

Unpacking the Conversation Agreements

Sometimes it's helpful to unpack the conversation agreements, so that people can...

Be curious and open to learning. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others' experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.

- Our purpose is not to reach consensus, convert someone to our own ways of thinking or believing, or win a debate.
- Marvel at all the different ways of looking at the issue.
- When we hear a perspective that is different from our own, we often want to respond with our own perspective. Your time to speak will come, so do your best to simply listen and wonder...perhaps imagine you're traveling in a strange land. "I wonder how they came to that understanding" is powerful self-talk that opens our curiosity.

Show respect and suspend judgment. People tend to judge one another. Setting judgment aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.

- It's helpful to describe what respectful listening looks like. Most of us are familiar with the need not to interrupt. Cross-talk is also a temptation. When someone says something that interests us, we sometimes feel the urge to say something like, "Yes! That's happened to me...." and begin a dialogue with the speaker. If we do that, it limits the other person's ability to speak. When you get that urge to jump in, try writing your comment down so that you can mention it when it's your turn to talk.
- You probably don't need this reminder, but some folks do...so, when it's your turn to speak, avoid cursing, yelling, blaming and other kinds of attack.
- Be aware of your own body language. Eye-rolling, head-shaking and snorting are not helpful.
- Judging is hard-wired in our brains. In less than a second after we meet people, we assess who they are, what they value and believe, and what we can expect from them. This built-in ability is critical to safety in some situations. If a lion pops out from behind a rock right in front of us, we need to recognize it instantly and take appropriate action, not hang around to wonder if the animal is a pet seeking a new home. There are no lions here. Really. Our instinctive judging capacity gets in the

way of taking in new information, because it leads us to believe that we already know all we need to know about a person and that belief keeps us from wondering and listening deeply. Just be aware of your judgment and put it to the side while you listen.

Note any common ground as well as any differences. Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.

- If there is disagreement, actively listen for ways you agree with the person speaking.
- Curiosity really helps us to objectively identify differences in beliefs and opinions.

Be authentic and welcome that from others. Share what's important to you. Speak authentically from your personal experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.

- Tell your story to the degree that it's comfortable for you. Think about how you have experienced the issue at hand.
- Each response or story is a gift of trust. Receive it in a trustworthy way.

Be purposeful and to the point. Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.

- We all get distracted from our original point from time to time. Keep the question you're answering in front of you and try to avoid going down rabbit holes or circling around to say something in a different way.
- Remember that our purpose is to share and learn, not to convince or change others.

Own and guide the conversation. Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation as a whole. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the "time out" sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.

- Ownership doesn't simply give you permission to help each other out. Each participant has responsibility for the quality of the conversation. The agreements and the guide are the facilitator. Each group is in charge of their own conversation,

and each person has the responsibility to monitor and direct what's happening.

- You may be tempted to abandon the topic guide and have free-floating conversation. That's the group's choice, but the result of that decision means more work for you—to make sure everyone gets equal airtime, to ensure that no one's agenda takes over, to avoid the kind of messiness that happens when the debate-oriented relative comes to dinner.
- This conversation method is structured to help us practice listening—not talking. If you're strongly tempted to have free-floating conversation, consider how that's working for you in the rest of your life.
- Many groups decide to have a few minutes of open conversation, asking if anyone has clarifying questions or comments, at the end of each round. Knowing there will be a time for that helps people listen during the rounds.
- The topic guide will hold the process, and you'll have more fun if you follow it.