high, and we need to take a break or end the conversation altogether.

If you find yourself getting activated (i.e., butterflies, tightness in your chest or jaw, flushed) and it's preventing you from listening, ask for a quick break. Heightened emotions don't mean the dialogue has to end, but it does mean that it's more likely for things to become unproductive if we don't pay attention to them and intervene when necessary.

As the facilitator, check in during breaks with those who seem to be having especially strong emotions. You may need to slow down, introduce some individual writing time, or pause the dialogue and pick it up again another time.

It is okay to end a dialogue altogether if the conversation turns hostile (e.g., name calling, threatening behavior, etc.). A dialogue space should be challenging, but it should not be unsafe. If a dialogue is stopped abruptly, check in with participants afterwards to see what support they may need.

EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

Most dialogues will not end neatly. In fact, accepting and expecting non-closure is an important element of dialogue. Share plans for additional opportunities for dialogue or other ways for participants to continue this kind of relationship building. If your dialogue is a one-off, let participants know of other places they can engage in sustained conversation.

Important: This resource represents a simplified selection of strategies, not an exhaustive list. For more information on the concepts shared here and other conflict resolution resources, refer to the [MCR Initiative](#).

References

Essential Partners "[Essential Guide to Dialogues About Israel-Palestine](#)"
[The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects](#) by Lisa Schirch and David Camp