



Brave conversations in difficult times

Are you wondering how to handle tension or disagreements at work or in the union? Are there topics you avoid with your co-workers or family? Are you seeing splits in your local around issues that are hard to talk about? This tip-sheet can help.

We don't have to agree about everything to work together to defend our wages, benefits, working conditions and communities. At the same time, avoiding conflicts can make them worse and require more formal interventions later on. If we choose instead to have brave conversations, we can grow and become stronger as a union.


This tip sheet will help union activists have difficult conversations in a way that can build solidarity and make changes for the better. Use these tips to help find informal solutions to everyday challenges.

How to have brave conversations

1. Prepare

- Calm your mind and relax your body. Breathe. Plant your feet.
- Check in with yourself: What is your goal in this conversation?
- Decide together on a good time and place to talk.
- Remind yourself that you do not need to take another's anger personally.
- If this is not possible, think carefully. There may be power dynamics or other reasons why you are not the best person to have this conversation.

2. Remember, calm is contagious

- Slow down your speech and movements.
 - Pay attention to body language: Notice if your arms are crossed – this can signal that you are protecting yourself or are feeling defensive. Open hands can signal open-mindedness. Eye contact is cultural, so notice if the other person is comfortable making eye contact – don't force it.
 - [Interpersonal Communication](#) is: 55% body language, 38% tone of voice, 7% words
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3. Tell your truth

- Speak in “I” statements. Own your perspective and your feelings.
- Put your cards on the table. State your goal(s).

4. Get very curious

- Ask open-ended questions. Listen to understand, not to respond. Don’t interrupt.
- Keep asking questions to uncover feelings and desires underneath strong positions.
- Show empathy. Show understanding. This does not mean you have to agree.
- Summarize what they say. Check in with questions like “Do I have that right?” or “Is there more?”

5. Explore. Did either party’s actions unintentionally cause harm?

- Sometimes we think we know what someone’s intention is when we are impacted negatively by what they do. And sometimes we can have a negative impact even when our intentions are good.
- Listen to the others’ intention and share the impact. This can build understanding.

6. Aim for “Both/And”, instead of “Either/Or”

- Views are formed by backgrounds and experiences. Try to imagine yourself in the other person’s shoes.
- Is it possible for two different versions of the same story to co-exist?

7. Make agreements

- What can you ask each other to do to prevent conflict from causing disruption?
- Explore what you need to have a mutually respectful relationship. Offer to meet the other person halfway.

8. One conversation may not be enough

- Working through conflict takes time. Start small. Build trust.
- Leave an opening for another conversation. Be patient. People often seem very dug in but can change their thinking later if they feel heard.

Note:

- Having a difficult conversation doesn’t mean you have to accept discrimination, harassment, or violence. You can choose to walk away or ask for help. Do what you need to keep yourself safe.