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. Offer name tags with space for writing out pronunciation for those who would like that, helping to foster a more inclusive and respectful space. Begin with a simple icebreaker to establish rapport and help participants feel comfortable before diving into deeper discussion. Utilize the Read Brave toolkit (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 what Read Brave is and how this year's conversation will be focused on "claiming your power" and provide an outline of discussion topics:
  - Read Brave is an annual citywide book club that taps into the power of books to bring teens and community members together to read and talk bravely about topics critical to Saint Paul. Using themes in the book, this year's Read Brave conversations will focus on claiming your power.

- The richness of culture and shared experiences:
  - This year's book highlights one culture's traditions and storytelling, offering a lens into immense possibility. Encourage participants to find connections between their own experiences and the themes in the book—celebrating both shared commonalities and the beauty within our differences.

- Acknowledging potential discomfort:
  - Some topics may bring up strong emotions. Encourage participants to

communicate concerns so the discussion remains a safe and affirming space. Let everyone know they can approach you privately if they are worried about particular topics, and together you can make a plan to ensure they feel comfortable.

- Making a plan to support participants:
  - If a participant expresses concerns, and they are comfortable, acknowledge them at the start of the discussion and emphasize taking extra care when approaching sensitive subjects.

- Providing "stop signs" for participants:
  - Offer red pieces of paper or papers with an X on them—if someone feels distressed, they can hold up their sign, and the conversation can shift to a different topic.

Foster Connection, Openness, and Engagement Within the Group

- Encourage participants to connect and engage through warm-up activities

  - For example: Invite participants to deepen their connection to the book by reflecting on which character they would be or identified with most and why. Encourage them to share a few sentences about their choice. This allows participants to explore personal connections to the story while fostering group discussion. Others may resonate with similar sentiments or have chosen the same character for entirely different reasons, leading to meaningful insights and conversation.

- 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.
  - Participants use "I" statements to speak to their own experiences and truths.
  - Acknowledge and honor cultural differences in language. Some terminology in the book may not be Western, and certain tones or terms may feel unfamiliar. Encourage patience and openness when pronouncing names or phrases. Offer resources to look up pronunciations. Refer to the Read Brave toolkit for more information.

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.

Encourage participants to engage in ways that feel natural and affirming in a virtual space. Some people may use reaction features like hand clap emojis or thumbs-up icons to show support without interrupting the flow of conversation. Let participants know they are welcome to use these features, if available, on the chosen platform.

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.