

Tips for Healthy Discourse

Healthy discourse is meaningful and often difficult discussion around a potentially divisive topic.

Before You Meet

Establish expectations in advance. In addition to the issues listed below, clarify logistics such the format, time-frame, location, and scope of the discussion.

Give people the opportunity to opt in or out without guilt. Discourse can take an emotional or relational toll that not everyone is read to pay.

Require a commitment to genuine dialogue. Not all speech is dialogue. Some people are more interested in stirring the pot, self-promotion, or winning an argument, than in actual discussion. All participants should commit upfront to being forthright, listening to and considering opposing viewpoints, and avoiding incendiary or escalatory behavior.

Be creative and thoughtful in your process design. Consider processes other than a single meeting with everyone where people just speaking up one after another. There may be important concerns that people are uncomfortable surfacing to the whole group. Consider multiple meetings with different constituent groups. Within meetings consider processes such as “pair shares” or the use of a “talking stick.”

Err on the side of fewer people in the room. A meeting with fewer people is more intimate, and creates a smaller audience that parties will be tempted to perform for. It means a small web of relationships that must be managed. It also helps keep the discussion more focused, and perhaps most importantly, it means more average air time per participant.

Clarify expectations about what will be disclosed to others outside the room. While committing to keeping things in the room can create a sense of safety for some participants, it is not always realistic or enforceable, particularly at a public university. The larger the group the less practical it becomes. Also, when confidentiality is imposed, rather than voluntarily agreed to, it can feel coercive.

Clarify the purpose of dialogue and whether decision making or action or is anticipated as an outcome. Sometimes dialogue and the chance to hear one another is itself the desired end. Other times some parties are looking for action, in which case dialogue can be seen as a delaying tactic or a means of maintaining the status quo by avoiding action or decision-making.

Meet in a physical environment conducive to dialogue. The physical environment can have an enormous impact on the tone and tenor of the meeting. For instance, a circle of living-room style armchairs may be more conducive than a conference room table.

Establish contextualized ground rules on what it looks like to be respectful and to disagree well. Perceptions of respect can be culturally dependent. For instance, maintaining eye contact can be consider respectful or disrespectful depending on the cultural context. Your group may need to define for itself respectful behavior. It can be helpful to be specific about particular behaviors. For example, “be cautious in ascribing intention to others”, and “avoid sarcasm or eye rolling.” In particular, it is good to clarify group members comfort level with interruptions/crosstalk.

Frame the issue(s) objectively in a way that is agreeable to all participants. When issues are (consciously or unconsciously) framed in a partisan or biased way, they signal a predetermined outcome. If participants cannot agree on the nature of the disagreement, the discussion will likely be contentious and unfocused.

Consider using an impartial facilitator/mediator/moderator. Sometimes participants can collectively manage the process on their own. However, it can be difficult to both manage the process and participate in it at the same time. A skilled impartial facilitator can help manage the process without engaging the substance of the dialogue. The UCR Ombuds Office offers free impartial facilitation services to the UCR campus community.

During the meeting

Provide freedom for participants to take a break at any time for any reason. Depending on the size of the group, you may or may not want to pause the conversation.

Graciously enforce ground rules when they are violated. It is common for people to violate ground rules, often unconsciously. It is important to maintain the established boundaries, but to do so in a way that does not shame participants.

Identify and acknowledge significant imbalances or disparities between the parties.

Significant disparities between the parties create challenges for dialogue. Here are some types of disparities:

Disparities of power: Less powerful parties may be more hesitant to speak up.

Disparities of potential impact: For some parties, the discussion may be an intellectual curiosity whereas for others it may be deeply personal. For example, the topic of abortion may be more emotionally charged for someone who has had an abortion or for someone who is adopted.

Disparities of understanding: Sometimes there can be vast differences between the knowledge and insight of various parties. For instance, in dialogues around race and racism, people of color typically have much more exposure to the topic than white people do.

Disparities of numbers: Sometimes the people holding one opinion significantly outnumber those holding an opposing opinion. This makes managing “air time” hard, as it is important to give everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard but this can drown out important minority perspectives.

Beware binary thinking and false equivalencies. There are not two equal but opposite sides to every issue. Even viewing the issue as a spectrum is limiting as issues are often multi-dimensional or multi-layered. Not every opinion is equally valid. Try to brainstorm multiple options and approaches.

Create opportunities for self-reflection.

Consider using the “Ouch rule.” If someone says something hurtful, participants are encouraged to say “ouch” and then unpack what happened.

Pay attention to feelings and identity threats as well as to ideas. Emotional dynamics in conflict are complex. They should not dominate the discussion but it is not realistic to expect to set them aside either. It is important to acknowledge and monitor them without letting them take over the dialogue. For some participants, an expression of emotion is authentic communication and for others it can feel threatening. Also, the way emotions are expressed and interpreted can be influenced by gender, race and culture. Discourage emotional red herrings, which are emotional outbursts that derail the dialogue by shifting the conversation to caring for the emotional needs of one or more participants. Participants should try to be conscious of their tone, volume, and body language and seek to have them be congruent with their message.

Distinguish between intent and impact. A negative impact does not mean the intent was bad. Participants may bear responsibility for the impact of their behavior even if their intentions are good. Be careful attributing the intentions of others. Instead describe their behavior and its impact on you.

Be curious, empathetic, and seek to understand. Try to listen, and summarize what you have heard before responding. You can be empathetic and seek to understand others without agreeing with them. Ask interested, open-ended questions rather than cross-examining others.

Surface underlying interests. This critical skill helps shift the conversation from an adversarial dynamic to an exploration of the deeper issues.

Try to be future and solutions focused. It is important not to gloss over the problems of the past. If you do not address them, they are likely to recur. However, all the solutions are in the future.

Look for points of agreement, and opportunities to build on the points of view of those with whom you have disagreements.

Avoid personalizing. Try to address behaviors and issues rather than making character judgments.

Acknowledge your own contribution to the problem and apologize when appropriate.

Additional Resources:

Facilitating with Ease! by Ingrid Bens, *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Petterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Sitzler, *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker, Essential Partners <https://whatisessential.org/>, UCR Ombuds Office <http://ombuds.ucr.edu>