

# A GUIDE TO USING THESE IDEAS

## PART IV

### Making Hard Conversations Easier

Difficult conversations happen all the time. Sometimes they are centered on issues such as race, ethnicity, or gender. Just as frequently, they are challenging in other ways: An employee has performance problems and needs to hear some blunt feedback; a boss is underpaying you and needs to understand your complaints; a spouse has got to change if a relationship is going to survive; an uncle is drinking too much, and you are worried.

These kinds of conversations are hard because they can threaten someone's sense of self: Our discussion with an employee about their performance might seem, to them, like criticisms of their work ethic, intelligence, or personality. Telling a boss that you deserve a bigger paycheck could sound, to the boss herself, as if you are accusing her of being uncaring. Asking a spouse to change can sometimes come off as an attack on who they are. An uncle is likely to hear your concerns about his alcohol consumption as a criticism of how he lives.

But these conversations are not just essential, they are unavoidable. So it is important that we are mindful of the last rule for a learning conversation.

***Fourth Rule:***  
**Explore if identities are  
important to this discussion.**

This rule tells us to consider our actions during three distinct periods: *before* a discussion, at the *beginning* of the discussion, and as the discussion *unfolds*.

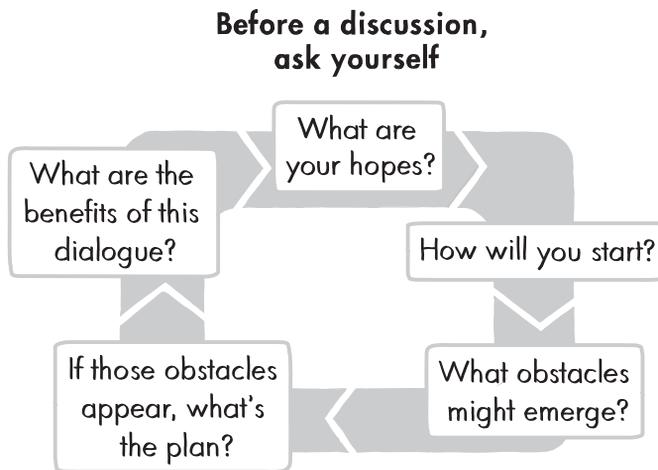
## BEFORE THE DISCUSSION

Before a word is spoken in a *Who Are We?* conversation, there are some questions you should consider. The goal of this exercise is to nudge yourself to think about *how* you hope a conversation will unfold, and *what* you hope will be said.

*Ask yourself:*

- **What do you hope to accomplish?** What do you most want to say? What do you hope to learn? What do you think *others* hope to say and learn? If we have elucidated goals before a discussion, we're more likely to achieve them.
- **How will this conversation start?** How will you ensure that everyone has a voice and feels they can participate? What is needed to draw everyone in?
- **What obstacles might emerge?** Will people get angry? Withdrawn? Will a hesitancy to say something controversial prevent us from saying what's necessary? How can we make it safer for everyone to air their thoughts?

- **When those obstacles appear, what's the plan?** Research shows that being preemptively aware of situations that make us anxious or fearful can lower the impact of those concerns. How will you calm yourself and others if the conversation gets tense, or encourage someone who has gone quiet to participate more?
- **Finally, what are the benefits of this dialogue?** Are they worth the risks? (The answer usually is yes.) When people get angry or upset, or it's easier to walk away, how will you remind yourself and others why this dialogue is so important?



### AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DISCUSSION

Tough conversations frequently begin on uncertain footing. Particularly when we're discussing *Who Are We?*, we're usually anxious we'll say the wrong thing, or tense about what we might hear.

We can lessen those anxieties by addressing a few things right away.

*As a conversation begins:*

- **First, establish guidelines.** It is useful to make clear the *norms*—for instance, no one is allowed to **blame, shame, or attack others**. The goal is to **share our feelings, not litigate who is at fault**. It is also helpful to define if **asking questions is okay**, and if there are some kinds of inquiries—about, say, very personal topics, or particularly sensitive issues—that require some forethought. We should affirm that **everyone is encouraged to speak**, that everyone belongs in this discussion, and perhaps identify someone to serve as a moderator to make sure everyone is given space. Finally, it is useful to ask people to **speak about their own experiences and describe their own stories**. Don't generalize. Don't solve or diminish others' problems, unless they ask for help. When a colleague describes something painful, **listen**, and tell them you're sorry it happened. Acknowledge what they felt.
- **Second, draw out everyone's goals.** You likely have some aims in mind. Share them. Then, ask others what they hope to get out of this discussion. Identify *emotional goals* (“I want to make sure we stay friends” or “I need to get something off my chest”); and *practical goals* (“I'd like to walk away from this with a plan”); as well as *group goals* (“It's important to me that we all show compassion for each other”).
- **Finally, acknowledge, and keep acknowledging, that discomfort is natural—and useful.** We will misspeak. We will ask naïve questions. We will say things we didn't realize were offensive. When these discomforts emerge, rather than shutting down, we should use them as opportunities to learn.

## At the beginning of a discussion

Establish the guidelines

- What are the norms?
- No blaming, shaming, or attacks.
- Are questions okay?

A moderator can encourage

- ...everyone to speak.
- ...people to tell their own stories  
and not diminish others' problems.
- ...everyone to listen.

Draw out everyone's

- ...emotional goals.
- ...practical goals.
- ...more ephemeral goals.

Acknowledge this will  
be uncomfortable

- We may misspeak.
- We may ask naïve questions.
- When those discomforts emerge,  
we won't shut down. Rather, we'll  
see them as opportunities to learn.

### AS THE DISCUSSION UNFOLDS

Once we've prepared for a hard conversation, and have discussed guidelines and goals, we should remember to:

- **Draw out multiple identities.** Ask people about their backgrounds, communities, the organizations and causes they support,

and where they come from. Share your identities in return. We all contain multiple selves; none of us are one-dimensional. It helps to be reminded of that.

- **Work to ensure everyone is on equal footing.** *Who Are We?* discussions work best when everyone has an equal voice and the ability to speak. Focus on welcoming everyone's perspective. Don't trumpet your wealth or connections, your privilege or seniority, your expertise. Seek to frame topics so everyone is an expert, or everyone a novice. (This, in fact, is why discussing experiences is so powerful: We're all experts in what we've seen and felt.)
- **Acknowledge people's experiences and look for genuine similarities.** Ask people about their identities and build on what you have in common. ("You went to Valley High? So did I!") But remember: Similarities must be genuine. And connections become more meaningful when we push them a bit further, and use them to understand each other better. ("High school was tough for me. What was it like for you?") Even if we don't have similarities, simply acknowledging others' experiences—showing you have heard them—can create a sense of togetherness.
- **Manage your environment.** Social identities gain and lose power based on their salience and the environment where a conversation occurs. Sometimes a simple shift—moving a discussion from a group setting to something more personal; talking away from the workplace; starting a meeting by discussing the weekend before getting to business—can shift what feels safe, and who feels welcomed. (And, by the same token, when an environment makes someone feel left out, it can undermine our sense of safety.)

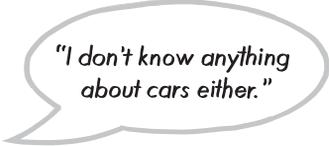
### During the discussion

- 1 Draw out multiple identities.



*"Where did you grow up?  
What was that like?"*

- 2 Put everyone on equal footing.



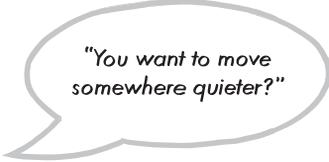
*"I don't know anything  
about cars either."*

- 3 Look for similarities to create in-groups.



*"You're a lawyer?  
So am I!"*

- 4 Manage your environment.



*"You want to move  
somewhere quieter?"*

This can seem like a lot. Hard conversations, even with the most meticulous and thoughtful planning, can veer off in directions we haven't foreseen. But when we're aware of harmful influences such as identity threat and stereotype threat, when we have a plan and are prepared for obstacles, when we know that things will get uncomfortable and that's okay, it becomes a bit easier to discuss difficult things.