

Facilitating Difficult Conversations in Our Current Climate

FACILITATION TIPS: [ORID method](#) | [Useful facilitation questions](#) | [Icebreakers and activities](#) | [Small group sample agendas](#)

While none of our program content facilitates a conversation on political discourse, we ask ambassadors to identify challenges in their communities and develop action plans to address them. Students may want to discuss recent tragedies in our communities.

Keep in Mind

- As with any topic your role is to facilitate conversations, provide an open and safe forum, and encourage positive dialogue.
- We don't expect you to be an expert on these topics and it's okay to start with that admission.
- It is not your job to change the minds of students on any topic in the short window of time we have with them.
- If a student is sharing an opinion which is creating conflict in the group or is discriminatory or inflammatory, feel free to address it head on. Stop the student from continuing, support any student who may have been affected, and try to get the group back on track.
- Don't assume someone's experience based on what they look like on the outside.

Tips to Facilitate Discussion

- **Come first with an open heart and listening ear;** often individuals are not looking for a solution but simply to be heard.
- **Set ground rules or "community standards" in your first group time** regarding respect for each other and toward creating a comfortable space for sharing. This can be a collaborative process to get group buy-in. Remind your ambassadors about the community standards that you've all agreed to if an ambassador shares discriminatory or toxic comments. Examples of things to try to elicit:
 - Assuming no matter how something comes out of someone's mouth that it was meant with the best of intentions and/or based on experiences/current knowledge.
 - Ensuring everyone can be heard.
 - Any feelings are valid.
 - Don't interrupt/practice active listening.
- **Remember to be flexible and adaptable.**

- **Be okay with silence.** This is especially important in a virtual setting; allow for people to compose a thought and come off of mute. A general rule is to pause at least seven seconds after a question is asked before moving on.
- **Moderate conversations,** not so much as to edit content, but to ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard. Consider giving ambassadors two minutes to write their thoughts and then ask them to share what they wrote. This helps those who process differently get engaged.
- **Establish strategies for everyone to participate,** and to be heard. For instance, invite quieter participants to share their thoughts and/or questions and actively encourage more talkative guests to give space for other voices.

Useful Language

- Extend **gratitude for courage to participate** in difficult discussions that may reveal biases and/or be vulnerable about experiences.
- A key for successful discussion is to be interested and **deeply listen** to what others have experienced, and what they think.
 - “I’ve never thought of that before; could you explain why you think that?” rather than “I don’t believe it; that’s never happened to me.”
- Recognize that **people with good intentions misspeak** or make statements that can hurt or offend. Letting others know how their words affect you, or might be misunderstood by others is useful, but ascribing intent can be counterproductive.
 - “I feel frustrated (or I feel disrespected) when people say... because...”, rather than, “That pisses me off; that’s a stupid (or racist) thing to say.”
- **Try the "noticed and wondering technique":** "I noticed you shared _____; I am wondering if you could tell me more about that."
- **Ask open-ended questions:**
 - What would that look like?
 - Tell me about a time when you experienced that.
 - Help me understand where you are coming from.
 - What was your intention when you said that?
 - Why do you think that’s the case?
 - How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
- **Define terms.** Ask the group to come up with what they mean by a term, or ask someone to explain what that means to them.
- **Repeat things back** (e.g., What I’m hearing you say is...) to make sure something is not lost in translation

Calling Out vs. Calling In

Calling Out

- Let someone know that their words or actions are unacceptable and will not be tolerated.
- Interrupt in order to prevent further harm.
- Feels hard and uncomfortable, but is necessary.

- Allows us to hit the “pause” button and break the momentum.

Think: That statement had a profound impact on me/others. I need to let them know. Examples on how to do so include—

- Okay, I am having a strong reaction to that and I need to let you know why.
- I need to push back against that. I disagree. I don't see it that way.
- I wonder if you've considered the impact of your words.
- That word/comment is really triggering and offensive. Be mindful and pick a different word.
- I feel obligated as your facilitator to tell you that your comment wasn't okay.

Remember, it is a powerful thing for the target of oppression to hear these words from the mouth of an ally!

- I don't find that funny. Tell me why that's funny to you.
- I need you to know how your comment just landed on me.
- It sounded like you just said _____. Is that really what you meant?
- You may or may not realize this, but you're talking about me/my story/my identity.
- It sounds like you're making some assumptions that we need to unpack a bit.

Calling In

- Focus on reflection, not reaction.
- There is an opportunity to explore deeper, make meaning together, and find a mutual sense of understanding across differences.
- We are seeking to understand or learn more.
- We want to help imagine different perspectives, possibilities, or outcomes.
- Provides for multiple perspectives and encourages paradigm shifts.
- Make a suggestion with an uptick. (Don't you think you should...?)

Think: How might we call out the behavior, while calling in the person? Examples of how to do so include—

- I'm curious. What was your intention when you said that?
- How might someone else see this differently? Is it possible that someone might misinterpret your words/actions?
- What criteria are you using to measure/assess etc.?
- What do you assume to be true about_____?
- Why do you think that is the case? Why do you believe that to be true?
- Why did the result or response cause a problem for you?
- How might the impact of your words/actions differ from your intent?
- How might your own comfort level, assumptions, expectations, prior experiences be influencing your beliefs, decisions, process?
- How did you decide, determine, conclude...?
- Why is this the best way to proceed? What other approaches have you considered?
- Why do you think others have/haven't moved in that direction?
- What sort of impact do you think your decision/comment/action might have?

- How is _____ different from _____?
- What is the connection between _____ and _____?
- What would have to change in order for _____?
- What is making you the most fearful, nervous, uncomfortable, or worried?
- How do you know it's working?
- In your opinion, what is the best-case scenario?
- What would other stakeholders say/think/feel?

Further Reading

Most of you have likely seen excellent discussions taking place around race on social media in recent weeks and those sources are usually more qualified than we are to educate on those topics. If you'd like to deepen your learning:

- [Lets Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#)
- [The Basic Guide to Why Black Lives Matter](#)
- A [website](#) curating lists for further reading and learning
- [Race Equity Tools: Core Concepts](#)

Most of all: This is often the first point in these students' lives that they are being asked to think critically. Try not to pass judgment on the experiences or perspectives they come with. Nobody's mind will be changed overnight, but especially not if open dialogue cannot help them understand.

Remember: Racism/bigotry often come from a fear of the unknown. It's harder to hate somebody you know.