

Brave Conversations

UCSF Office of the Ombuds

You can improve your brave conversations by explicitly addressing the complex matrix of identity, power, privilege, and equity using intentional communication and conflict management skills.

How we engage and work with each other is influenced by our identities and the social structures that confer power and privilege on some while supporting marginalization and harm on others. What follows are suggestions for approaching a dialogue addressing race and other components of identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Note the use of language in this document: calling these “difficult conversations” can lead to apprehension or defensiveness. We use the term “brave conversations” to encourage curiosity and courage to address concerns effectively.

1. Frame

Sometimes groups meet specifically to address how social justice, race or other components of identity are being expressed or impacting members of the group. Sometimes groups come together to address a team function (work, learning, patient care) and recognize that social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) power dynamics contribute to a challenge or conflict experienced by some or all team members. Note that DEI is not always acknowledged as playing a role in interpersonal or group conflict; we encourage exploring how it may be an unacknowledged part of a dynamic.

- To start, it’s helpful to reflect on your goals for the conversation. Is the conversation a response to a concern or is it a professional development opportunity?
- What institutional or societal power differences might have an impact on the conversation? Power hierarchies are present in many interactions in healthcare, education, and business. Race and other aspects of identity have an often-unacknowledged power that is layered into interpersonal dynamics. In preparation for a dialogue about race, it’s important to acknowledge how identity-based power (privilege) and oppression may impact a work relationship.
- What are the expectations for confidentiality in the conversation? This might range from a conversation designed to establish a group agreement, and therefore not confidential, to people sharing more personally in confidence. How will the outcomes of the conversation be memorialized or shared, if at all?
- Who, if anybody, is facilitating the conversation? Does that person have the trust of all/ both people? Do they have training and support to hold the conversation?

- Sometimes it's helpful for people to gather in identity-specific groups for support, learning, strategizing, or to feel fully seen. Sometimes people gather in mixed-identity groups to address and change dynamics that are challenging or harmful. Both kinds of meetings have a place in addressing DEI.

2. Prepare

Consider what conditions might best support everyone to be ready to talk about DEI, and make those conditions explicit. Make sure you are well-rested, have eaten, and cared for yourself. People are likely to be more effective when basic needs are met.

- Most of us have multiple identities, some that are historically, structurally, and interpersonally privileged, and some that are historically, structurally, and interpersonally oppressed.
- Consider and examine how your life has been impacted by being part of majority cultures and what privileges they confer. Educate yourself about how privilege shapes individual lives and larger systems, assumptions about right and wrong. (Resources below)
- Consider and examine how your life has been impacted by being part of oppressed cultures and what experiences you've had. Consider if and how you want to share those experiences. (Resources below)
- For those who hold less power in the conversation, ask yourself how you want to participate in the conversation and what you need in terms of boundaries. For those who hold more power in the conversation, consider how you can respect and support others' boundaries.
- For those with relatively more positional or societal power, prepare yourself to hear things you disagree with or that challenge you, and plan for how, even in the midst of discomfort, you can continue to listen to develop your understanding of the other person's message.
- Distinguish between position and interests. Positions refer to stated solutions; interests are the reasons you want to pursue those solutions. Centering interests (e.g. the need for respect, support, opportunities, recognition) rather than positions (e.g. limited ways to institutionalize equity) can allow for an inclusive dialogue about solutions that meet personal, group, and institutional needs.

3. Engage

- Maintain a commitment to the Principles of Community and the PRIDE Principles. UCSF should be a place where all who work, learn, or provide or receive care are respected, valued, and treated with dignity.
- Agree to practice and demonstrate active listening. Listen for understanding with a willingness to be influenced. Be curious.
- Ask open-ended "what" and "how" questions (as opposed to closed-ended "why" and "did" questions) to learn and understand someone else's perspective.
- Pay attention to how much time each person talks, whose experiences get challenged, who gets interrupted. Work to make sure there is turn-taking, perspective-taking, and equitable sharing of airtime. To address systemic oppression, carve out time for silence, and for those whose voices don't get heard or valued.

- If the goal is to address workplace, educational, or patient care dynamics or processes, engage from a framework of *dialogue* vs. *debate*. Listen deeply to people who do not share your experience, and be open to learning.
- Notice when diversity, equity and inclusion themes such as identity, power, privilege, oppression, and unconscious bias come up, and explore them with curiosity and humility. Naming the dynamics that came up while preparing for the conversation can be powerful.
- Take thoughtful risks. Especially if you come from a privileged or power position, be vulnerable and admit where you may have made a mistake, caused harm, have work to do. A good apology focuses on the person/ people impacted, not on the intent. (“I recognize that I have work to do.” I’m going to pay closer attention going forward.” “I am going to take some time to reflect on this.”)
- Listen to and value stories of hurt, fear and anger and experience of trauma based on prejudice, harm, marginalization, and disparate treatment. These stories are important, and not owed. Retelling these stories can be very difficult. Recognize the work it takes to share them and express thanks for the opportunity to learn. Also, you can make choices about if and how you choose to share your experience.
- Ask for breaks, as needed.

4. Reflect

- What do you need in order to feel supported, challenged, productive, inclusive, ready to engage with members of your team? Consider how you name and ask for that.
- What have you learned about others in the course of addressing DEI? What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about the systems and institutions in which we work, learn, and provide care?
- What else would be helpful to understand before the next time you engage in DEI conversations?
- What support do you need, and who is available to provide it?
- Who else needs to be in the conversation? Who needs to hear the outcome of the conversation in order to act on the outcomes?
- Allow and acknowledge “first-draft thinking” to allow people to reframe something they said, if needed.
- Seek to understand the impact of your actions, and avoid centering on your intentions.

5. Repeat

Keep showing up for brave conversations as a demonstration of commitment and action.

Resources

- <https://diversity.ucsf.edu/addressing-discrimination>
- <https://mrc.ucsf.edu/racial-equity-anti-black-racism>
- <https://graduate.ucsf.edu/faculty-administrators/faculty-racism-dialogue>
- <https://graduate.ucsf.edu/student-racism-dialogue>