

GUIDE *to* RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS



The first step to eliminating racism and inequality is to talk about it openly and honestly, which you're about to do. Yet, talking about racial inequality can be challenging.

Remember that each of us has multiple identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, ability, etc.) and that we also don't always know another person's identities and experiences from their physical appearance. If you're comfortable, share moments from your experience that will inform what you are emotionally bringing to the discussion and invite others to do the same.

People will have different reactions to the difficult conversations you'll be facilitating. Know that *being uncomfortable isn't always a bad thing*, especially if you're used to feeling comfortable. Your goal as the host should be to create a space in which individuals can express and listen to each other's lived experiences and where **both** their experience and someone else's are incorporated into a larger communal narrative.

Here are some suggestions about how to create that space.



ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU AND OTHERS MIGHT HAVE MOMENTS OF DISCOMFORT

In many cases, it helps to say out loud what others might be feeling: "For people who don't usually talk about racial justice or speak about racism in racially diverse groups, this might make you or others feel uncomfortable, and that's OK." Demonstrating your own vulnerability can give an opportunity for others to be vulnerable.

ESTABLISH GROUP GROUND RULES

These could be formal, such as "whoever holds this spoon speaks," or "if you agree, snap your fingers." These rules could also be informal, including "whatever is said in this room, stays in this room."

USE "I" STATEMENTS

Individuals can only speak to their own experiences. Do not look to others to speak on behalf of their race, gender, ethnicity, or other groups they may identify as being a part of.

BE RESPECTFUL OF INTROVERTS - AND OF SILENCE

Notice who is not speaking. Encourage those individuals to contribute, but do not force them. Similarly, if the conversation reaches a point of silence, do not push people to speak. Be respectful of reflection and different speeds of processing.

PROVIDE SPACE FOR EVERYONE TO HAVE A VOICE

Individuals who are most comfortable expressing their opinions out loud can dominate conversations. The facilitator should respectfully invite others to share their opinions if a few voices begin to dominate the conversation.

IF THE DISCUSSION *becomes* HEATED or UNCOMFORTABLE

AVOID "RIGHT" AND "WRONG"

While some opinions are commonly accepted as "right," it is unproductive for conversations like these to cast someone's statements or beliefs as "wrong." Instead, refer back to speaking from one's personal experience.

IF IT WILL HELP, TAKE A BREATH (OR TWO) BEFORE RESPONDING

It is critical to allow yourself time to process your reactions to a statement or a text and get to the root of what caused those reactions. Deep breaths release endorphins in the brain and can allow people to center themselves.

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT YOUR LANGUAGE

Think about the language you are using, not just in terms of intent, but also in terms of impact. If someone says something you hear as offensive, consider that they may not realize they have said something hurtful. If someone calls you out for saying something offensive, remember that your intent can be different than your impact.

KEEP POWER DYNAMICS IN MIND

Remember power dynamics change based on individual's identities. Be cognizant of the fact that some voices and identities have been given privilege while other voices and identities have been discriminated against.

WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES

You might make mistakes when speaking about racial justice. If you hear something that has offended you, say "ouch" to demonstrate its impact. Explain why a comment has offended you. Then the person who said the comment has the opportunity to say "oops," sharing that they made a mistake. This framework is an opportunity to acknowledge and learn from that mistake, and then continue the conversation.

USE FACTS GRACIOUSLY - NOT TO SHUT DOWN A CONVERSATION

Remind people that this is a conversation. Everyone's personal experience matters. Recommend that people share information to deepen the discussion, not to shut down the conversation.

IF YOU'RE OFFENDED, CONSIDER SOME OPTIONS

*Call people "in", not "out."*¹

When you are holding someone accountable for an offensive or ignorant statement, think about how to address the hurt they caused *and* still engage them in the conversation.

Move back and listen.

Take on the role of an active listener. Challenge yourself to concentrate completely on what other people are saying without interrupting and instead of crafting a response.

Remove yourself from the conversation.

Do what you need to do to take care of yourself. If you do not feel like you can continue to engage in the conversation, step away.

1 | For more information about the approach of calling people in, read Ngọc Loan Trân's "[Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable](#)," Black Girl Dangerous.

Quality facilitation is key to the success of meaningful Turn the Tables Discussions. Below are some tips for effective facilitation.

AN IMPORTANT REMINDER

It's not just on you to facilitate a successful conversation (that's the work of the whole group.) Your job is to use these best practices and model what it means to be brave and vulnerable in this space. You do not have to be the expert, but rather make space for everyone to share their wisdom, if they so choose.

LEADING UP TO THE DISCUSSING

COMMUNICATE PLANS & EXPECTATIONS

Explain why you are doing what you are doing. A key measure of successful facilitation is whether or not people feel ownership in the group. One way to achieve this is by clearly explaining why you are doing what you are doing when you do it. If you need to cut feedback short, explain why. If you want to change the agenda, explain why. If you want to continue the discussion beyond its set end time, ask permission from the group. This is one key way of making people feel invested in the conversation.

START WITH NAMES & GENDER PRONOUNS

Ask your guests to start by saying their names, gender pronouns (e.g., they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, he/him/his, ze/zir/zirs), and any identities they want to share that will be important in this conversation (race, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, etc.) It's a powerful way to get everyone on the same page and to welcome different gender identities (and all identities) that might be present. If you don't know the names of everyone present, it is helpful to write them down in the order that they are sitting around the space.

¹ | Adapted from "We Plant Seeds: A How-to Guide for Effective Jewish Service-Learning Programs" for the full toolkit, go to wepair.org/resources

² | Check out Repair The World's [Guide to Respectful Conversations](#)

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Never assume that everyone in the session can read or is comfortable doing so aloud. When asking for participants to read or role play, ask for volunteers. Always read instructions out loud. We also don't always know another person's identities and experiences from their physical appearance. Try not to direct questions towards people based on those assumed identities.

SET COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Lead your group in creating (or agreeing on) guidelines for how you will interact with each other over the course of the discussion. Community agreements, sometimes called guidelines or group norms, are the foundation for you to build a brave space where participants can express their opinions thoughtfully and openly, ask difficult questions, and where the feelings of the group are valued and protected. Everyone needs to buy into these agreements and demonstrate respect for one another in order to have a meaningful conversation about these sensitive topics.²

USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Language is important. Even with the best intentions we may inadvertently exclude or hurt people with our language. If you use a word everyone in the room may not know, explain it. Avoid jargon and acronyms, or explain them as you go along so everyone is included. Acknowledging that everyone may not know a term can put others at ease for not knowing it. Facilitators must also watch their own use of language (e.g. swearing or references to others), and shouldn't tolerate hateful language from anyone.

In particular, be thoughtful about how you are using "we." By using "we" to describe a group that actually does not include all participants, the conversation will feel incredibly othering. For instance, if you talk about how "we" as a Jewish community have to contend with our whiteness and racial privilege in doing racial justice, that "we" excludes all Jews of Color directly facing racism. Instead, be specific about you you are talking about; if it is white Jews, say "white Jews"! Also, be compassionate with yourself if you make a mistake and use it as an opportunity for modeling.

GUIDE, DON'T "TEACH"

Facilitation differs from typical lecturer/student dynamics. The best facilitation lets everyone (including the facilitator) learn from one another. The facilitator serves as a guide for participants and helps them find value and hold multiple truths in their and other's experiences and ideas. Participants may naturally, however, look to you as an 'expert.' One way to bypass this is to open that question to the group: "I'm not sure. What do you think?"

SHOW VULNERABILITY

One way to encourage people to be vulnerable is to show your own vulnerability. Participants will continually look to you for clues about how to act and respond; model that risk-taking and deep-thinking is okay. Acknowledge that it's okay to falter a bit as you try to get a new idea out; or to take a moment or two before responding— it's all part of learning.

It can be really challenging to admit to others, or even to yourself, about your past mistakes. Sometimes over the course of these conversations, people hear experiences or information that frame past experiences in new and challenging ways. Sharing your own mistakes opens the door for people to reflect on their own missteps without retreating into guilt.

ADAPT TO THE GROUP'S NEEDS

Roll with what participants tell you. Come with an agenda and be prepared to adapt or change it. You might pivot based on the needs of the group, the interests of the group, or the dynamics of the particular session. If it feels like you are struggling to pull the discussion in a particular direction, then you may need to let the group go in the way it is excited to go. Develop multiple ideas for getting at the same point; this can be a "toolkit" to fall back on when one approach doesn't work.

Group energy ebbs and flows. This is part of the process – nothing to take personally. If you see the group's energy ebbing, you may want to articulate that observation and suggest taking a break, asking participants to get up and move around or doing something else to address it.

HOLD SILENCE

Silence can be scary. Especially for the extroverted among us. Silence can be the result of a poorly asked question or it can be the result of a wonderfully challenging text or moving answer. It can be uncomfortable to let the silence lie, but an important moment in the larger arc of the conversation.

RESPECT PERSONAL BOUNDARIES & DON'T THERAPIZ

This is a discussion, not a therapy session (or a training or lecture, for that matter). While going beyond our comfort zones, it's also important to maintain appropriate boundaries for group participants. While it may be tempting to follow up the powerful act of empathizing with offering advice or a diagnosis, instead take a deep breath and model active listening. Share a part of their story that particularly moved you. Connect with them on a human-to-human level, sidestepping a therapist/patient, student/teacher, or worst, researcher/subject dynamic.

In general, if you haven't already built trust with an individual, they might not feel comfortable opening themselves up in the conversation. That's more than okay. On the other hand, while someone might be open with you about all of their identities and experiences, it does not mean they necessarily want to share it with a larger group. Encourage people to engage in conversations in any way they feel comfortable. Your job as the facilitator is to provide the scaffolding to stretch themselves and explore different social justice issues.

NAME CHALLENGES & DISAGREEMENTS

Your guests may very well have different opinions about social justice issues and have difference experiences with history, institutions, and the law. Those differences will not be resolved over the course of a single conversation. Rather than trying to gloss over those differences, name those multiple perspectives.

IF CHALLENGING SITUATIONS ARISE

PAUSE AND REVISIT GUIDELINES

If at any point people are treating each other with disrespect or speaking in generalizations, pause the conversations and return to the guidelines. In particular, “move up, move back,” “hold multiple truths,” and “use ‘I’ statements” are key agreements to revisit.

WHEN TO CALL PEOPLE “IN” & WHEN TO ASK THEM TO LEAVE

If people are unintentionally inflicting harm on each other through their language or actions, use the strategy of calling people “in”, not “out.”³ There can be a gulf between the intent of a question or statement and its impact, especially when asked in the context of a white person to a Person of Color. Some examples are: “Where are you from originally?”; “When did you convert to Judaism?”; “Let me touch your hair!” All of these statements are based on an underlying, profoundly othering assumption that the person does not look “Jewish” or “American”. As a facilitator, you want to balance between holding someone accountable for an offensive or ignorant statement and still engaging them in the conversation. If you have the emotional bandwidth, use it as a teachable moment to allow further entry into the conversation. Use the “I felt... when you...” format to discuss how you personally perceived someone’s statement. Or share a time (real or invented) when you said a similar comment and how its harmful impact was shared with you.

If any guests are intentionally inflicting harm on each other through their actions or using hateful language, it’s not a productive environment to continue the conversation. As the convener of the discussion, you can ask the person to leave the conversation and/or the space. The bottom line is that racist, anti-semitic, homophobic, Islamophobic and other hateful speech is not tolerated in these spaces (and hateful speech is determined by the community to whom it is directed). If you feel comfortable, give the guests time to reflect on/process any harm caused and how you can move forward as a community.

THE DEVIL DOESN’T NEED ANY MORE ADVOCATES

Within the framework of community agreements, encourage your guests to wrestle with the texts, challenge themselves, and ask thoughtful questions of each other. However, it is one thing to ask questions from a place of genuine difference of opinion; it is another to debate for the sake of pushing people’s buttons.

If you see someone taking on the role of debater or interrogator, there are two approaches you could take: ask the person how they are feeling and thinking -- asking them to take responsibility for their statements. You could also gently, but firmly, stop the line of questioning and ask for other people to contribute.

MANAGE TALK TIME

Everyone deserves and appreciates being listened to in a respectful way. Some people don’t realize that their talking is taking time away from others, or from other planned activities. One of your roles as a facilitator is to redirect the conversation when necessary. This may mean interrupting someone, which can be hard to do. Consider who gets the opportunity and support to speak in other spaces and whose voices are often minimized or silenced. A social justice analysis doesn’t just apply to the content of the conversation, but also the structure of it.

When you do need to cut someone off, try to balance firmness and respect. Firm – because subtlety is lost on some people, especially when they have gained a full head of conversational steam – but always come from a respectful place. You can make it clear that you value what the person is saying, but that because of time constraints we need to move on.

³ | For more information about the approach of calling people in, read Ngọc Loan Trần’s “Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable,” Black Girl Dangerous, <http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2013/12/calling-less-disposable-way-holding-accountable/>