

# READ BRAVE

SAINT PAUL

## How To Host a Brave Conversation

Hosting a brave conversation requires intentional planning, active facilitation, and a commitment to fostering a respectful and inclusive environment. This guide aims to assist facilitators in establishing a positive environment for deep conversations and conflict navigation.

### Before the Conversation - Set the Stage for Success

Establish a safe and welcoming environment that promotes connection and community-building. Consider actions like arranging chairs in a circle, providing comfortable seating, and welcoming participants as they arrive. Utilize the Read Brave toolkit ([www.readbrave.org](http://www.readbrave.org)) for conversation planning, including selecting questions from the book discussion list and integrating suggested activities.

### Facilitating the Conversation

#### Establish Expectations

Facilitators should set expectations and clarify the conversation's purpose to build a sense of safety. Consider explaining:

- Explain the theme, such as Read Brave 2024's "Celebrating Identities," and provide an outline of discussion topics:
  - Read Brave 2024's theme is Celebrating Identities. Like themes in the book, we invite residents to dig into the complexities of who we are, how we relate to each other, and what it means to create a city where all identities belong
- Acknowledge potential discomfort and encourage participants to communicate concerns for a safe and affirming discussion.
  - Let everyone know that if there are topics they may find uncomfortable, or if they are worried that a particular topic might come up, they can talk with you to ensure they will feel safe throughout the discussion.
- Make a plan to mitigate anxiety or stress for participants who may need it:
  - If the person gives permission, address their worries at the beginning of the discussion and emphasize taking extra care around the subject in question.

- Provide “stop signs” for participants, such as red pieces of paper or pieces of paper with an X on them. If someone feels distressed, they can wave the stop sign and the discussion can be moved to a different topic.

## **Foster Connection, Openness, and Engagement Within the Group**

- Encourage participants to connect and engage through warm-up activities
- Cultivate a time for participants to create a community agreement together. Some suggestions include:
  - If any participant does not feel comfortable, they can take a break.
  - Emphasize the importance of using gender-inclusive language and respecting personal pronouns. Also, establish whether or not participants are comfortable with helping each other be accountable regarding using the correct pronoun if they make a mistake. For more pronoun resources, please refer to the Read Brave toolkit.
  - Participants use “I” statements to speak to their own experiences and truths.

## **Be an Active Facilitator**

Being an active facilitator doesn’t mean taking over the conversation. Here are several strategies to help steer the discussion along or navigate conflicts.

### **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?”

## Help Examine Bias

For groups open to potential conflict, delving deeper into participants' points of discomfort can help with self-reflection.

“Are there any parts of the book that made anyone uncomfortable?”

“Why do you feel that way about X?”

“Has anyone else been curious about the same sort of thing before?”

“Have your initial feelings changed after this part of the discussion?”

## Manage Conflict

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

“Why don't we reexamine that feeling together?”

“Is there a different way to phrase that thought?”

“This is a Brave Conversation and this topic may be difficult...”

“Why don't we take a second to ground ourselves?”

“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, sexist, phobic, etc.) thing to say.”

## Use Silence as a Tool

Allow time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.

## Virtual Facilitation

In virtual settings, be aware of non-verbal communication cues. Maintain an energetic presence and embrace silence for reflection. Recognize and understand how people communicate without using words. How are you 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.

## Closing the Discussion

At the end of your group's time, you may wish to take some time to reflect on the conversation as a whole. Consider encouraging participants to share a positive aspect of the discussion. For example, complimenting another participant's thoughts, acknowledging different perspectives, sharing personal takeaways, etc. Try using different methods for people to share final thoughts; this may be verbal, written, anonymous, etc. based on personal preference. Ask everyone how they plan to integrate the discussion into their mindset going forward. Finally, remind participants about the toolkit! The resources available there may help answer lingering questions, clear up points of confusion, and internalize and reflect on the discussion.

## Additional Links

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

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

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

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

Have questions? Please reach out to Gao Yang, Community Partnerships & Programs Coordinator, at [gao.yang@ci.st.paul.mn.us](mailto:gao.yang@ci.st.paul.mn.us).

---

*Read Brave Saint Paul is brought to you by the Saint Paul Public Library and The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. This program is funded with money from Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, with special support from a Saint Paul Public School's Community Partnership ARP Grant.*