

KEY ELEMENTS OF A CIVIL CONVERSATION

WHILE a civil conversation might generically mean any conversation where people are treated – and treat one another – with civility, in the context of the model developed at Interfaith Philadelphia in partnership with *On Being*, we're inviting groups to engage in a specific model of gathering and conversation inspired by Krista Tippett's invitation and materials for "planting new conversations in families and communities."

HERE ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF A CIVIL CONVERSATION:

- An invitation from a facilitator to individuals or a group to attend a Civil Conversation
- A designated time and place for the conversation to take place
- A portion of a podcast or short video clip – such as a segment from the "On Being" podcast – that will be played at the civil conversation event, which serves as a 'common reference,' and which will focus the discussion. There may also be images which can be projected while the participants listen to the material, and transcripts available to follow.
- A facilitated discussion of the themes, questions, issues and ideas that arise from listening to or reading the materials. The intention of the conversation is to allow participants to speak authentically and personally and listen deeply and respectfully, with the goal of better understanding one another.
- A framing of the conversation with an opening and closing that marks this time and conversation as "set apart" from other ways the participants may interact with one another (socially, programmatically, etc.)
- An opportunity to connect to Interfaith Philadelphia and other organizations engaged in this work

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WAYS TO RESPOND IF THINGS GET TOUGH

EVEN with these guidelines and suggestions, talking with one another in the ways suggested here can be uncomfortable. It is natural for challenges to occur in the course of authentic dialogue. Some can be averted by establishing – and using! – guidelines; others by your awareness of various comfort levels in the group. As the facilitator, you have the role of “holding the space” for participants who may carry their own difficult feelings into the discussion, or express themselves in ways that bring discomfort to others.

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF COMMON CHALLENGES THAT MAY WELL ARISE IN THE COURSE OF YOUR CIVIL CONVERSATION:

- One voice dominates, and is unaware of encroaching on others’ “air time”
- A quiet participant, who listens more than speaks, and is reluctant to share
- Someone acts as the expert, asserting knowledge, and not speaking from their own story
- As facilitator, you sense an “elephant in the room”
- A participant intellectualizes the conversation, not speaking for him/her/themselves
- Someone steps in to “police” the conversation, correcting others for saying something which isn’t “politically correct”
- Comments which are off subject – including personal agendas – derail the discussion
- A factually inaccurate statement is made
- Someone offers negative or judgmental comments
- A participant is overcome by emotion
- Someone won’t move off the subject
- Bullying behavior shuts down the conversation
- There’s a lack of common understanding of terms or language

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- An inappropriate or awkward thing is said, and everyone wants to avoid the moment
- There's an assumption that everyone agrees on something that hasn't been discussed in the group

HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS TO HELP THE DISCUSSION MOVE THROUGH ROUGH SPOTS WHEN THESE MOMENTS ARISE:

- Refer back to the guidelines, and engage the group in discerning which one might help in this moment. This allows you to be the guide, but helps the group to own the process as well
- Use phrases such as, "I notice" or "I wonder" in your role as facilitator. This models language which helps participants to speak for themselves and their own experiences, and can help shift the group's dynamic
- Ask clarifying questions such as "Can you say more about your personal connection to this subject?" or "Where did you learn ...?" This helps shift away from intellectualizing, or debating facts
- If participants seem to focus on a "right answer," giving advice, setting each other straight, or a solution to a problem, try redirecting to the goal of a civil conversations event: to more deeply understand one another's experience and views
- Sometimes silence can feel like a rough spot. Resist the temptation to fill it with words. A silence that falls after a question is posed or a story is shared can be a reflective moment, and honors the importance of the discussion
- Make space for both the introverts and extroverts in the room by asking those who have shared more to hold back, and inviting those who have yet to speak to offer a reflection
- Try to catch an exchange before it progresses to taking sides. Holding space for non-resolution is an important role of the facilitator
- If the group seems mired or wandering, offer a moment to pause, then try to identify the sense of the group and the direction it might want to head