



# NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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DIALOGUE &  
CIVIC ACTION  
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**Conflict is not the problem.**

Avoidance, shame, and  
mismangement are the  
problem.

# Conflict Myths:

Conflict means something has gone wrong

Healthy relationships don't have conflict

Conflict is something to “fix” or “win”

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# Conflict Reframes:

**Conflict is natural and normal in human relationships.**

**Conflict is a catalyst for change.**

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

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**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.

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# 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?

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# 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	Equality	Freedom	Family	Respect	Spirituality
Empathy	Justice	Autonomy	Friendship	Tradition	Purity
Peace	Honesty	Individualism	Community	Duty	Faith
Charity	Integrity	Independence	Patriotism	Lawfulness	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

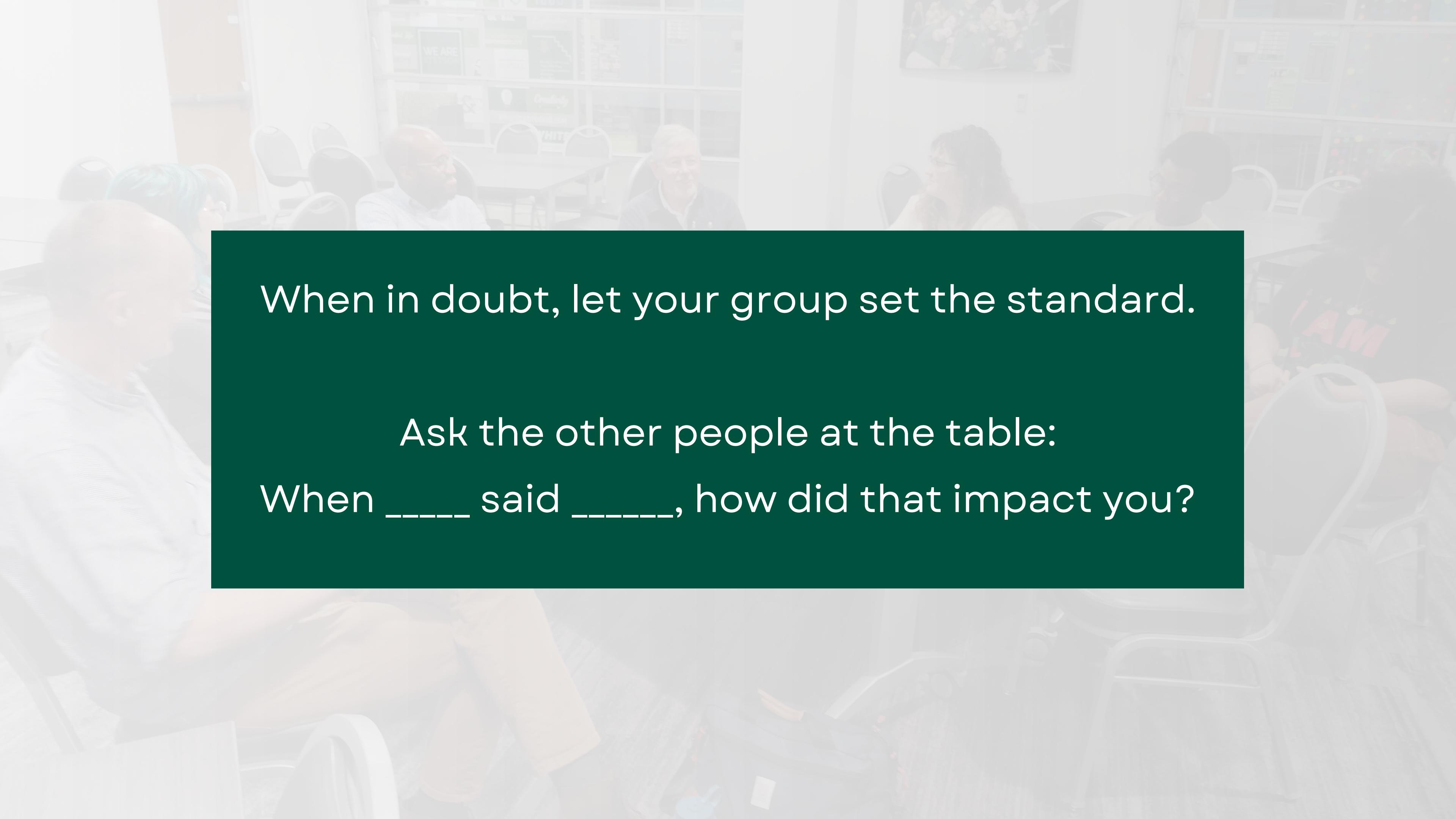
**What it sounds like:**  
“Since things are getting going pretty fast, I think this is a good time to pause to take a breath.”

## 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 large, semi-transparent grayscale photograph of a theater audience. The audience is seated in rows of theater-style seats, facing towards the left side of the frame. The background is a wall with several framed posters and a large screen. The overall atmosphere is one of a formal presentation or lecture.

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.*

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# 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](http://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.

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# Any Questions?