



How To Host a Brave Conversation

It's important to lay ground rules when discussing sensitive topics. This will help manage conflict, help participants feel comfortable, and create deep conversations. These tips are adapted from Everyday Democracy. Everyday Democracy helps communities create public dialogue that leads to positive change.

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Share “air time” – take space if you’re usually quieter, and make space if you’re more talkative.
- If you are offended or uncomfortable, say so, and say why.
- It's OK to disagree, but don't personalize it; stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Speak for yourself, not others.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Personal stories stay in the group, unless we all agree that we can share them.
- We share responsibility for making the conversation productive.
- Embrace discomfort and expect non-closure.

During the Discussion: Be an Active Facilitator

Being an active facilitator doesn't mean taking over the conversation. Here are several strategies for helping the discussion along.

Reflect and Clarify

Restate an idea or thought to make it clearer.

“Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly ... ”

“What I believe you are saying is ... ”

Summarize

Briefly state the main thoughts.

“It sounds to me as if we have been talking about a few major themes ... ”

Shift Focus

Move from one speaker or topic to another.

“Thank you, John. Do you have anything to add, Jane?”

“We've been focusing on views 1 and 2. Does anyone have strong feelings about the other views?”

Ask Probing or Follow-Up Questions

Questions help people explore disagreements, understand other perspectives, and uncover common ground.

“What are the key points here?”

“What would someone with a different point of view say?”

Manage Conflict

Help manage conflict and disagreement to be productive. Steer participants away from blaming or belittling statements.

“Let’s refer to our ground rules.”

“What seems to be at the heart of this issue?”

“What do others think?”

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. Ascribing intent can be counterproductive.

Consider saying, “I feel frustrated (or I feel disrespected) when people say _____ because...”
Avoid, “That pisses me off; that’s such a stupid (or racist) thing to say.”

Use Silence

Allow time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.

Virtual Facilitation

Recognize and understand how people communicate without using words. How you are sending signals from your own body? How can you signal encouragement and participation?

In a virtual setting, this is especially important because your face is all that’s visible. Be more energetic than you would be in person and embrace silence.

More Resources



[Conversation Guide from National Day of Racial Healing](#)



[A Guide for Training Public Dialogue Facilitators from Everyday Democracy](#)



[Guide to Respectful Conversations from Repair the World](#)



[How to Lead Discussions \(p. 44\) from the American Library Association Guide for Libraries](#)



[Virtual Facilitation Best Practices Guide from GP Strategies](#)



[Guidelines for Authentic Conversations about Race from The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)