

Creating space for difficult conversations

USING THESE RESOURCES

These resources are designed to be a guide to facilitate and engage in difficult conversations. Having and engaging in challenging dialogue does not always come easy or naturally. Thank you for taking on this challenge and for leading the way.

As you work with your team or within your community, know that you are not expected to be perfect, be “the expert” or have all the answers. Your role is a facilitator. You are convening and engaging in a dialogue. To that end, never feel as if you do not have resources to call on, starting with your campus advisor, who can not only provide direct support, guidance, and assistance, but can also connect you with numerous other campus based resources.

Beyond campus based resources, look to your local community, including not for profit and advocacy agencies in your locale, region, or state. These agencies and resources may be good partners for your community.

CREATING SPACE FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

As you begin to engage in dialogue, the concept of “Gracious Space” is one that can assist in creating and maintaining an environment in which honesty, equity, reciprocity, and partnership can thrive. The difference between gracious space and ground rules are that “rules” are things and often are set by others, have punitive consequences, and have a restraining connotation.

Gracious Space is all about honor and respect for the place, time and people involved in a particular conversation. It allows for safe space in which to engage in real meaningful thought and conversation. Each group creates their own agreement. Start with a few on the board and have the group quickly add anything that is important to them or that is missing. Challenge anything that they disagree with or question. Below are some examples of starting points.



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START WITH

- **Step up, step back** – both share and listen – everyone participates but no one dominates
- **Keep it real** - be honest
- **Respect one another and disagree without being disagreeable** (disagreement is inevitable and encouraged for our learning; however, to allow for real growth, we must express ourselves, as well we are able, in ways that people can ‘hear’ us, without shutting each other down and trusting that people are beginning from a sincere place of wanting to learn and be heard.)
- **Speaking order** (one person speaks at a time, guided by facilitators who will keep track of who wants to speak in order as well as they are able)
- **Use of ‘ouch’** (when some feels offended by something another person has said, one can acknowledge the hurt by saying ‘ouch.’
 - The facilitator will recognize the ‘ouch’ to the degree that the individual and the group feel it needs attention before moving on – as much as possible, without derailing the focus of the group unless absolutely necessary at that moment.
- **Be responsible for our own defensiveness and learning.** Check our defensiveness and be responsible for our own learning.
 - Take a breath before responding to a moment when we may feel accused or misunderstood. Rather than immediate response, use the speaking order to allow any response, if necessary, to be thoughtful and reflective.
 - Do not place responsibility on others for learning that we need to work on ourselves and accept that some learning we may have to do outside of the circle in order to allow the group to move forward.
- **Turn off technology** (or put on vibrate) – if necessary, please leave room to answer.

For more information about Gracious Space, please visit the [Center for Ethical Leadership](#).