

# Tips for Healthy Discourse

*Healthy discourse is meaningful and often difficult discussion around a divisive and controversial topic.*

## Before You Meet

**Establish expectations in advance.** In addition to the issues listed below, clarify logistics such as the format, time-frame, location, and scope of the discussion.

**Give people the opportunity to opt in or out without guilt.** Discourse can take an emotional or relational toll that not everyone is read to pay.

**Require a commitment to genuine dialogue.** Not all speech is dialogue. Some people are more interested in stirring the pot, self-promotion, or winning an argument, than in actual discussion. All participants should commit upfront to being forthright, listening to and considering opposing viewpoints, and avoiding incendiary or escalatory behavior.

**Clarify expectations about what will be disclosed to others outside the room.** While committing to keeping things in the room can create a sense of safety for some participants, it is not always realistic or enforceable, particularly at a public university. The larger the group the less practical it becomes. Also, when confidentiality is imposed, rather than voluntarily agreed to, it can feel coercive.

**Clarify the purpose of dialogue and whether decision making or action or is anticipated as an outcome.** Sometimes dialogue and the chance to hear one another is itself the desired end. Other times some parties are looking for action, in which case dialogue can be seen as a delaying tactic or a means of maintaining the status quo by avoiding action or decision-making.

**Meet in a physical environment conducive to dialogue.** The physical environment can have an enormous impact on the tone and tenor of the meeting. For instance, a circle of living-room style armchairs may be more conducive than a conference room table.

**Err on the side of fewer people in the room.** A meeting with fewer people is more intimate, and creates a smaller audience that parties will be tempted to perform for. It means a small web of relationships that must be managed. It also helps keep the discussion more focused, and perhaps most importantly, it means more average air time per participant.

**Establish ground rules on what it looks like to disagree well.** For example, no personal attacks, give others the opportunity to speak, be cautious in ascribing intention to others, avoid sarcasm or eye rolling, be evidence based.

**Frame the issue(s) objectively in a way that is agreeable to all participants.** When issues are (consciously or unconsciously) framed in a partisan or biased way, they signal a predetermined outcome. If participants cannot agree on the nature of the disagreement, the discussion will likely be contentious and unfocused.

**Consider using an impartial facilitator/mediator/moderator.** Sometimes participants can collectively manage the process on their own. However, it can be difficult to both manage the process and participate in it at the same time. A skilled impartial facilitator can help manage the process without engaging the substance of the dialogue. The UCR Ombuds Office offers free impartial facilitation services to the UCR campus community.

## During the meeting

**Provide freedom for participants to call for a break at any time for any reason.**

**Graciously enforce ground rules when they are violated.** It is common for people to violate ground rules, often unconsciously. It is important to maintain the established boundaries, but to do so in a way that does not shame participants.

**Identify and acknowledge significant imbalances or disparities between the parties.**

Significant disparities between the parties create challenges for dialogue. Here are some types of disparities:

Disparities of power: Less powerful parties may be more hesitant to speak up.

Disparities of potential impact: For some parties, the discussion may be an intellectual curiosity whereas for others it may be deeply personal. For example, the topic of abortion may be more charged for someone who has had an abortion or for someone who is adopted.

Disparities of understanding: Sometimes there can be vast differences between the knowledge and insight of various parties. For instance, in dialogues around race and racism, people of color typically have much more exposure to the topic than white people do.

Disparities of numbers: Sometimes the people holding one opinion significantly outnumber those holding an opposing opinion. This makes managing “air time” hard, as it is important to give everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard but this can drown out important minority perspectives.

**Beware binary thinking and false equivalencies.** There are not two equal but opposite sides to every issue. Even viewing the issue as a spectrum is limiting as issues are often multi-dimensional or multi-layered. Not every opinion is equally valid.

**Create opportunities for self-reflection.**

**Use the “Ouch rule.”** If someone says something hurtful, participants are encouraged to say “ouch” and then unpack what happened.

**Encourage genuine vulnerability but discourage emotional red herrings.** Emotional red herrings are emotional outbursts that derail the dialogue by shifting the conversation to caring for the emotional needs of one or more participants.

**Pay attention to feelings and identity triggers as well as to ideas.** They should not dominate the discussion but it is not realistic to expect to set them aside entirely. It is important to acknowledge and monitor them without letting them take over the dialogue.

**Distinguish between intent and impact.** A negative impact does not mean the intent was bad. Participants may bear responsibility for the impact of their behavior even if their intentions are good.

**Practice reflective listening.** This is a critical but often undervalued skill in effective dialogue.

**Surface underlying interests.** This critical skill helps shift the conversation from an adversarial dynamic to an exploration of the deeper issues.

### **Additional Resources:**

*Facilitating with Ease!* by Ingrid Bens, *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Petterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Sitzler, *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker, Essential Partners <https://whatisessential.org/>, UCR Ombuds Office <http://ombuds.ucr.edu>