

HOW TO FACILITATE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

BY COMMON GROUND USA

Crisis response requires many actions – from addressing individual mental health and safety, preventing harm or further harm, crisis communications, and much beyond. Conversations across differences, including sustained dialogues, are a tool within this broader crisis response.

- 01 Plan across the community** – Involve others—and specifically people most affected by an issue, and people from opposing groups—in planning the conversation. This can identify potential pitfalls, triggers and areas of trauma, and can ensure there is a shared sense of purpose and ownership ahead of time. This also empowers other voices within the group.
- 02 Be aware of emotions** – When covering difficult topics, be aware that participants (or you as a facilitator) may feel threatened or traumatized. People may need to hold space to heal, to be in community, to grieve—vigils, art and music tributes can be transforming. If you plan to have a difficult conversation, then small groups and one-on-one discussions are better suited. In a larger gathering, you may want to break it down into much smaller conversation groups.
- 03 Offer examples of shared values and brave outreach** – Identifying shared values, such as “no one wants violence” or “we are all worried about family and friends,” can offer a starting point to reframe the problem away from one between the people in the room to a shared problem that all groups in the room are working through. Reminders of how people with opposing views have come together around a shared problem can reinforce this. Productive conversation moves at the speed of trust. One conversation cannot entirely shift a person's perspective, but concluding with grounded reasons for hope can encourage a continuation of the discussion.
- 04 Set ground rules and expectations** – Prior to arrival, make clear the purpose of the gathering. At the start of what might be a difficult conversation, help the individuals set their own shared ground rules for the discussion – for example to learn about a different perspective, to assume positive intent, to refrain from harmful speech. This Love Anyway Invitation is an example used often.

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05 Use empathetic listening – A good facilitator is a good listener. Active empathetic listening does not just mean hearing the words that are being spoken, but understanding feelings, assumptions, body language, previous history.

06 Be multi-partial – The objective of facilitation is to make an already difficult conversation among two or more sides of an argument, easier. The voice of a facilitator is to help those directly involved or affected, better explain their views. In doing so, instead of trying to be neutral, a facilitator can be multi-partial, (seeing the reasoning behind a variety of arguments pro/against a certain issue) and can try to re-articulate them for the parties.

TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

TIP 1 Know your triggers – There are topics, words or statements that can elicit in us a very strong emotional response – these are triggers. It is important, before facilitating any argument, to spend some time thinking of the types of statements (relevant to the context) that might trigger that response in us, so that we may mitigate our reaction once they are uttered.

TIP 2 Know your biases – We all have biases, whether we may see them or not, and these are easily revealed in the context of a triggering conversation. Seek to understand and to learn, assuming that the issue and people we are talking to are 'uncharted territory.'

TIP 3 Consider imbalances of power – Carefully consider a location that is equally accessible and comfortable to both groups; if you know one side will be present as a group, support the other to organize as such; if one side is bringing 'technical' support (a lawyer, media, etc.) make sure the other does too; consider translation needs for all; be conscientious of holidays; make opening/closings with cultural significance open to all.