



Part One: Get Ready > 4. Prepare yourself to facilitate.

PREPARING FOR THE CONTENT OF THE CONVERSATION

Ordinarily, facilitators do not take responsibility for the content of a conversation. But when the issue is race, you'll likely be called upon to provide guidance about the substance behind tough questions and may even need to present some content (such as definitions of terms). Even if this isn't the case, you'll need a deep understanding of the content in order to serve the group well by: listening for underlying meaning; unearthing and testing assumptions; synthesizing parts of the conversation; noticing what might be causing the group to get stuck; and mirroring the group's thinking in ways that allow them to hear their thoughts, gain deeper insight and agree to emerge.

BE READY TO DEFINE TERMS AND USE DEFINITIONS AS TEACHABLE MOMENTS.

- **Acknowledge that people have different definitions of race and racism.** To avoid talking past one another, it's often helpful to define terms using working definitions or inviting the group to build its own working definitions. Use context-appropriate examples to demonstrate each definition so they are clear. If the group gets stuck, try building agreement around a term "for the purpose of this conversation only." If that doesn't work, have the group experiment with moving forward without consensus on definitions in order to keep talking. It's possible to accomplish a lot even without such a consensus and sometimes consensus emerges through the process of dialogue.
- **Clarify the different levels at which power and oppression operate.** Facilitate a plan to understand and distinguish between the ways people express bias, prejudice and bigotry, and the impact of systems, collective practices and norms that create systematic and accumulated advantages for Whites and disadvantages for Black, Indigenous and other people of color .
- **Anticipate different perspectives that are likely to arise based on the identities and experiences of participants.** For instance, in many conversations about power and oppression, people who are in the "up" or advantaged categories (White people in the case of racism and racial equity) tend to focus on individual attitudes and behavior, while people in the "down" or disadvantaged categories (Black, Indigenous and other people of color in this case) tend to focus on structural and systemic analysis. This is a byproduct of the reality that "downs" have to pay a lot more attention to systemic/structural aspects of oppression than "ups" because the systems tend to "work" for the ups.

RECOGNIZE THE ASSUMPTIONS AND WORLDVIEWS OF PEOPLE IN THE ROOM.

- **Listen for how unspoken assumptions about the nature of the problem and strategies for solving it drive the conversation.** Guide participants to articulate their implicit theories about why the situation exists and what can be done about it. Help them focus on policies, not people, as the problem to be addressed.
- **Make the assumptions visible and testable.** Help people hear and understand their differing worldviews as a way to make sense of specific disagreements or differences of opinion. Use yourself as an example, making visible your assumptions and worldview.
- **Create opportunities for dissent** and encourage people to express differing perspectives, assumptions and worldviews.



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PREPARING FOR THE CONTENT OF THE CONVERSATION, CONT.

▶ UNDERSTAND WHO'S IN THE ROOM AND THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH THE ISSUES.

- **Acknowledge power.** In any organizational or community context, power hierarchies affect comfort level. The racial backgrounds of the people with more power can also affect comfort level. Those who traditionally have less power tend to lose trust when power dynamics are not acknowledged.
- **Expect different dynamics if the room is racially homogenous or heterogeneous.** For instance, in a racially mixed group, people may tend to withhold their questions or thoughts in order not to offend, to avoid exposing their lack of understanding, or to avoid “airing dirty laundry in public.” In racially homogeneous groups, participants may be more willing to acknowledge what they don’t know or what concerns them about the issues.
- **Recognize that internalized racial oppression often manifests,** even when there are no White people present. Similarly, internalized racial superiority often manifests, even in the absence of Black, Indigenous and other people of color.
- **Recognize that we have different roles** in undoing racism, based on our identity. White people can be particularly focused on identifying and changing policies and practices that reinforce racism.

▶ UNDERSTAND SOME OF THE LIKELY DYNAMICS IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE AND RACIAL EQUITY, RACISM AND WHITE PRIVILEGE.

- **Understand that a range of color/racial backgrounds exists within many ethnic and nationality groups and some people within those groups experience color prejudice.** Because race is a social construct, it’s named and experienced differently across countries and cultures. Don’t assume that the American construct of race is obvious, universal, or makes sense to participants from other backgrounds. Recognize the complexity for immigrants learning the unspoken norms and attitudes about race in the United States and that they may have internalized those norms and attitudes unconsciously.
- **Recognize that other tensions exist within racial groupings** based on ethnicity, nationality, gender, immigration and socioeconomic status and other factors. Any of these factors could easily be conflated with race or put forward as an alternative to avoid a conversation about race.
- **Anticipate that dynamics will be different among people who regularly see or work with one another versus people who don’t.** In some cases, fear of creating tensions within an ongoing group may hinder participants’ willingness to be candid. On the other hand, in some cases, ongoing relationships may help to create a space for deeper trust and honesty.
- **Anticipate defensive reactions to the concept of White privilege,** particularly for people who are learning about it for the first time or just beginning to explore the concept. Some participants may focus on their own behavior and attitudes (“I don’t discriminate!”) or their own challenges in society based on other aspects of their identity (“being White isn’t creating advantages for me as a working-class person!”). Some may challenge the existence of structural racism. Some may think they have nothing to contribute to a conversation about racism because they haven’t been discriminated against and don’t believe that they actively discriminate against people. Some White people will be more comfortable identifying with Black, Indigenous and other people of color than with other White people. Many White people also are more comfortable talking about areas in which they are a “down” and will try to shift the conversation to gender, anti-Semitism, homophobia, etc. Another frequent dynamic is that people with privilege are uncomfortable exploring privilege and will want to move quickly to action.
- **Expect that people will come to the conversation with different understandings and levels of investment in the issue.** Some may see a dialogue about race and racial equity as an “add-on” rather than central to their work or lives. Some people may feel “we have to do something!” and others will feel that “dialogue is the thing we have to do!” Some will have passion about this issue and will be ready to engage. Consider how much support you need to get started, knowing you may not have everyone’s enthusiasm at the beginning. Encourage people to see the focus on race, equity and inclusion is part and parcel of how they do their existing work and not an additional task.



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PREPARING FOR THE CONTENT OF THE CONVERSATION, CONT.

▶ KNOW THE HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY/ISSUE/ORGANIZATION AND ANTICIPATE HOT BUTTON ISSUES FOR THIS PARTICULAR GROUP. BE READY TO RESPOND IN WAYS THAT MOVE THE CONVERSATION FORWARD.

- **Understand as much as you can about how structural racism has manifested itself** in the specific experience of the discussion, participants, community and organization(s) you're working with. How does structural racism relate to the mission and purpose of the organization/group or the issues it's addressing? (For example, a project to facilitate home ownership by Black, Indigenous and other people of color in low-income urban communities is an attempt to address the consequences of structural racism in the housing market.)
- **Be ready to engage typical hot button issues, such as:**
 - ▷ "The real problem is economics/class."
 - ▷ "The leaders of institutions in this neighborhood are paternalistic. They never want to hear from the people who use the services they provide."
 - ▷ "Those who run this organization exclude Black, Indigenous and other people of color from important decisions and overlook them when it comes to hiring and promotions."
 - ▷ "There's no need for affirmative action any more. Racism has been solved."
 - ▷ "Focusing on diversity is watering down the quality of our students, workforce, etc. and is discrimination against Whites."
 - ▷ "That (negative attitudes and behavior by Black, Indigenous and other people of color in reference to White people) is 'reverse racism.'"
 - ▷ "Black, Indigenous and other people of color can be racist against other people of color."
- **For any of these kinds of issues**
 - ▷ Educate yourself about the likely issues and the range of related data and viewpoints.
 - ▷ Be clear about your role. Before you respond to a hot button comment, remember that it's not your duty to "correct" the person. It may not even be your role to participate in the content of the conversation. If your role doesn't explicitly include training, education, or participation around content but you believe that getting into it could be of service, build an agreement with the group before you begin about stepping into that new role and/or offering your perspective.
 - ▷ If a comment "pushes your buttons," acknowledge to yourself what has happened and focus on how to deal with your reactions so you can stay in service to the group. That could mean finding a way to set aside your reaction to keep the group on its path. It could mean creating a teachable moment that externalizes what happened as a learning opportunity for the group. It could mean calling a break so you can get centered. Just be sure you're keeping the group's well-being firmly in mind.
 - ▷ Begin by thanking the participant for raising an issue that they're concerned about without agreeing or disagreeing with the point of view. Then decide whether to deal with the issue now, hold off until later, or defer to another conversation altogether. (IISC calls this "accepting, legitimizing and then dealing with or deferring the comment.")
 - ▷ If the group has an "ouch" norm—using a comment that may be inadvertently offensive as a teachable moment—let participants explain the harm.
 - ▷ If you and/or the group decide to engage an issue, remember to keep everyone working together in the phases of the agreement building process²⁸—first opening, then narrowing, then closing.
 - Opening: be sure everyone understands the issue that's been raised and viewpoints have been expressed and understood
 - Narrowing: assess, organize, or evaluate the different viewpoints
 - Closing: build agreements about the viewpoints

Remind people that they have the freedom (and actually an obligation) to explore differing viewpoints for understanding. Such exploration doesn't imply or commit people to agree to anything. Most likely, you won't close on the content, but you may have to build a cohesive process to continue to explore the issue.

²⁸This framework was developed by Interaction Associates.



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PREPARING FOR THE CONTENT OF THE CONVERSATION, CONT.

▶ HELP AVOID TYPICAL PITFALLS WHEN GROUPS THINK TOGETHER.

- **Avoid globalizing or over-generalizing** from personal experience or limited anecdotes.
- **Avoid looking for an “authoritative voice”** in the room who can speak for all members of a particular group. Acknowledge that different opinions and experiences exist within racial groups. Allow participants the freedom to speak from their own experience without “representing” their entire group.
- **Avoid compartmentalizing.** Encourage participants to bring the conversation back to other parts of their world (e.g., work, home, community).
- **Avoid “group think” by:**
 - ▷ Pressure testing emerging consensus, actively inviting concerns or different viewpoints into the conversation
 - ▷ Asking the group “what if...” questions (e.g., “what if there is more to the story than you’ve articulated?,” “what else could explain the situation besides what you’ve already named?,” “what if your own experience is making it difficult to imagine what it’s like for others in this situation?”).
 - ▷ Offering data or alternative ideas that no one in the room is raising for the group to consider
 - ▷ Ensuring before the meeting that a wide range of voices and views will be in the room

Source: Interaction Institute for Social Change. May be used and reproduced by local United Ways for non-commercial use, with attribution. This tool was developed based on experiences of many IISC consultants with the countless organizations and individuals we have served over the years and the colleagues in many fields from whom we have learned. The original idea for this piece grew out of an 18 month learning process about facilitating dialogues about race that IISC facilitated for a group of community development practitioners, funders and intermediaries convened by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation–Boston office and the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations, which was supported by Third Sector New England’s Diversity Initiative. The section on preparing oneself to serve was influenced not only by IISC’s ongoing internal learning processes about the love that does justice and spiritual leadership, but also by our work with the Sisterhood for Peace: Transforming Sudan project of My Sister’s Keeper and coach and colleague Selena Sermefio.