

Public Conversations Project's Tips for Making a Hard Conversation Work

Preparing for a genuine dialogue

1. Insure that those who are involved have a **commitment to a shared purpose**, e.g., to pursue mutual understanding vs. persuading the other.
2. Make **communication agreements**. See second page.
3. Begin with **good questions** – questions that encourage participants to a) speak as individuals, not as representatives of groups, b) connect their views to their personal experience, c) speak about the complexities of their views, not just their certainties or positions, and d) share the meanings that they attach to particular words, symbols, and events.
4. Use **structures** for reflecting, speaking, and listening (e.g., “go-rounds” preceded by time to reflect.) Pauses for reflection and designated times for speaking and listening make a big difference.

Sharing responsibility for the quality of the conversation as it unfolds

1. **Avoid sweeping generalizations** and grand pronouncements. Speak personally and be specific about what you notice and how it impacts you. If someone else makes a sweeping generalization, ask him to be more specific and/or to speak about the experiences that have shaped his view.
2. **Avoid making attributions** about the motives, intentions, and beliefs of others, and if you find yourself making assumptions ask a genuine question. If others make attributions, clarify what your intentions and beliefs are.
3. **Offer clarification** if you feel misunderstood or if you feel that your views have been mis-characterized (“let me put this another way...”) or ask the listener to repeat what she heard you say. Then affirm or correct her statement.
4. **Seek clarification** if you feel confused or that you may be misunderstanding the other. You can ask a question or you can paraphrase what you have heard and check to see if you understood correctly. (“Are you saying that...?”)
5. **Unpack meanings of hot button words** that have different meanings for different people.
6. **Mind the gap between intention and impact**. You're the expert on your intention. They're the expert on the impact that your speaking has on them.
7. **Move beneath “positions”** to explore underlying values, needs, and concerns.
8. **Balance assertion with inquiry**. Debates are a battle of assertions. Dialogue requires reaching across a divide with genuine curiosity.

9. **Name your feelings (the impacts of the other’s speaking) directly and as information – not as a critique.** If you feel hurt, angered, or disrespected, say so. If possible, describe exactly what you heard or saw that triggered your reaction. ("When you said X, I felt Y.") If it is hard to be specific, just say, "OUCH" to flag your reaction and ask if you can slow down the conversation to sort out your thoughts and feelings. Similarly, if you feel angry, express the anger directly (e.g. "I felt angry when I heard you say X...") rather than expressing it indirectly, for example, by trashing another person's statement or asking a sarcastic rhetorical question.
10. **Take seriously the communication agreements you made.** For example, if you feel cut off, say so or override the interruption. ("I want to hear what you have to say, but I'd like to finish first...") If someone asks a rhetorical question, ask him to rephrase it. ("That seems like a rhetorical question. Is there a question you're genuinely curious about that I could answer?") If someone labels you speak up, e.g., ("We agreed not to use labels, and you just called my political party X...") If someone draws your attention to a lapse on your part, thank him.
11. **Maintain (or revise) your commitments related to “dialogue” versus “debate.”** If you feel uncomfortable with the way the conversation is going, say so and ask what others' experience is. If others share your concerns and you have an idea about what might improve the conversation, offer that idea. ("How about taking a minute to reflect on whether this is the kind of conversation we want to have together?")
12. **Stay focused (or revise your previously agreed upon focus).** If you think the conversation is going off track, share your observation and check in with others. ("I thought we were discussing X, but it seems we bypassed it and are focusing on Y. I'd like to go back to X and finish that conversation. How does that sound?")
13. **Consider using hand signals** (like raising hands or using the time out signal) so that you can communicate a desire to speak without interrupting the other.
14. **Use a notepad to hold your thoughts for later.** This makes it easier to more fully listen when others are speaking and honor your agreement not to interrupt.
15. **Slow down and be open to having silent pauses and breaks.** Prioritize the quality of the conversation over the pace. The more rushed you are, the harder it will be to “stretch” into new ways of conversing and the more likely you will be to slip into old familiar ruts. A fast paced conversation allows for little reflection, few genuine questions, and a scarcity of fresh information.

Sample Agreements for Dialogue

1. We will speak for ourselves and allow others to speak for themselves, with no pressure to represent or explain a whole group.
2. We will not criticize the views of others or attempt to persuade them; rather, we will focus on being understood and understanding them.
3. We will listen with resilience, “hanging in” when we hear something that is hard to hear.
4. We will avoid making attributions about another’s beliefs or motives; if tempted to do so, we will consider asking a genuine question to test the assumptions we are making.
5. We will share airtime and authorize each other to remind us if we lose track of time.
6. We will not interrupt.

7. We will “pass” or “pass for now” if we are not ready or willing to respond to a question.