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## 6 Keys To Facilitating A Diversity Discussion

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Kimm Beavers

As the post-show discussion facilitators of The Defamation Experience, we have facilitated over 450 discussions to over 80,000 people. The number of participants has ranged from as many as 800 high school students to as few as 20 lawyers.

Discussing subjects like race, class, religion, and gender can often be difficult, particularly in a large group of relative strangers. Our audiences are experiencing a wide range of emotions, from uncomfortable and hesitant to eager and curious. We always attempt to put people at ease by creating a space that allows them the opportunity to either engage right away, or to just observe until they are ready to more actively contribute. For some, it takes time, others just dive in. Either way, we know that everyone should feel safe and secure in knowing that their thoughts and ideas will be heard by a respectful audience. As facilitators, it's our job to create this feeling of safety by setting ground rules for a mindful and respectful discussion and by modeling active listening.



Gina Taliaferro

### Here are 6 helpful tips to successfully facilitating a discussion:

**1: Setting The Tone:** We have a clear opening for the post-show discussion. Audiences are informed that rather than striving for objectivity in their comments, the goal is to shine a light on that process of recognizing their own personal thoughts, feelings, and biases and how it can affect their objectivity. Experience has taught that the best discussions unfold

organically. So, it's important to be patient as the audience gets comfortable with participating. We ask for a show of hands in a series of questions like: "Did anyone have difficulty making a decision?", "Did anyone struggle with their objectivity?", etc. In this way, people are pulled into active participation without feeling singled out in having to stand up and speak right away.

**2: Prompts Are Your Best Friend:** We use prompts to help trigger the conversation, keep it moving, or deepen it from a superficial level. Prompts are open-ended questions designed to stimulate contemplation and elicit thoughtful responses that extend beyond a simple yes or no. Preparing a list beforehand helps achieve this goal. Prompts are not intended to structure a conversation in advance, but they help the conversation flow organically from the thoughts and interests of the audience. A well-designed prompt can create a through line between topics or shifts in the conversation and can also introduce thoughts, feelings, and emotions without the audience member having to initiate the topic.

**3: Physical Presence:** Similarly, we strive to put the audience at ease by stepping off the stage and moving closer to create an intimate space. This also has the subtle effect of indicating that the focus has shifted from the fictional action on the stage to the lived experience of the audience. Maneuvering throughout the audience, making eye contact and maintaining a relaxed tone conveys genuine and sincere interaction from us.

**4: It's Not About Us:** The discussion is a very organic process with the audience. As facilitators, we try to speak only as much as necessary to keep the conversation flowing. We want the audience to have their own moments of realizations through self-examination. However, making a connection between the comments of two or more audience members can help in getting people to respond directly to one another. We want to encourage the flow of ideas and self-discoveries.

**5: Maintain Control:** We know it's important to not relinquish our roles in managing the discussion, calling on people to speak, and – if necessary – jumping in if a provocative statement calls for a request for clarity. That includes intervening quickly if an exchange threatens to grow heated and remind the audience that disagreeing with each other's ideas is realistic but should remain respectful. That said, we are proud to say in the over 450 discussions, we've never had a contentious conversation. People genuinely want to have these conversations. Sometimes they just don't know how, and a facilitator's job is to help make that happen.

**6: Closing On A Positive Note** - It's very important to acknowledge the progress of the discussion from the audience. Whether they leaned in to the conversation or dove in, they participated, and that first step is huge. Furthermore, we encourage them to continue having these conversations by listening mindfully and respectfully, then expressing themselves mindfully and respectfully.

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