

## 9 Tips for Initiating Difficult Conversations Across Difference

1. **Be open to learning about others' viewpoints, particularly when you don't understand and/or you disagree with them.** The goal of courageous dialogue isn't winning a debate or persuading others. It's about learning to see and validate another's viewpoint, while better understanding and validating your own. It's about learning, not winning.
2. **Better understand and view hard issues along a continuum, from the individual to the systemic and group level.** Do not do one at the expense of the other. An individual may not have experienced discrimination, but that does not mean that discrimination does not exist for another group. At the same time, don't expect one person to represent their entire group identity.
3. **Learn to get more comfortable being uncomfortable and confused.** Expect the conversations to be messy at times and for you or others to be misunderstood. Do not require that people make the discussion comfortable for you. When it starts to get uncomfortable, get curious about why you might feel that way and/or have the need to defend yourself. If it gets heated, catch your breath, take a few seconds...or minutes...to notice and reflect. If the conversation takes an awkward turn, don't cut and run. When the road gets rough, just breathe, apologize if needed, and continue the dialogue. Remember that systemic inequality is NOT your or anyone's personal fault AND you are responsible for engaging and noticing how systemic inequities impact how people hear you and how you hear others.
4. **Listen, learn, and experience before rushing to action.** You can't fix what you don't understand. Stay in the discomfort of not knowing, not being sure of what to do next. While this place can be awkward and unsettling, it is also the zone where transformative learning happens. Stay with it. Do not misconstrue listening and learning with losing your voice. Speak up. Do not be silent, especially engage people from your own INSIDER group.
5. **Learn to explore and navigate sameness and difference simultaneously.** If you normally connect with people around commonalities, lean into differences. Between all of us, there are areas of sameness and areas of difference. Explore both of these, not one at the expense of the other. While we may often desire to connect on commonality, others may often yearn to have their differences seen or acknowledged.
6. **For INSIDERS, don't expect OUTSIDERS to be your educator, coach or mentor.** If you don't know much about an inclusion or equity issue, learn. And don't assume you have to just learn from OUTSIDERS. Learn by educating yourself and with others in your

INSIDER group. Be a resource for one another. Doing your own work releases OUTSIDERS from being the exclusive resource for you and other INSIDERS.

7. **For OUTSIDERS, notice when you start to question the genuineness and authenticity of an INSIDER colleague who is sharing some of their confusion about an issue with you.** Ask yourself how your past experience with other INSIDERS may be impacting how you are hearing this colleague right now: How you are attributing or interpreting their intent based on your past experience with other INSIDERS?
8. **Notice the gap between your INTENT and its IMPACT on others.** While your intention may be good, realize that your impact is often quite different. When that happens, try not to defend your intent or insist that people give you credit for your “good” intentions. Rather, explore how what you have done or said has impacted others. These are often ripe moments for breakthrough learning.

Expect to make mistakes repeatedly in your learning and in your partnerships across difference. When they happen, lean in and listen more. Ask questions while stating and talking about what is happening for you. When listening, do not lose your voice. A true learning conversation needs more than one voice.

9. **Through it all, do not go it alone.** Make sure you use your support group. Establish one for yourself if you don't have one readily available. Make sure your support includes people from your own group. A support group can be one person or a few but the common denominator is they are willing to both support and challenge you. Their support/challenge helps you better lean into the difficult learning moments where real growth happens.