Dialogue, Conversation & Facilitation

Diversity | Equity
Inclusion | Belonging

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There is ample research to suggest that dialogue, conversation about diversity and inclusion, is an important element in building an engaged and collaborative working environment. But, in many work environments, authentic dialogue, particularly about race, can be challenging. Sometimes people are reluctant to share personal and professional feelings when they perceive that others may be critical about their viewpoints. Additionally, some work environments do not have a trained discussion facilitator to assist with creating a respectful and authentic environment for important, but often difficult conversations.

This document was designed to provide a set of guidelines for individuals wishing to effectively frame discussions about diversity and inclusion and tips to appropriately lead such dialogues. As always, the Office for Institutional Equity (OIE) is available as a resource.

Preparing for the Conversation
Effective facilitation begins long before the group first assembles. Good facilitators invest a great deal of time and energy in preparation. Steps to consider include:

• Communicate with your manager, supervisor or director regarding your plans.

• Be clear about the topic, rationale for the conversation, and your expected outcome(s).

• Consider which population(s) will be involved? Decide if the conversation will be open to individuals across the campus or health system, or your department?

• Select a space that can accommodate the expected participants and that affords privacy.

• Be clear about the length of the conversation and communicate it to the participants.

Beginning the Conversation...Setting the Stage
After you have made careful preparations for this conversation, arrive at the room early, welcome people to the conversation and start on time.

• Communicate your role to the group. Will you be a participant in the conversation? Are you making introductory comments and then stepping back? Will you be a “process observer,” making comments about the process of the conversation as it unfolds? Co-leading?

• Clearly communicate the objectives of the dialogue at the beginning
of the session. Write the objectives on a board or flip chart where participants can see and refer to them. If the group begins to stray from the purpose, you can remind them of the objectives and bring them back on track.

• State the ground rules. As the facilitator, part of your role is to set and enforce ground rules to improve group process. Lay them out clearly and completely to the group and assess their comprehension before proceeding (respectful dialogue, one person speaks at a time, allow time for others to speak, focus on ideas…not the individual, etc.)

• Be aware and mindful that during any given dialogue or conversation, multiple cultural paradigms are present. Not everyone believes, values or employs a particular form of communication.

Facilitating a Productive Conversation

Dialogue doesn’t replace appropriate focus on systemic change within a work or learning environment. It doesn't substitute for enhanced diversity hiring, educating leadership or creating a sense of belonging; however, productive, authentic dialogue can help build a foundation for the open and free exchange of ideas necessary for innovative strategies:

• Active listening is part of facilitation. We all have personal positions about particular issues, but in the context of facilitating a conversation, you should not champion your own idea. A facilitator can lose credibility with the rest of the group, if it appears that he or she is pushing the group in the direction of a particular perspective or criticizing a point of view. It’s about creating an environment for the discussion of those many, sometimes strongly differing perspectives, not shaping the mindset of the participants.

• But, the facilitator is not to be silent. Comments by the facilitator can be very effective to productive conversation. Asking open-ended questions, rather than questions that are likely to elicit simple “yes” or “no” answers can be very useful to the group process. Suggesting that an individual, “say more” about a comment can often bring clarity and definition to an idea, and usually stimulate more discussion and consideration from others.

• Gently invite quiet participants to share their thoughts and respectfully ask individuals who may be dominating the conversation to “hold that thought”. The more voices and viewpoints that can be considered, the better the opportunity for a robust dialogue.

• The facilitator should be aware that modeling good interpersonal skills is highly important; participants are looking for facilitator cues and tools to emulate.

• Diffusing hostility can be a challenge for many facilitators. It can sometimes be helpful to re-state
the dilemma or conflict, looking for areas of commonality. Encourage respectful discussion of differing ideas, without insisting on agreement, but focusing on the goal of understanding a different perspective.

**Coming to Closure**

A rich, open dialogue can be exciting and stimulating. Although the temptation might be to continue a conversation well beyond the agreed-upon ending time, it is wise to be respectful of everyone’s time and the guidelines you have set at the beginning of the conversation.

- As you summarize the conversation, engage the participants in the process. It’s an opportunity for participants to share what other perspectives they have heard and have come to understand in, perhaps, a different way.

- Comment on what this conversation means for the climate of the department, program, or school.

- What are next steps? Has the conversation surfaced actions to be taken? If so, your summary should indicate who will be responsible for taking action, along with the time table. Will there be another conversation?

- Be cognizant of individuals who might be left with “raw emotions”. Spend some time with those individuals. Be supportive. Suggest Professional Assistance Services (PAS) for employees or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) for students, when appropriate.

Remember, the Office for Institutional Equity is available to help with the planning of the conversation or to debrief the dialogue and suggest next steps.

**Resources:**

Information extracted and compiled from Dr. Larry Roper & Jim Rough: Effective Interracial and Diversity Discussions and Seven Keys to Consider (Training Guide), respectively.

If you are interested in Facilitator Training offered by the Office for Institutional Equity, please contact:

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