

HOW TO HAVE HARD CONVERSATIONS LIKE A SUPERCOMMUNICATOR

Tense conversations – including about politics or religion or delivering feedback at work – don’t have to spiral into anger or arguments. With a little preparation, curiosity and listening, they can become moments of genuine connection – even when we don’t agree. Use this cheat sheet next time you need to have a difficult discussion:

STEP 1

PREPARE

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 229

- » **Define your own goals**
(“Am I trying to build understanding, or do I need a resolution?”)
- » **Anticipate and prepare for obstacles**
(“How will I respond if they get upset? What will I say if they mention something I think is untrue?”)

STEP 2

HOW TO START

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 230

- » **Establish ground rules**
(“Can we agree not to interrupt?”)
- » **Share your goals and invite others to share**
(“I want to express why this is important to me—what do you want out of this conversation?”)
- » **Acknowledge discomfort**
(“I might say something the wrong way. I hope you’ll forgive me – and I promise that I’ll forgive you.”)

STEP 3

AS YOU PROCEED

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 232

- » **Highlight shared values**
(“It’s clear we both care a lot about our families, even if we disagree on this issue.”)
- » **Draw out perspectives**
(“Tell me how this has impacted your life.”)
- » **Validate experiences**
(“It sounds like this topic is deeply personal for you. Can you share more?”)

STEP 4

LOOP FOR UNDERSTANDING

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 164

- » **Ask questions.**
- » **Repeat back, in your own words, what you heard.**
- » **Ask if you got it right.**

Some of the most challenging conversations often involve hot-button topics, like race, politics and religion. Sometimes these hard conversations occur at work, when we have to give employees difficult feedback. These discussions pop up everywhere—from family gatherings where the latest election results are on everyone’s mind to online exchanges about issues in the news. These conversations can get heated, but there are ways to make it easier to understand and connect.

Here’s a step-by-step guide on how to make discussions about politics, religion and other often tough issues feel a bit safer. (These approaches can help with any tense discussion.)





STEP 1

PREPARE

Tough conversations benefit immensely from preparation. When we go in without an idea of what we're hoping to achieve, we often end up in a reactive mindset, where it's easy to say something that comes out wrong. Think of the last time a debate about politics spiraled into acrimony, or a financial conversation with a partner grew tense. These moments often escalate because they catch us off guard. While some tough conversations arise unexpectedly, making a habit of preparing for difficult discussions can help.

The next time you find yourself needing to have a difficult conversation, start by setting clear goals for yourself. Ask yourself: ***“What outcome am I hoping for?”*** and ***“Am I trying to build understanding with this person or simply express my feelings?”*** Clarifying your own goals helps steer the conversation toward sharing rather than misunderstandings or heated arguments. And it's helpful to think of a few questions that will help you figure out other people's goals.

Breaking down your goals can look like this:

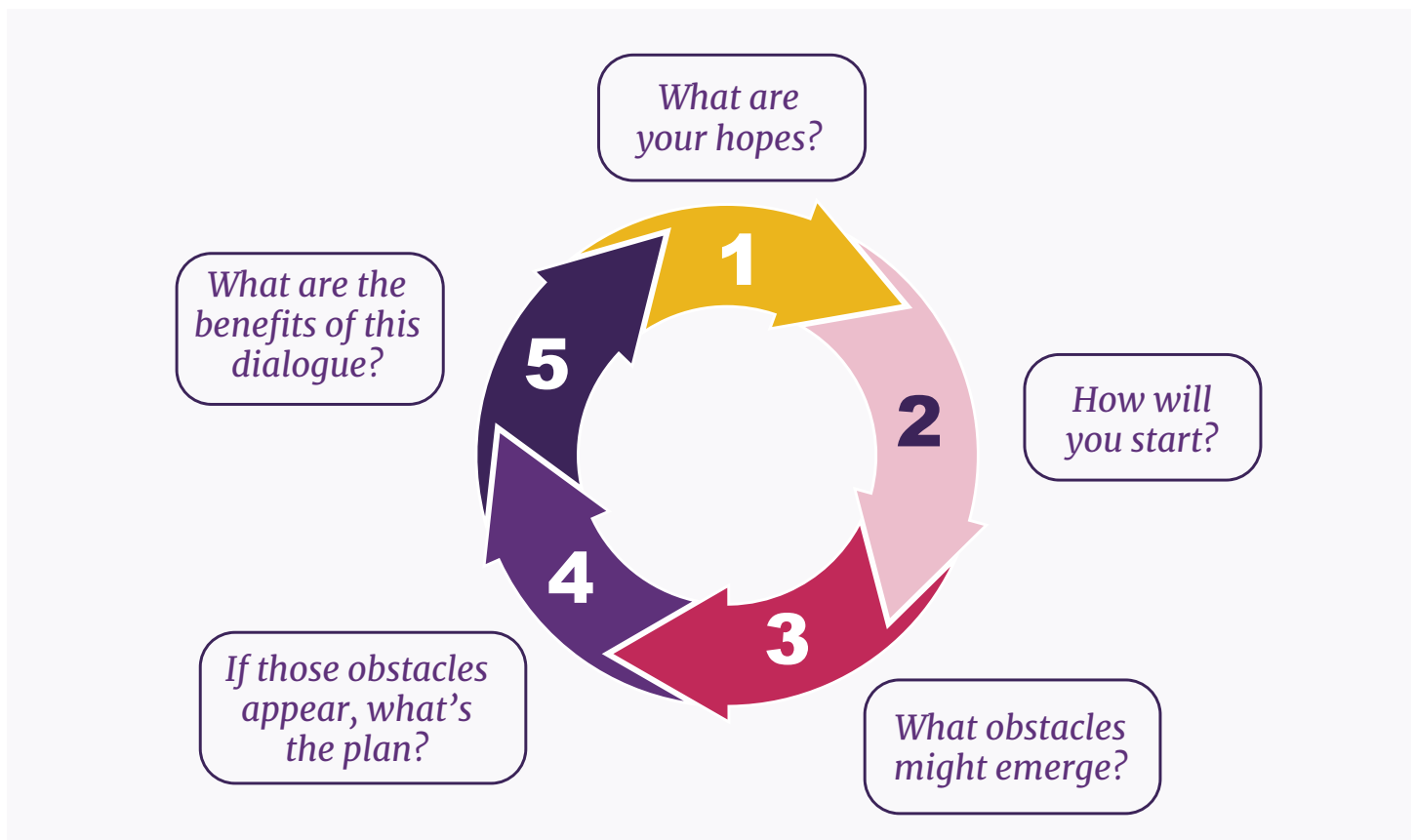
Goal	What to ask
<i>Building understanding</i>	<i>It's clear this topic is important to you. Can you tell me why?</i>
<i>Getting consensus</i>	<i>We might disagree on some details, but I want to understand where we agree.</i>
<i>Clarifying my own position</i>	<i>Do you mind if I tell you about my experiences with this issue?</i>

Next, try to anticipate challenges and discomfort. Conversations about politics can escalate quickly, especially when people feel their beliefs or values are under attack. Think about, and plan for, how you'll respond if emotions start to rise. For instance, in a conversation about gender inequality, someone might say, "Women make just as much money as men these days." Rather than responding with "You don't know what you're talking about," it might be worth acknowledging that there has been some progress – while pointing out that significant gaps

still persist. Make it about direct experiences, rather than competing facts: ***"In my office, I've seen more women get passed over for promotions compared to men."***

Remember: Preparation isn't just having a plan—it's managing your own emotions, such as frustration or anxiety, so they don't take over. When you're clear on your own goals, and have thought through potential challenges, you're better equipped to stay calm and focused, even if the discussion gets heated.

Before a discussion ask yourself





STEP 2

HOW TO START

For difficult conversations, setting the stage can make all the difference. Start by establishing some basic ground rules. For instance, you might say, ***“Let’s avoid interruptions,”*** or, ***“Let’s keep everything we discuss today confidential.”*** These types of agreements help reduce defensiveness and keep a discussion constructive.

If there’s a chance the conversation might veer into personal territory, ask for permission with something

like, ***“Would it be okay if we talk about how this issue has affected you personally?”*** Asking permission can defuse defensiveness, show respect for someone’s boundaries, and avoid pushing people into discomfort.

Next, try to draw out everyone’s goals and share your own. Ask others what they hope to get out of the discussion, and consider how their goals align with your own. These conversations can often benefit from identifying three kinds of goals:

Example

Emotional Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>“I need to get this off my chest because it’s been weighing on me.”</i>» <i>“I want us to listen to each other, even if we don’t agree.”</i>
Practical Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>“I’d like to explain my stance clearly so you know where I’m coming from.”</i>» <i>“It’s important to me that we work together and find a plan everyone can live with.”</i>
Group Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>“I want to find some common ground that helps both of our teams.”</i>» <i>“I want us to agree on how we’ll handle these conversations moving forward so we all can work together.”</i>

Finally, acknowledge, out loud at the discussion’s start, that even with careful planning the conversation may still feel uncomfortable at times. You might misspeak or unintentionally say something offensive. Ask, in advance, for people’s patience – and promise you’ll be patient yourself. Discomfort is part of growth, and it’s a chance to understand how someone different from you sees the world.

At the beginning of discussion

Establish the guidelines

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

Acknowledge this will be uncomfortable

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





STEP 3

AS THE CONVERSATION PROCEEDS

Now that the ground rules are in place, let's get curious. (As one saying goes: ***When you feel furious, get curious.***)

Many disagreements arise from how people see themselves and their values in relation to a hot-button topic. The best way to ease tension is to ask genuinely curious questions (***"I voted for someone else, but tell me what you saw in that candidate."***) Then highlight what we have in common. For example, in a discussion about politics, someone might mention a family member who can't afford medical treatments. We've all felt the anxiety of not being able to help the people we care about – so acknowledge that shared value with ***"It's really clear we both care about our families,"*** and then, if it make sense, share a similar experience, such as ***"I've been struggling with this same issue with my own mom."***

When we talk about experiences – rather than dueling facts – we connect, even if we don't completely agree.

It's also important to make sure everyone feels on equal footing. We are all experts in our own experiences. Something like, ***"I'm wondering how paying for healthcare has affected other parts of your life?"*** gives everyone a chance to share, and

acknowledges that no single perspective has all the answers.

Empathy and curiosity are key here, but it's important to remember that what might feel empathetic to one person, might not to another. For example, if someone shares their frustration about their paycheck, and you respond with, ***"That's been a struggle for me too—I can't make my rent this month,"*** it might seem like you're shifting the focus to yourself rather than listening. A better response might be, ***"That sounds hard. How are you handling it? Because I've been going through something similar."***

Finally, consider how the environment can influence a conversation. A noisy or chaotic setting—like a busy restaurant or crowded event—can make it harder for people to feel heard and respected. Discussing something important by text rather than by phone might make it feel like you're not taking the issue seriously. Recognizing how our environment – and the choices we make – influence a discussion can make a huge difference.

ENVIRONMENT	SOLUTION
<i>A noisy or crowded setting</i>	<i>Move to a quieter space where everyone can focus and feel heard</i>
<i>Someone interrupts or dominates the discussion</i>	<i>Gently remind everyone of the ground rules, or share how you are feeling.</i>
<i>A comment feels personal or accusatory</i>	<i>Pause and acknowledge the tension: “Let’s take a moment to reset.” Then ask them to restate their point in a different way.</i>
<i>Emotional topics – like race or politics – come up unexpectedly</i>	<i>Acknowledge the potential for discomfort, and remind everyone of the importance of having conversations like this.</i>
<i>The discussion becomes circular, with no resolution in sight</i>	<i>Suggest focusing on one specific issue – and save other topics for later. (“Let’s focus on where we’ll spend Thanksgiving, and we can talk about New Year’s some other time.”)</i>



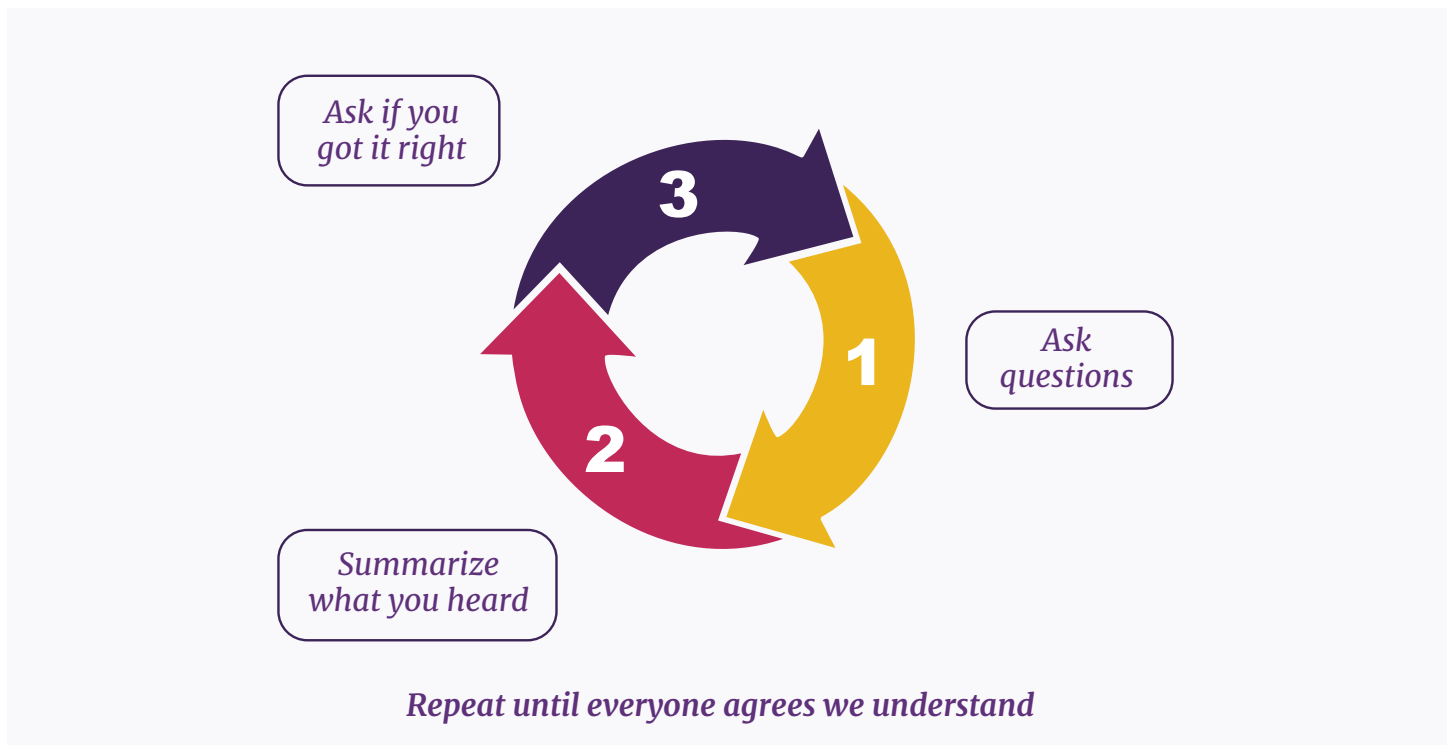
STEP 4

LOOPING FOR UNDERSTANDING

When things get heated, it's easy to misunderstand what someone is *really* trying to say. There's a technique to help with this – looping for understanding – that's also a great way to show you're listening.

Here's how it works: (1) listen closely to what the other person is saying, (2) rephrase it in your own words, (3) ask if you got it right.

We prove we are listening by Looping For Understanding



The reason why looping is so effective is because it makes you a better listener, and proves you want to connect. When we restate someone's points in our own words, we often process it differently, which can bring new understanding. What's more

by looping we demonstrate not just that we've heard their words, but that we're trying to understand everything behind them. We're proving we're listening, which makes others more likely to listen in return.

It's important to recognize that the goal in looping isn't mimicry – it's to show we are paying attention and processing what someone said. We might disagree with them, but we need to first show we understand. And if we hope someone will listen to us, we need to prove we are listening to them.

CONCERN	MIMICRY	LOOPING
<i>“The media is biased, and they’re pushing their own agenda.”</i>	<i>“So you believe the media is always wrong?”</i>	<i>“It seems like you feel the media isn’t giving people the full story because they’ve been wrong before. Am I getting that right?”</i>
<i>“No one respects law enforcement anymore.”</i>	<i>“Are you saying police officers don’t deserve respect?”</i>	<i>“It sounds like you’re concerned about the challenges officers face because of public attitudes. Is that accurate?”</i>
<i>“People just can’t afford basic healthcare in this country.”</i>	<i>“You think healthcare is too expensive?”</i>	<i>“It feels like you’re worried that the price of things like medicine seem out of reach for some people. Am I hearing you fully?”</i>



SUMMARY

Difficult conversations shouldn't tear people apart—they should be opportunities for curiosity and thoughtful dialogues. Often, our most meaningful and important conversations are those that are the hardest to start. While sensitive topics can stir emotions, they also provide an opportunity to understand what matters most. By preparing, getting curious, and proving we're listening by looping for understanding, we can

transform heated debates into meaningful exchanges. Whether it's during a holiday dinner or catching up with an old friend, remember that these conversations aren't about "winning". They're about listening to find common ground, and ultimately building a deeper connection. The real goal of every conversation isn't to prove that I'm right, and you are wrong. The real goal is to understand each other a little better.

