

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

CENTER FOR
DIALOGUE &
CIVIC ACTION

STETSON UNIVERSITY

Conflict is not the problem.

Avoidance, shame, and
mismanagement are the
problem.

Conflict Myths:

Conflict means something has gone wrong

Healthy relationships don't have conflict

Conflict is something to “fix” or “win”

Conflict Reframes:

Conflict is natural and normal in human relationships.

Conflict is a catalyst for change.

**Conflict can be transformative,
not just resolvable.**

Conflict Resolution Asks:

“How do we end this disagreement?”

Conflict Management Asks:

“How do we keep this from blowing up?”

Conflict Transformation Asks:

“What is this conflict revealing about unmet needs, power, values, or relationships—and how might we grow through it?”

Source material from John Paul Lederach.

Practical Skills: One on One and Informal Interactions

Core commitment:

Stay relationally curious,
even when you disagree.

What If Something Goes Wrong...

Try to be curious rather than combative.

First step:

Repeat back to the person, in their own words, what they said.

Then ask: Did I understand you correctly?

Next Let's Ask Some Clarifying Questions

What makes you say that?

Why is that important to you?

Can you say more about what you mean?

Why do you think that is?

Have you always felt that way?

Is this your belief or did you hear it from someone else?



Practices for Navigating Interpersonal Disagreement

1

Listening Deeply

- Reflect back what is being said (use their words)
- Notice what is being said and what is not
- Begin where they are, not where you want them to be

2

Staying Human

- Emotionally relate to how they are feeling
- Notice how you are feeling; be honest and authentic
- Take responsibility for your part in the conflict

3

Staying Relational

- Be curious and open to what they are trying to say
- Try to understand how their past affects the present
- Stay with the process and the relationship, not just the solution

Source material from Lee Mun Wah.

Practice Scenario:

You are at a community coalition meeting with several nonprofit leaders. Before the meeting officially starts, you're chatting one-on-one with a colleague you generally respect. The conversation turns to a new initiative your organization is launching to better engage people who have experienced chronic homelessness.

The colleague says:

“I worry that we’re pouring a lot of resources into people who don’t really want to help themselves. At some point, you have to reward the folks who are actually doing what they’re supposed to do.”

You feel a tightness in your chest. You’re offended — but you also know this person has real influence over funding decisions and partnerships.

Discussion Questions:

1. What reactions come up internally when you hear this?
2. What are the risks of saying nothing?
3. What are the risks of responding too aggressively?
4. How would you navigate this conversation with curiosity if this happened to you?

Practical Skills for Group Discussions

Do:

- Set expectations and tone up front with guidelines and thoughtful preparation.
- If the group needs key information or data to work from, make sure it is provided upfront.
- Model respectful dialogue and redirect conversations if they become heated or off-track.
- Encourage quieter voices to contribute. Notice interruptions and circle back.

Don't:

- Impose your personal beliefs.
- Allow personal attacks or dismissive comments.
- Let one person or perspective dominate the conversation.
- Try to avoid correction or policing of ideas. Rather, focus on fostering greater understanding with your group.

Set The Table With Guidelines

These are not rules for control.
They are agreements that protect the conversation.

- Stay Engaged
- Experience Discomfort
- Speak Your Truth
- Expect and Accept Non-Closure
- When in doubt, ask open ended questions
- Participation is always voluntary – you can “pass” if you don’t want to share
- Take the learning with you, but leave people’s stories here

Physical Design as Facilitation

Gathering Activities

Talking Stick or Timer

Various Ways to Reflect

Circles or Shared Tables

Visibility & Audibility for All

Decor Can Start The Conversation



Name Values & Feelings

Everyone is working from one or many core values. Try to build a connection by noticing their values, even if you don't share them.

Care	Fairness	Liberty	Loyalty	Authority	Sanctity
Kindness Empathy Peace Charity	Equality Justice Honesty Integrity	Freedom Autonomy Individualism Independence	Family Friendship Community Patriotism	Respect Tradition Duty Lawfulness	Spirituality Purity Faith Modesty

Name Values & Feelings

Try: Connecting participant beliefs to their values.

Example: “It’s clear to me that many of you are concerned about freedom and liberty being upheld on this campus.”

Try: Stating what people might be feeling based on your observations.

Example: “I am hearing that many of you are feeling frustrated. Am I getting that right?”



Ways to Redirect the Conversation

Pause

What it sounds like:

“Since things are getting going pretty fast, I think this is a good time to pause to take a breath.”

Break Into Pairs

What it sounds like:

“Things are moving pretty fast. Let’s break into pairs and talk about how we’re feeling about this conversation right now.”

Go-Round

What it sounds like:

“This conversation is important and I’d like to invite other voices to weigh in on it, too. Let’s do a go-round where everyone shares 1 sentence about [prompt].”

A group of people are seated around a table in a meeting room. In the background, there are shelves with various items, including a sign that says "WE ARE". The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green rectangle containing white text.

When in doubt, let your group set the standard.

Ask the other people at the table:
When _____ said _____, how did that impact you?

Practice Scenario:

You are facilitating a discussion among nonprofit leaders about equity in service delivery. Ground rules have been set, and the conversation has been thoughtful.

Midway through, one participant says:

“I think we’re overusing the word ‘equity.’ At some point, personal responsibility has to matter. Some communities just don’t take advantage of the resources that already exist.”

You notice several people visibly tense up. One participant crosses their arms. Another looks down at the table.

Discussion Questions - Pair Up with a Partner:

- What signs tell you the conversation is at risk?
- What's your first move as the facilitator?

Practical Skills: Mediating Conflict Between Others

First, stop for a Neutrality Check!

If you are not trusted by all parties, you cannot facilitate transformation.



Structural Safety Matters

- Equal Seating and Visibility
- Talking Stick or Timer
- Equal, Uninterrupted Time to Share
- Clear Facilitation Boundaries & Consistency

Including Advocates or Witnesses

Allowing advocates can:

- Increase psychological safety
- Reduce power imbalances
- Prevent later misrepresentation of what was said

Important boundary:

- Advocates observe and support—they do not speak unless invited



Establishing Your Goals Together

**Shift from “Who’s right?” to
“What’s needed?”**

**The critical question:
“What would need to change for
you to feel respected and able to
move forward?”**

**This keeps the focus on forward-
looking repair, not re-litigation.**



Additional Resources:

Constructive Dialogue Institute - www.constructivedialogue.org

Lederach, John Paul. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field*. Good Books, 2003.

Pranis, Kay. *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*. Good Books, 2005.

Porter, Thomas W. *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of Justpeace*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010.

CHECK OUT THIS SEMESTER'S DIALOGUE EVENTS



Presented by Stetson University's Center for Dialogue & Civic Action
For more information, email dialogue@stetson.edu

A group of people are seated around a table in a meeting room. The room has bookshelves in the background filled with books and informational cards. A dark green rectangular overlay is centered over the image, containing the text "Any Questions?" in a white, serif font.

Any Questions?