Inclusive Communities

TOOLKIT

Create sustainable, rewarding professional relationships

CBA
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INTRODUCTION

The authors of this toolkit strongly believe that everyone deserves a safe, welcoming, inclusive, fulfilling, and connected life. This includes our personal and professional lives, and this toolkit is focused on the latter—though you may find some of our strategies help you in your personal life, too.

In addition to being the right thing to do, prioritizing inclusion and belonging is also wise. When people do not feel valued, included, or connected, their work may be less efficient and effective, and you may struggle to retain valuable talent—whether in a firm, at a nonprofit, or on a volunteer committee. On the other hand, when people feel they have fulfilling professional relationships and do not have to expend time and energy on navigating interpersonal challenges, they can bring their full talents to the work at hand. They will be likelier to feel invested in the organization's long-term success and stick around for it.

In the legal profession—and the world at large—many structural barriers stand between people and their right to full participation in the community. These include racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities), heteronormativity, neuronormativity (the systemic preference for people whose brains function in ways that are considered standard or typical), xenophobia (fear or hatred of immigrants, refugees, etc.), and other systems of oppression. They also include cultural features of our profession, such as the focus on competition and high achievement, elevated rates of substance abuse, and an aversion to frank conversations about feelings and personal experiences.

This document is intended to give you some tools to overcome those barriers and create sustainable, rewarding professional relationships. However, we know that no document can solve all our problems, and only some solutions work for some situations. So, some provisos are necessary before we go further:

This toolkit is drafted primarily from the perspective of peer-to-peer engagement within the legal community—such as volunteer committees, governance settings, etc.—not hierarchical relationships between superiors and subordinates. When formal power structures are involved, we hope you will still find the principles in this toolkit helpful, but they may need to be applied differently. If you are in a subordinate position, this toolkit may give you some valuable ideas on broaching complex topics. Still, it will not tell you how to protect yourself from potential repercussions, navigate HR involvement, etc. If you are in a managerial position, you will need to understand that your position of power may make folks more cautious about sharing with you—we recommend you listen more, speak less, be intentional about creating opportunities for people from underrepresented backgrounds to participate, and respect the boundaries of those working under you.

Likewise, as mentioned above, our relationships are impacted by power dynamics that exist outside of our professional roles—issues like race, gender, disability, immigration status, religion, etc. This toolkit is designed to give general ideas on navigating complex topics and building relationships across barriers, whether those barriers are identity-related or not. Still, it is not intended to be a comprehensive resource on the experience of any particular identity group.

Suppose you have relative social power when interacting with someone with marginalized identities. In that case, that is also a power dynamic you should be aware of and respect. For example, a marginalized person may not feel safe or comfortable opening up to you about their experiences, and they may have very good reasons for feeling that way. Marginalized people may also wish to have some conversations with each other that you're not a part of and may feel they need that space with other people who already "get it." Relatedly, a topic that seems abstract and academic to you may be very personal for them, which you should respect.

Holding these provisos in mind, we hope you find this toolkit helps you build and maintain stronger, better, safer, and more durable relationships within your professional community. We would love to hear from you about how this is going, and as fellow practitioners, we look forward to sharing in the fruits of your labor.

Finally, we thank and acknowledge the many people who taught us the principles in this document and provided feedback on earlier drafts: fellow attorneys, inclusion experts, academics, therapists, friends, and partners, too numerous to list.

BUILDING RESILIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Later sections of this toolkit will guide you in broaching tricky topics with people in your professional network and repairing harm when things go awry. But all that work depends on a foundation of connection, trust, and openness. Without that foundation, assuming good faith and working to resolve conflicts effectively is much more complicated. It may not even feel worth the effort to repair a relationship with someone you never took the time to know and appreciate in the first place.

Over time, lacking community and connection can lead to job dissatisfaction, burnout, and the loss of valuable talent in your organization and the profession. Feelings of exclusion, disconnection, or alienation lead to worse outcomes and higher turnover for people with marginalized or non-normative identities. While fostering connection doesn't require everyone to be friends outside work or go to happy hours, it is worth connecting on a meaningful level.

Therefore, our first advice is to slow down and be curious. That's not something our profession often encourages, but it's worth it. Take the time to get to know the people you work with, whether they are peers, supervisors, subordinates, or work at a different organization. Refrain from assuming any two people are the same or that the way you've always done things is the only way or the best way. Get to know each other's work-related preferences:

- Is this someone who values frequent, informal feedback, or is this someone who prefers to work independently and have more occasional structured check-ins?
- Is this someone who's better at processing information orally or in writing?
- Do they struggle to change tracks out of the blue, or do they welcome interruptions and opportunities for a break from what they're doing?
- Do they have obligations outside work that affect their availability?

When we don't have open conversations about these questions, we often default to norms created by and for abled, white, straight, neurotypical, middle-class or upper-class men living in traditional nuclear families. Those norms don't even work for all such men, let alone everyone else. So, ditch the 'default settings' and find the best collaboration for you and your team.

Consider stepping outside your comfort zone to build deeper connections beyond work preferences, especially with people who may not share your background or social identities.

- Do they have hobbies and interests outside work that are important to their identity?
- Are there things about their life experience that allow them to bring a different, unique, creative perspective to your work?
- Are there areas where they need or appreciate extra care and sensitivity because of their life experiences?
- Are there areas of the work you find challenging but that they love and are happy to step up for?
- Are there ways you can support them better or things you can learn from them?

Not all of these are appropriate questions to ask when you meet someone for the first time, but they're all worth getting to know over time—if the other person is comfortable sharing. Some people are less comfortable opening up, especially before you've built a solid foundation of trust. Others may have prior bad

experiences where they were encouraged to show up "authentically," but were then punished for showing up a little too authentically. So, respect other people's boundaries and never try to force them; that can worsen matters.

By investing the time and energy in building a cohesive community of true teammates, you can avoid many problems and tensions before they arise, and you'll have a better shot at repairing harm and bringing people back together when mistakes happen.

INCLUSIVE TEAMWORK AND MEETINGS

How an organization plans and executes teamwork and meetings will reflect and shape its culture in meaningful ways. While entire books have been written on these topics, the following articles and resources are designed to give a basic overview of strategies to ensure everyone has a meaningful seat at the table and produces the best results for your organization. Only some of these ideas will make sense in every situation, but we hope you find some helpful strategies here.

Planning Meetings

1. **Consider whether a meeting is necessary.** Everyone has experienced the frustration of rearranging their day to attend a meeting that could've been an email. This can be more challenging for people with caregiving responsibilities, medical needs, or those impacted by systemic factors that disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups. In addition, some neurodivergent people and introverts find unnecessary "face time" particularly draining. Your colleagues will show up to your meetings more engaged and excited if they know that meetings are reserved for situations where their collaboration, discussion, and engagement are genuinely beneficial.

2. **Invite the right stakeholders.** This goes both ways: avoid inviting people whose involvement is tangential at best, and avoid excluding people who are essential to the decisions you'll be making. Suppose a particular work group (e.g.,) will be integral to executing your choices. In that case, those work groups should be represented at the table so they can provide input and understand the rationale behind decisions that affect them.

3. **Draft a clear agenda and share it well in advance.** Many people experience anxiety from a lack of structure or clear expectations. In addition, some people prefer time to prepare and will appreciate the opportunity to gather their thoughts or draft written notes in advance. Ensure documents are accessible to people with disabilities (see Appendix A).

4. **Set a realistic duration.** Some people, especially those who are neurodivergent or have specific disabilities, budget their mental energy based on a meeting's expected duration and may struggle to remain present and engaged in discussions that go beyond the allotted time. Others may become frustrated and feel silenced if important agenda items are not addressed because previous topics exceed the scheduled time.

5. **Ensure accessibility.** All your meetings should be held in locations that are accessible to people with any mobility impairment or physical disability, regardless of whether you know that any attendees are disabled. Audio/video content should include captions, images should include "alt text" (text encoded with an image to describe it for visually impaired readers), and you should provide ample opportunity ahead of time for folks to request any other accommodations they may need. If you are already aware of a specific attendee's access, support, or accommodation needs, consider proactively communicating with them about how they will be supported.

6. **Be thoughtful about in-person, hybrid, or virtual.** Many people find the benefits of being in person irreplaceable: we can pick up on tone and body language more quickly, and even the tiniest bit of lag or audio degradation can make it harder for folks to converse naturally and fluidly. That said, allowing remote attendance can significantly benefit many, such as those with childcare or other obligations during the workday and those with specific disabilities. Some marginalized people may also benefit from remote attendance if they find the office experience stressful for identity-related reasons.

Starting the Meeting

1. If only some people already know each other, **do introductions**. Encourage folks to share their pronouns along with their name and other relevant information, but do not penalize people or put them on the spot if they don't—it is possible the person is transgender or non-binary and does not feel safe sharing their authentic pronouns in this space, or maybe a second-language speaker unfamiliar with the concept. Some may prefer when introductions do not include icebreaker-type prompts such as "share a fun fact about yourself," which can activate their social anxiety and distract them from hearing everyone's introduction. In contrast, others may find more information or context helpful. If you're using an icebreaker, consider adding the prompt to the agenda.

2. If this group meets regularly, **establish and periodically revisit norms**. These norms can include things about how the meeting is planned,
   - How do people contribute to the agenda?
   - Can people share written notes ahead of time if they find it helpful?

and how it is executed:
   - Who enforces the agenda?
   - How do we make sure all voices are heard?

Check in on a scheduled basis, quarterly or annually, to discuss how these norms work and whether they need to be updated.

3. If appropriate, begin the meeting with a **check in or acknowledge complex topics**. This will vary a lot depending on what kind of team you're dealing with, what kind of organization, and what's happening worldwide. Sometimes, it makes sense to begin meetings with a structured check in or acknowledge current events that may impact some folks in the room. Some people show up more effectively once they're allowed to recognize an "elephant in the room," while others may prefer to stay focused on the task at hand. Refrain from pressuring people to participate in this if they're uncomfortable, and never put a marginalized person on the spot to talk about their lived experience if they have yet to volunteer. Instead, consider making some space to acknowledge the challenges we may be facing.

4. **Be thoughtful about notetaking.** If this is a meeting where taking notes is necessary or appropriate, ask for volunteers or designate a note-taker. Make a point of distributing this labor equitably while also being mindful that it may not be a good task for some due to dyslexia or other barriers. Again, ensure the resulting document is accessible for people with disabilities.

Running the Meeting

1. **Stick to the agenda.** This is important for all the same reasons as setting an agenda. Relatedly, watch the time and try to table less critical details or tangents holding you back from getting through the full agenda.

2. **Watch the style and flow of the conversation.** Allow people to fully express a thought before interrupting to respond. If others interrupt, consider saying something like this: "I'd like to hear the rest of what Sarah had to say before we start responding." Men disproportionately interrupt women, so be especially attentive to gender dynamics. In addition, some neurodivergent people, people with social anxiety, second-language speakers, and others may find it difficult to participate when people are interrupting each other, even if it feels friendly and collaborative to you. Frequent interruption is part of the standard communication script in some cultures—"collaborative overlap"—while others find it rude, domineering, or exclusionary. This highlights the need to discuss your communication practices openly and nonjudgmentally.

3. **Avoid crosstalk.** When people exchange side comments while another person is speaking, it may show a lack of attention or respect for what they are saying. For people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have auditory processing challenges, it may also make it impossible for them to focus on what the primary speaker is saying.

4. Take proactive steps to **ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate.** You may perceive a conversation as flowing naturally, but others may be holding onto thoughts or becoming increasingly frustrated that they haven't had a chance to interject. Gendered expectations, power dynamics, cultural differences, language barriers, and neurological differences may all make it more challenging for some than others to interject during a conversation. If only some people are speaking up, consider pausing to explicitly ask if anyone else has anything to add or go around the room in order.

5. **Be thoughtful about addressing exclusionary behaviors.** Be watchful for any subtle acts of exclusion (also known as microaggressions) that may come up. These include things like racialized comments about people or places, misgendering, ableist language, cultural stereotyping, or normative assumptions about people's personal lives.

Many marginalized people report that they wish allies stood up and confronted problematic behavior more often so that they don't always carry the burden (and possible repercussions) of doing so. On the other hand, you may draw attention to someone who doesn't want it, make matters worse, or misrepresent a particular person or community's position. In other words, effective allyship sometimes means standing up and sometimes means sitting down. Suppose you need help approaching a situation like this as an ally. In that case, do so with curiosity and humility, don't assume you know everything, listen to what marginalized people tell you will help them, and avoid putting marginalized people on the spot.

If you are the one who was impacted directly, whether, when, and how to speak up is always your choice, and the later chapters in this toolkit may give you some ideas on how to broach these topics in a way that will land effectively on the listener. In saying that, we also recognize the burden is on others to do better, not on you to make sure you always frame your concerns in the most palatable way for others.

If you realize you made a mistake, it is usually best to acknowledge and correct it as quickly as possible. Belaboring the point or expressing guilt and regret in over-the-top ways can do more harm than good and shift the burden to marginalized people to comfort you. But staying silent can harm, too, when it sends the message that problematic behavior is acceptable.

Addressing these moments effectively is always situational and contextual, and learning how to do so is a lifelong journey. In the Resources section, we've included some content on microaggressions so that you can recognize them more quickly and have additional guidance on when and how you might address them.

6. **Give credit to the contributions of women, trans people, people of color, and anyone with a marginalized identity.** Almost every woman has a story of a meeting where she contributed an idea, but it was ignored until a man repeated it and received all the praise. Many people of color have had their concerns about racism dismissed as overblown until a white person paraphrases them. If you see these things happen, consider interjecting: "Interesting point, Brad. I think Nadia said something similar a few minutes ago—maybe she'd like to elaborate?"

7. **Take breaks.** If your meeting is long (more than 60-90 minutes) or exceeds its scheduled time, offer folks breaks to stretch, use the restroom, or decompress for a minute. Sitting still or remaining engaged for extended periods is more challenging for some bodies and brains than others.

8. **Honor people's needs.** Allow folks to do what they need to stay present and engaged during a meeting. For example, people may need to stand up and stretch (common for some physical disabilities) or a physical object to play with in their hands (common for some neurodiversity). Make it clear that people are encouraged to do what they need for themselves, and model it by doing what you need for yourself.

9. **Only go overtime with everyone's agreement.** If you cannot address your entire agenda within the allotted time, check in before the scheduled end time to see what people prefer: to power through, take a short break, or end the meeting and schedule a follow-up. If there isn't a consensus, end the meeting and schedule a follow-up.

10. **A special note on hybrid meetings.** Do everything possible to ensure virtual attendees are fully included. To the best of your ability, arrange the room in such a way that everyone in person can see the screen on which virtual attendees are displayed, virtual attendees can see everyone who's in person, and a microphone picks up everyone who's in person. Be mindful that the loss of body language and eye contact, and the addition of even minor lag times, can make it more difficult for virtual attendees to contribute, so pause the conversation to check in and ensure their voices are heard. If the virtual attendees also have less social or institutional power, barriers to participation may be compounded. If you feel challenged running effective hybrid meetings, consider going all-remote anytime some attendees are remote.

Wrapping up

1. **Do a final check-in around the room.** See if anyone has final thoughts or questions they'd like to share.

2. **Briefly summarize the meeting.** Review key decisions made, next steps agreed to, remaining action items, including who is tasked with carrying out action items and timing, etc., to make sure everyone is on the same page and that the intentions of the meeting are thoroughly carried out.

3. **Thank everyone for their time and contributions and invite them to reach out if they have follow-up thoughts or questions.** Some people prefer time to think and process, may have their best ideas hours or days later, or they may not have felt comfortable speaking up at the meeting. Those people should not feel they "missed their chance" to be part of the process.

After a Meeting

1. **Send meeting notes.** If helpful and appropriate, send notes to memorialize decisions and action steps.

2. **Check in.** If anyone was experiencing barriers to participation or identity-based harms, consider reaching out privately to ask about their experience in the meeting and whether they have anything they'd like to share. Ensure your tone and approach convey that you intend to offer support and foster inclusivity, not to single them out or apply undue pressure. Be mindful of power dynamics or other factors that may affect this conversation.

3. **Address harmful behavior.** If you think anyone is creating barriers to participation or inclusion (intentionally or not), consider reaching out to have a kind but direct conversation with them. See the section above addressing exclusionary behavior and the other sections of this toolkit for some factors to consider. If someone meant well, they ought to be receptive to constructive feedback, but it may need to be framed carefully to be effective.

If you realize you created barriers or acted inappropriately, consider reaching out privately to the affected person or the entire group to acknowledge and take accountability for your mistake. If that harm was directed at a specific person, it is usually best to speak with them privately first so you can handle the situation in the way they would find most helpful.

We hope these guidelines help you organize teams and meetings where everyone is heard and respected. Of course, every team, organization, and meeting is different, so only some of these guidelines apply all the time. Use your judgment and seek input from others when you're unsure. Focus on progress, openness, and accountability, not perfection.

Key Takeaways

- Communicate at every stage—before, during, and after—to ensure everyone can fully contribute.
- Provide structure (i.e., agendas and time limits)
- Watch to ensure everyone is included in the conversation and find ways to make space for quieter people without putting them on the spot.

DISCUSSING DIFFICULT TOPICS

When faced with participating in a difficult conversation, our inner experiences vary. Some may become energized by the opportunity to set others straight and emerge as the winner. Some may believe others will soon agree if they know what we know. We may feel dread or anxiety. Some of us prefer to avoid difficult conversations, perhaps even tasking someone else with carrying the "bad news." Do any of these internal states sound familiar?

Difficult conversations can be sources of continuous communication and understanding, just like the headwaters of rivers and streams. Navigating difficult conversations benefits all relationships, including personal, organizational, and larger communities. So, how can we become more willing and skillful?

Why Difficult Conversations are Necessary for Relational Vitality.
As we strive for diversity, equity, and inclusion in our organizations and community systems, we intend to be in relationships with people with life experiences, learning, knowledge, perceptions, viewpoints, and wisdom that are more varied than has historically been included. What is "true," "common," or "acceptable" for participants in a diverse group will increasingly expand and diverge. For each member to authentically contribute, conversations that feel initially awkward and tense are critical to facilitate understanding, trust, and continued engagement.

What are we talking about? Difficult Conversations Defined.
A "difficult conversation" can be defined as anything that is hard to talk about[i] or is a high-stakes conversation characterized by intense emotions, personal blind spots, and mistaken assumptions.[ii] Navigating difficult conversations requires preparation, self-awareness, practice, and humility. It's like running the rapids instead of paddling in open water.[iii] Preparation is needed; getting wet, sometimes soaked, is likely even with intentional preparation.

How do We Skillfully Engage? Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

Assess Personal Readiness and the Basics
The acronym HALT is a starting point for investigating personal readiness. Inner states of Hunger, Anger, Loneliness or Tiredness are stop signs. Before engaging in a difficult conversation, prudently prepare by feeling clear-headed, balanced and well-resourced.

Beyond the essential internal checklist, consider any broader impediments to success: Is this the right time and person?

Shift into a Learning Mindset without Reactivity
Preparation also includes curiosity about what happened (observations) that stimulated reactions, including disruptive feelings. Shifting from an internal narrative about what happened into a curious investigation of what was objectively observable during the exchange may help the shift into a "learning stance" and grow some neutrality, including awareness of the possibilities of gaps in understanding or mistaken intentions.[iv] Avoid "coloring in" the intent of others with your adverse inferences. Always start with the intention of giving others the benefit of the doubt.

Identify the Unmet Needs and Values Behind the Reactions
Situations that stimulate negative feelings such as anger, outrage, sadness, disappointment, or hopelessness are signs that universal needs and values have not been met.[v] In preparation, identify unmet needs below the disrupt-

ing feeling, such as annoyance. Is a need to be included unmet? How about respect, appreciation or understanding? Our eddies of emotions help direct awareness to the undercurrent of unmet values and needs. Also, consider the needs behind the desire to be correct. Cultivating awareness of what is happening beneath our surfaces helps us stay centered as the conversation intensifies.

Use Self-Empathy to Generate Understanding and Acceptance of Reactions
Beyond identifying feelings and unmet needs, cultivating empathy for ourselves is essential. From prior experiences, self-identify when you felt less connected with others during conversations and what may have been a cause – defending a position, judging or diagnosing others. We can identify our unpleasant or disruptive emotions and appreciate the cues about unmet needs. Acknowledging that we care about inclusion and respect as central to our core values can help us overcome the inconvenience of feeling annoyed or exasperated. We connect to what is deeply important, expanding our empathy for our whole selves, feeling creatures who also think.[vi]

Understanding What's at Stake—Our Identity
The intensity of feelings in the presence of difficult conversations is related not just to our experience of the participants; difficult conversations can disrupt what we believe about ourselves. Such discussions bring forward core identity questions: Am I competent? Am I safe? Do I belong? Am I perceived as trustworthy? Before engaging, explore the connection between fear and core vulnerabilities. Fear of embarrassment may be connected to internal doubts about competency. Fear of dismissiveness or minimization can relate to doubts about belonging and value. Identify judgments and recurring assumptions that we are carrying about ourselves. Considering how we want to be seen or judged by others indicates identity vulnerabilities. Reframe all-or-nothing thinking by adopting the "And" framework: I have competencies and missed something important. I do belong, and I experience events differently from most people. I am valuable, and I am not perfect. I am lovable, and I have contributed to the problem. Gentleness and humility support the process of "complexifying" our identities.[vii]

Humanizing Participants—Their Identities
Before engaging, assessing what other potential participants may be feeling, how those feelings relate to their unmet needs and values, and how their identities may be implicated is valuable. Stretch your imagination to see with their eyes and hear with their ears. Set up two chairs, sit in one chair, summarize your observations, feelings, and needs, then switch chairs and speak from their perspective.[viii] In this exercise, we challenge ourselves to suspend our judgments and hold our common humanity as the singular truth. Like us, they want to be valued, belong, and be trusted.

"Empathy is a journey, not a destination."[ix] Empathy involves a shift from observing how someone seems on the outside to imagining what it may feel like on the inside, looking at the world through another's eyes. Authentically trying to understand is the closest we can get—and this effort sends a positive message.

Initiating the Difficult Conversation

Having prepared ourselves by (1) resourcing, (2) inquiring what's at stake, and (3) humanizing other participants, the next step is initiating the difficult conversation. As we push off, knowing there may be rapids ahead, we focus on the following three purposes that can make a difficult conversation more beneficial: (1) learning more about others' perspectives, feelings, needs, intentions, contributions, ideas, preferences; (2) expressing our feelings and needs; (3) discovering creative approaches that work for everyone.[x]

Initiate with the "Third Story"

Every difficult conversation includes what may be initially perceived as the space between us, an invisible "third story." Consider initiating the discussion with the third story, the one a keen and neutral observer such as a mediator or mutual friend would describe: the differences between the various perspectives without judgment. This can include some guesses without presumption: "My sense is that you and I see the situation of … differently. I think … should be done this way, and I'm guessing you think … is a better strategy. I'm feeling concerned, and maybe you are, too. I'd like to better understand your perspectives and share my own. Would you be willing to set aside forty-five minutes for a discussion when it works for you?" Notice a few things about this opening: (1) invitation to learn; (2) specific requests to set aside time; (3) inviting a joint decision-making process about agreeing to a good time; (4) limiting the effort to a manageable time frame.

Use Active Listening to Learn

Listening well is our superpower to transform a stale conflict into a generative conversation. Listening from a place anchored securely in curiosity with an authentic intention to gain understanding and learn (not to "win a fight") is the quality of listening that transforms and connects. Be fully present. Ask questions to deepen understanding of observations, feelings, needs, judgments and ideas:

- Can you say a little more about how you see things?
- What information do you have that maybe I don't?
- What impact have my actions had?
- Can you say more about why you think this is my fault?
- Were you reacting to something that I did?
- How are you feeling about all of this?
- Are you willing to say more about why this is important to you?

Paraphrase back. Ask if there's more to understand and if anything needs to be included. Remember the first purpose of the conversation: to learn.

Managing Our Sympathetic Nervous System During the Conversation

This kind of listening takes work. It likely will activate our sympathetic nervous system, and we can begin to feel reactive. The main thing is to be mindful of our nervous system. We can notice the rise of activation and employ our personal best calming strategies:

- Slowing our breathing (especially the exhalation)
- Setting our feet on the floor
- Noticing what parts of our bodies are comfortable
- Taking a sip of water and enjoying the coolness
- Scanning the room for pleasant colors or objects
- Speaking/naming the discomfort
- Asking to take a little break

To summarize, recognizing activation, riding the waves, and supporting deactivation are the three components of being mindful of our nervous systems. Feeling activated is entirely natural. The goal is to become more adept at riding the waves. Awareness lends the ability to steer during activation. Creating pauses and using them to ground and lower activation is the interplay. With practice, we trust our growing ability to hear someone else without expecting agreement and without losing our sense that we can also be heard and understood.

Recognize the Limitations of Email and Texting

Email and texting should be used wisely, as they escalate conflict when not used thoughtfully.[xi] Email and texting can be efficient in confirming simple matters such as the "what," the "when," and the "where." However, neither mode is dialogue— they are serial monologues without tone of voice, facial expression, or body language. We can't resolve an email conflict with more emails. Better to pick up the phone and call or schedule a virtual or in-person meeting. Before that call or meeting, spend a little time humanizing the participant, since there's a risk of losing a sense of shared humanity and belief in the possibility of common purposes during email conflicts.

On the other hand, some people—especially some neurodivergent people—prefer written communication. It is vital for those people to feel confident that they have expressed all their thoughts on the topic and that they have done so effectively. If written communication is preferred, one approach is to write out thoughts but not send them to the other person. Instead, ask for a time to talk "live," using written comments as notes to consult during the conversation. This can reap the benefits of a direct discussion within a framework for being complete and organized. An alternative option is to send the written thoughts and preface them with an invitation to discuss them face-to-face or over the phone once the other person has had a chance to digest them. When receiving this communication, avoid reacting defensively to detailed written comments. Instead, interpret them as a sign that the other person wants to ensure they are thorough and effective. In response, communicate appreciation for the material to think about and request a time for a discussion.

Though written communication can be helpful or necessary up to a point, avoid getting trapped in an endless email back-and-forth that could be resolved with a meeting or phone call.

Taking a Turn—Start with What Matters Most

Having created some goodwill by listening with the intention of learning, we must also speak our truths. Start with what matters most, framed as observations, feelings, needs and specific requests.

Here's an example:

"When you raised your voice and said 'you blew it,' I was surprised and upset. I put several hours of work into preparing to participate in the meeting and wanted to benefit the client. I need to understand why my participation did not meet your expectations so I can learn. I also need a calmer environment to process your input."

"Rather than reacting at the moment and expressing your concerns, would you be willing to schedule a time for a meeting, so we are calm and ready for such a discussion?"

"Can we schedule a first meeting now? In our meeting, I would appreciate it if you would describe the main 3 things you think I should have done or said differently. Would you also be willing to identify some examples you thought helpful?"

Identify and Value Multiple Strategies

Most disagreements concern attachments to competing strategies. Often, our values are the same. Awareness that a preferred strategy is not necessarily the only strategy and that various methods can be effective can be a helpful mindset. Guiding the difficult conversation into a mutual problem-solving dialogue where brainstorming, learning, commitment to communicating even during difficulty, gaining understanding, deepening connections, and acknowledging progress are our aspirations during difficult conversations. When the conversation(s) falls short, there is still learning, practice, perhaps some goodwill, and an opportunity to request a "do-over."

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> *We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.*
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> — Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider

Honor and Celebrate Courage and Engagement

Try to be aware and "right-size" any fear as much as possible. Difficult conversations are often scary. Admit your fears to yourself, try to understand what is at the root of the fear—what's at stake—and employ self-empathy strategies to create awareness and approach the conversation with curiosity. Maybe it won't be as bad as your worst expectations? Even if awful, perhaps you will learn.

Our intention with this work is to all engage in difficult conversations, trying our best and celebrating the courage it takes to stay engaged together. Please let us know how it goes!

Key Takeaways

- Difficult conversations deepen understanding if done skillfully.
- Skillfulness during difficult conversations requires preparation.
- Maintaining a learning mindset is critical.
- Honor and celebrate the commitment to engagement.

Sources

[i] Stone, D., Patton, B., and Heen, S., Difficult Conversations, 1999, 2010 10th anniversary ed.

[ii] Sofer, Oren J., Say What You Mean, a mindful approach to nonviolent communication.

[iii] Id., Ch 13, running the rapids.

[iv] Difficult Conversations, Ch. 2, "Stop Arguing About Who's Right: Explore Each Other's Stories."

[v] NVC Academy, Feelings and Needs Reference Guide, https://nvcacademy.com/media/NVCA/learning-tools/NVCA-feelings-needs.pdf.

[vi] Bolte Taylor, J., My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey

[vii] Difficult Conversations, Ch. 6, "Ground Your Identity: Ask Your Self What's at Stake."

[viii] Hidden Brain podcast, US 2.0, "Win Hearts, Then Minds" with Robb Willer.

[ix] Difficult Conversations, Ch. 9, "Learning: Listen from the Inside Out."

[x] Difficult Conversations, Ch. 7, "What's Your Purpose? When to Raise It and When to Let Go."
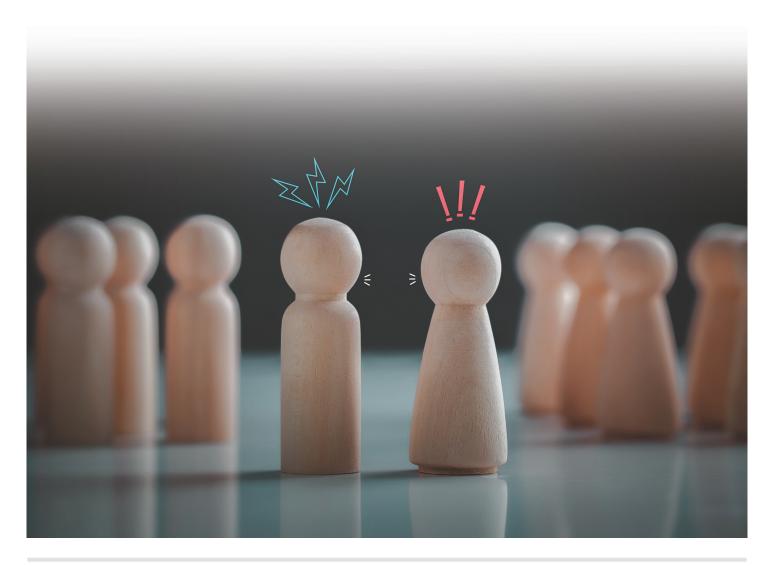
[xi] Difficult Conversations, "Ten Questions People Ask about Difficult Conversations."

RESTORING DAMAGED RELATIONSHIPS

In our fast-paced world filled with constant communication, it's easy to forget the profound impact that our interactions can have on others. Whether a casual conversation with a friend or a serious discussion with a colleague, how we communicate can build or damage relationships. The restorative practice encourages positive relationships, repairs relationships when they have been harmed, and creates a professional community based on cooperation, trust, and respect.

Restorative communication is grounded in principles of empathy, respect, and understanding. It seeks to foster meaningful connections and constructively address conflicts. Unlike traditional forms of communication that may focus on blame or criticism, restorative communication aims to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation.

At the heart of restorative communication is the belief that all parties involved have inherent worth and dignity. It emphasizes active listening and the willingness to acknowledge and take responsibility for one's actions. By creating a safe space for open and honest dialogue, restorative communication enables individuals to express their feelings, needs, and concerns without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Key Principles of Restorative Communication

Empathy: Empathy lies at the core of restorative communication. It involves actively listening to the other person's perspective, acknowledging their emotions, and demonstrating genuine concern for their well-being. By showing empathy, individuals can create a sense of connection and understanding, laying the foundation for meaningful dialogue.

Accountability: Restorative communication encourages individuals to take responsibility for their words and actions. Rather than deflecting blame or making excuses, it involves owning up to mistakes and demonstrating a willingness to make amends. Accountability is essential for building trust and repairing damaged relationships.

Collaboration: Restorative communication is inherently collaborative, seeking solutions that benefit all parties. Instead of approaching conversations with a win-lose mentality, it encourages individuals to explore mutually satisfactory outcomes through dialogue and negotiation. By working together, individuals can find creative solutions to complex problems.

Practicing Inclusivity in Restorative Processes

Power and identity dynamics play an important and often unacknowledged role in restorative processes. Reflection on and awareness of these dynamics are critical components of effective restorative communication practice.

Power dynamics can significantly influence how conflicts unfold and are resolved in group and one-on-one settings. In group contexts, individuals in positions of authority or those perceived as having more influence may unintentionally overshadow others' perspectives, making it challenging for all voices to be equally represented. In one-on-one interactions, power imbalances can subtly shape the conversation, impacting everyone's comfort in expressing vulnerability and taking responsibility. When one person holds authority, it may pressure the other to agree or conform, hindering open dialogue. By acknowledging and balancing power dynamics, restorative practices promote fairness, empower all participants to engage honestly, and ensure that solutions reflect the needs and perspectives of everyone involved, not just those with greater authority or influence.

Additionally, effective restorative practices acknowledge that cultural norms influence how people communicate, express emotions, and respond to conflict. Culturally responsive restorative practices recognize and honor the diverse cultural backgrounds and values that individuals bring into a restorative setting. By incorporating cultural awareness and sensitivity, facilitators and individuals can create a more inclusive environment that respects each participant's identity and lived experiences. This involves learning about different cultural communication styles, being aware of potential biases, and adapting practices to meet the group's needs. Culturally responsive approaches enhance trust and engagement and empower individuals to bring their whole selves into the process, enriching the restorative experience and fostering genuine understanding across cultural lines.

Applying Restorative Practices in a Group Setting

Repairing ruptures in group dynamics is essential to maintaining cohesion and trust. Whether caused by misunderstandings, disagreements, or interpersonal conflicts, addressing and resolving issues promptly can prevent them from escalating and negatively impacting group dynamics. In a group context, the dynamics between multiple individuals must be carefully navigated to ensure everyone feels heard, valued, and respected.

Restorative circles

Restorative circles are an essential part of the restorative communication process. These circles bring together the individuals involved in the conflict and other relevant stakeholders to engage in open dialogue and share their experi-

ences and perspectives. Through active listening and empathy, participants gain a deeper understanding of the conflict's impact on each other.

A restorative circle is a space for people to come together and discuss a conflict or problem. Restorative circles resolve disputes through dialogue, which helps people learn from each other and understand each other's perspectives. This is helpful for both sides of the conflict because it allows them to know why they feel the way they do about what happened.

How to Facilitate a Restorative Circle

Participants sit in chairs of equal height arranged in a circle and free of barriers like tables or desks between them, or in other arrangements that feel equitable and inclusive if disabilities or features of the physical space require something different. A facilitator encourages participants to collaboratively identify ways to repair the harm caused by the conflict. This may involve apologies, restitution, or specific actions to rebuild trust and relationships within the group.

In a restorative circle, five themes are employed by the facilitator to support dialogue and problem-solving.

Step 1. What's happened?

Everyone has a different perspective on any given experience or issue. Let everyone express how they experienced what has happened or is happening. Acknowledging harm and recognizing the impact of words or actions that have caused damage or discord within the group is the first step toward repair.

Step 2. Thoughts and Feelings

Thoughts influence Feelings. Invite people to express what they were/are thinking and how they were/are feeling due to these thoughts.

Step 3. Impact and Harm

Conflict and wrongdoing impact people and cause harm; this harm needs to be repaired. Invite each in turn to consider who has been or is being harmed/affected by the situation/event and how. Encourage accountability and responsibility. Offering sincere apologies and taking responsibility for one's actions demonstrates humility and a commitment to restoring trust and harmony.

Step 4. What do People Want?

In the event of harm, everyone involved will have different needs. Invite each in turn to consider what they need now to repair harm/solve the problem, to feel better, and to move on. Taking concrete steps to make amends and rebuild relationships is essential for moving forward positively and rebuilding trust.

Step 5. The Way Forward

Those harmed/affected need to find ways forward for themselves. Invite each in turn to consider how each of the expressed needs can be met, what support they might need to do this, and how they will do things differently. Reflecting on the underlying causes of conflicts and identifying strategies for preventing similar issues in the future promotes continuous learning and improvement within the group.

Best Practices to Support a Culture of Repair

To successfully apply the restorative communication themes outlined above, groups should have best practices to support a culture of repair. Restorative communication is about addressing conflicts after they occur and fostering a culture that prevents conflicts from escalating. By encouraging open exchange, empathy, and respect, restorative communication creates an environment where conflicts are less likely to occur.

Establishing Norms and Guidelines

Setting clear expectations for communication and behavior within the group creates a supportive framework for restorative practices and helps to reduce the opportunity for conflicts to occur.

Facilitated Dialogue

Using trained facilitators to guide group discussions and ensure all voices are heard can help navigate complex conflicts and promote understanding. Knowing your limits as a facilitator is essential for a leader. If you need help with facilitating restorative circles or the conflict involves you personally, consider bringing in an outside expert to assist.

Regular Check-ins and Feedback

Creating opportunities for regular check-ins and feedback sessions allows group members to address concerns proactively and prevent issues from escalating.

Celebrating Successes

Recognizing and celebrating achievements and milestones within the group reinforces positive behavior and strengthens group cohesion.

Applying Restorative Practices in a 1:1 Setting

When conflict arises between individual members of a community, their ability (or inability) to resolve those conflicts can significantly impact the broader community or group. Unlike traditional forms of communication that often prioritize blame or punishment, restorative communication between individuals emphasizes dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect.

In this intimate setting, individuals are encouraged to engage in open and honest conversations, explore the impact of their actions, acknowledge harm, and work towards repairing relationships and restoring trust. Through this process, participants can cultivate deeper connections, resolve conflicts constructively, and ultimately promote personal growth and reconciliation.

How to Facilitate a Restorative Conversation with an Individual

Here are six steps you can take to facilitate a restorative conversation. Remember, these are just suggestions. The most important thing is to convey compassion and authenticity to the other person.

Step 1. Open the lines of communication. (At the right time and in the right place).
Let the person know you will listen to them and their perspectives, then do just that. This is not the time for advice, lectures, or judgment.
Say: "How's it going? I wanted to talk with you about _____ ."

Step 2. Allow them to explain the situation from their perspective.
Try to see the situation from their point of view. Remember that people may often feel very differently about the same event.

Example Questions:
- "What happened?"
- "Can you tell me more about _____ ."
- "What were you thinking at the time?"

- "What were you feeling?"
- Actively listen and then summarize what you have heard. "so, what you are telling me is……………………. Do I have that right?"

Step 3. Identify what led up to the incident and any root causes.

Asking about what happened before or what else may have affected the person's behavior can help the person gain a greater understanding of the situation.

Example Questions:
- "It sounds like you felt _____ . What made you feel that way?"
- "What happened before it started?"
- "What else do you think was going on with _____ ?"
- "Has this happened before?"

Step 4. Identify the impact.

Help the person see how their behavior affected you or those around them. They may need help understanding consequences they can't see, such as hurt feelings.

Example Questions:
- "What have you thought about since?"
- "Who else do you think has been affected/upset/ harmed by your actions? How?"
- "When I heard/saw _____, I felt _____because I _____."
- "What role do you think you played in this situation?"
- "How do you feel now?"

Step 5. Address needs and repair harm.

Help the person decide how to make things better or solve the problem. Lead them to a resolution they can feel good about, even if it is a consequence.

Example Questions:
- "What can I do to make things better?"
- "If you were _____, what do you think you would need?"
- "What do you need to help you do that?"
- "What would you like to see happen?"
- "What could you do differently next time?"

Step 6. Create an agreement.

This may be a verbal agreement, a checklist, or even a written letter or contract. Remember to follow through on your promises.

Example Dialogue:
- "Based on our talk, I heard that you will _____. I will also _____."
- "Can we agree on this plan?"
- "I'm going to check on you in a while to see how things are going."
- "Thank you for sharing with me! I'm so happy we can work together to make things better!"

Best Practices to Support a Restorative Conversation

Active Listening

Pay close attention to the other person's words, tone, and body language. Paraphrase what they've said to ensure understanding and demonstrate that you're fully engaged in the conversation.

Expressing Emotions

Share your feelings openly and honestly, using "I" statements to take ownership of your emotions. Avoid blaming or criticizing the other person, focusing instead on how their actions have affected you.

Seeking Understanding

Ask open-ended questions to gain insight into the other person's perspective. Show genuine curiosity and empathy, demonstrating a desire to understand their thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

Brainstorming Solutions

Collaborate with the other person to generate ideas for resolving the issue. Be open to compromise and flexible in exploring different options until you find a mutually satisfactory solution.

Offering Apologies and Forgiveness

If you've contributed to the conflict, apologize sincerely and take steps to make amends. Likewise, be willing to forgive the other person and move forward with a renewed commitment to communication and understanding.

Conclusion

Restorative communication and repair can transform group dynamics by fostering empathy, understanding, and accountability. By cultivating a culture of open dialogue, collective responsibility, and continuous learning, groups can navigate conflicts and challenges more effectively, leading to greater cohesion, resilience, and collaboration. Whether in professional settings, community organizations, or social groups, practicing restorative communication and repair can create environments where individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute positively to shared goals and objectives.

Five Key Takeaways of Restorative Communication

- Empathy and Accountability as Foundations: Restorative communication builds on empathy and accountability, encouraging individuals to understand each other's perspectives and take responsibility for their actions. This approach fosters mutual respect, trust, and relationship-building, even in professional conflicts.
- Conflict as an Opportunity for Growth: Rather than seeing conflict as purely negative, restorative practices view it as an opportunity to strengthen bonds through constructive problem-solving, active listening, and mutual support, which is essential for building a cohesive community.
- Restorative Circles for Group Healing: Restorative circles provide a structured approach to resolving group conflicts. By allowing all voices to be heard, these circles promote understanding and collective problem-solving, leading to meaningful resolutions and rebuilding trust.
- Role of Facilitators in Conflict Resolution: Skilled facilitators are crucial in restorative practices, especially in complex or high-stakes conflicts and when there is a significant power imbalance among the parties. A facilitator can guide discussions, ensuring that all perspectives are represented, emotions are managed constructively, and the group remains focused on finding a collaborative solution.

- Preventive Culture through Best Practices: Establishing norms, regular check-ins, and celebrating group achievements are best practices that help prevent conflicts from escalating. A culture that values open dialogue and respect reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and fosters a positive, resilient community.

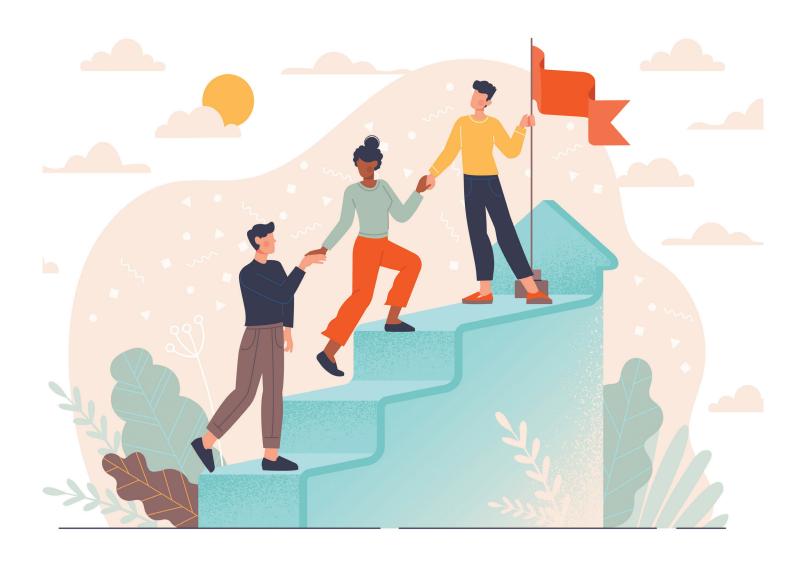## Sources and Further Reading

This section relies on principles taught in the following books:

Schwarz, Roger. The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches. Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Zehr, Howard. The Little Book of Restorative Justice. Good Books, 2002.

Rosenberg, Marshall B. Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life. PuddleDancer Press, 2003.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

We sincerely thank you for taking the time to read this toolkit, and we hope it helps you foster a stronger, more resilient community around you.

Changing how we've always done things can be challenging, and it's unlikely to happen overnight or go perfectly every time. We encourage you to emphasize progress over perfection, celebrate your successes, and strive to improve.

To paraphrase a quote by the Black novelist, poet, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou: We do our best until we know better. Then, when we know better, we do better.

In the same spirit, we welcome you to contact our Council if you have feedback on this toolkit and want to share ways that it worked—or didn't—for you or your organization. We intend to build out this toolkit with more resources over time, including shorter summaries and "practice pointers" aimed at specific situations, and we would welcome your ideas for future versions of this toolkit or related projects.

We will build a healthier, more supportive, and more cohesive profession—and world—one step at a time. We are excited to have you with us on that journey.

RESOURCES
Online Materials

Courageous Conversations toolkit from the Social Transformation Project: http://stproject.org/wp-content/uploads/toolkit-files/courageous-conversations-toolkit.pdf

Leadership Learned Podcast (from Inspirational Development Group) - How to Have Effective Conversations: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-have-effective-courageous-conversations-leadership/

"Inclusive Leadership: The Power of Workplace Diversity," a course by Dr. Brenda J. Allen: https://www.coursera.org/learn/inclusiveleadership

28 microaggression examples at work & in everyday life: https://powertofly.com/up/microaggression-examples

Say What? Microaggressions, Your Health and What To Do About Them, https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2024/05/427501/say-what-microaggressions-your-health-and-what-do-about-them

Books

"So You Want to Talk About Race" by Ijeoma Oluo

"We Can't Talk About That at Work! How to Talk About Race, Religion, Politics, and Other Polarizing Topics" by Mary-Frances Winters

"Say the Right Thing: How to Talk About Identity, Diversity, and Justice" by Kenji Yoshino and David Glasgow

"Inclusive Conversations: Fostering Equity, Empathy, and Belonging across Differences" by Mary-Frances Winters

"Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know" by Adam Grant

"Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally" by Emily Ladau

"How to be an Inclusive Leader: Your Role in Creating Cultures of Belonging Where Everyone Can Thrive," by Jennifer Brown

"Subtle Acts of Exclusion" by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran

"How to be an Anti-Racist" by Ibram X. Kendi

"White Fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism," by Robin DiAngelo

Schwarz, Roger. The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches. Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Zehr, Howard. The Little Book of Restorative Justice. Good Books, 2002.

Rosenberg, Marshall B. Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life. PuddleDancer Press, 2003.

APPENDIX A: CBA/DBA ACCESSIBLE PRINT & DIGITAL MATERIALS QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Please use the following accessibility tips when creating materials that will be printed and physically posted, digitized and uploaded to web pages, or distributed using email:

Filenames

- When saving a document, use a meaningful filename, e.g. "2025 Fundraising Event Flyer".
- If recycling another person's document, check the document settings and change the previous description and author to the current one.

Text

- Use basic, simple fonts (e.g Calibri, San Serif, Arial, or Helvetica).
- Use a font size of 12 or larger.
- Use text instead of an image of text.
- Use UPPERCASE, bold, and italic text sparingly.

Structure

- Create structure using Styles (in Word) or Reading Order (in Adobe Acrobat).
- Every document has one Heading 1 – The Title.
- Main ideas are Heading Level 2, and sub ideas are Heading Level 3.
- Number lists with the formatting tool – not manual numbering.
- Create bullet lists with the bullet formatting tool – not manually.
- Ensure the reading order in a .PDF accurately matches the visual order.
- Use tables for data, not for page layout.

Colors

- Use high-contrast colors between text and background. (e.g. black/white)
- Represent the meaning and significance in text form when colors convey important information
- Download a "color contrast analyzer" from the web when in doubt.