

PREPARING FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

a guide to promoting constructive dialogue



College Committee for Inclusive Excellence (CCIE)

Before going into the conversation, ask yourself some questions:

1. What is my purpose for having the conversation? What do I hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome? What would be an acceptable, even if not ideal, outcome? Enter conversations with a supportive purpose, and try to avoid language that is excessively critical or condescending.
2. What assumptions am I making about this person's intentions? I may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalized, but need to be cautious about assuming their intention. Others may be sharing my feelings, regardless of how I perceive their privilege. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.
3. What "buttons" of mine are likely to be pushed? What personal or collective history is being triggered? I may still have the conversation, but I'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with me.
4. How is my attitude toward the conversation influencing my perception of it? If I think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If I truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case.
5. Who do I *think* is the opponent? What might they be thinking about this situation? What are their needs and fears? What solution do I think they would suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as a partner.
6. What are my needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be?
7. How might you have contributed to the problem? How have they? Put aside biases you might have. When you have a prejudice, you will see what you expect, rather than what is there. *(adapted from Judy Ringer)*

Strategies to Help Focus When Emotionally Invested in a Topic

Step 1: Listen. Focus on what the other person is trying to say, not what you want to say.

Step 2: Reiterate. **Restate what I heard.** Reflect on what I have heard as opposed to what I think you may have heard. Repeating what I have heard limits miscommunication and misinformation.

Step 3: Contemplate. **Count to 10** before responding. Think about my response and use the time to compose what I want to say. Taking time to think about my responses helps move me away from immediate emotional responses that can potentially derail the conversation.

Step 4: Respire. **Take a breath** to check in with myself and settle my thoughts and emotions.

Step 5: Communicate. Speak with compassion and thoughtfulness; **speak as I want to be spoken to**, assuming good intentions and seeking understanding. When I disagree with someone, **focus on the statement rather than the person** who said it. *(adapted from Tolerance.org)*