

### Critical Conversations

A critical conversation is a dialogue between two or more people in which they discuss topics about which people tend to have conflicting views. This conversation can occur in various contexts. The purpose of a critical conversation is to (1) understand one another's perspective and (2) work together to form a shared vision of how to move forward. Critical conversations have the capacity to catalyze change in our workplaces. They also tend to be difficult due to personal and professional investment in the topic(s), uncertainty about how relationships will be impacted, and concern about how to handle conflicts that may arise.

As Faculty Advocates, you will facilitate critical conversations while leading trainings, during department meetings, and in one on one interactions with Chairs/Directors and colleagues. Thus, critical conversations can be an interaction that you plan for as well as an interaction that happens in the moment. To help prepare you, this handout includes strategies so that you feel empowered as Faculty Advocates to facilitate critical conversations as they emerge.

### Preparation Steps Applied: Example Scenario

During a faculty meeting, one of K's colleagues, J, makes a microaggressive comment about women. K gently communicates with J, calling them in rather than out, about the underlying message behind their words. J responds by stating that they are sorry K "took it that way" and "not everything is about gender." K feels compelled to follow up with J one on one. To get ready for the conversation, K uses the preparation steps.

1. **Establish Goals:** To communicate the way J's action made K feel, to hear more about J's perspective, and to encourage J to read more about the impact of microaggressions in the workplace.
2. **Identify Issue(s):** K feels that J did not take responsibility for their comments and instead trivialized K's feedback.
3. **Connect Issue(s) to Impact:** Trivializing a colleague's concerns about microaggressions is problematic for department culture and dismissing one another's feedback can "chill" bystander intervention behaviors.
4. **Reflect on Triggers:** J may continue to make microaggressive remarks during the one on one conversation.
5. **Strategize Handling Triggers:** K decides to put a time limit on the conversation with J in case J continues to say microaggressions. K also plans to debrief with a trusted colleague to process through the situation.

### Getting Started:

#### Preparation Steps When Facilitating Critical Conversations

It is important to be prepared. The following steps are a way to facilitate that process.

1. **Establish** the goal(s) you want to achieve by having a conversation. The goals can range from simply sharing how you feel to changing a policy, practice, or cultural norm in your workplace.
2. **Identify** the specific issue(s) you want to address. Sometimes there is a lot to "unpack" in a situation, making it imperative that you identify exactly what issues you want to focus on.
3. **Connect** the issue(s) to their impact. The topics discussed in a critical conversation have broader implications at interpersonal, cultural, and/or institutional levels – communicate those connections.
4. **Reflect** on how you or other people may be triggered. A trigger is language or behaviors that cause us to have an automatic emotional reaction.
5. **Strategize** how to handle triggers. Knowing how to navigate triggers will help you be able to move forward with the conversation and know when to pause it.

### Be in Dialogue Mode!

During critical conversations, dialogue will be an effective communication tool to implement. Dialogue is about exploring common ground, collaborating to find solutions to issues, and building relationships. However, "debate mode" styles of communication often occur during conversations. Why do you think this is the case?

## Debate vs. Dialogue

Debate	Dialogue
Assuming that there is one right answer and that you have it	Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that only together can they craft a solution
Combative: Participants attempt to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: Participants work together toward common understanding
About winning	About learning
Listening to find flaws and make counterarguments	Listening to understand and find meaning
Defending assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for reevaluation
Critiquing the other side's position	Reexamining all positions
Defending one's own views against those of others	Admitting that others' thinking can improve one's own
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in other positions	Searching for strengths and value in other positions
Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position	Discovering new information to move towards shared goals

### Strategies for Facilitating Critical Conversations in 1:1 & Group Settings

**Ground Rules:** Establishing ground rules at the beginning will help set expectations for a respectful and productive exchange of ideas. In addition to the ground rules you already have in mind, ask for input from the person or group you're in conversation with and revisit them as needed.

**Suspend Judgement:** Listening empathetically to understand someone else's perspective is a key part in having critical conversations. Try thinking about an opinion you once had that has since changed to help you listen to opinions you find especially problematic.

**Summarize and Paraphrase:** To ensure your understanding of what others are saying is accurate, periodically summarize main points and ask clarifying questions as needed.

**Silence:** Pause and leave room for silence to allow people to process information.

**Nonverbal Communication:** Be aware of your nonverbal communication; what you are not saying can be as powerful as what you are saying.

**Open-Ended Questions:** Asking open-ended questions will encourage elaboration and lead to deeper reflection and more understanding.

### Suggested Conversation Starters & Sentence Stems

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
- I'd like to talk about \_\_\_\_\_ with you, so that we can understand each other's point of view.
- I think we have different perspectives about \_\_\_\_\_. Let's try to find some common ground.
- I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about \_\_\_\_\_.
- I really want to hear your feelings about \_\_\_\_\_ and share my perspective as well.
- I'm nervous to share this, but I think it will help us understand one another better.
- Although I do not believe you intended to \_\_\_\_\_, I'd like to discuss how your comments \_\_\_\_\_.
- We may not agree, but let's try to reach an understanding.
- Can you provide some more evidence to support the comments you are making about \_\_\_\_\_?
- I'd like to share a different way of looking at \_\_\_\_\_.
- I really hope that by me sharing this, it will help you consider the situation from a different perspective.
- I'm not questioning your intention; however, I would like to talk about the impact.
- Thank you for sharing. I'd like to switch gears a bit and \_\_\_\_\_.
- I noticed a shift in the room; let's talk about what just happened.
- I am uncomfortable when you say things like that.

### A Note on Co-Facilitation

Co-facilitation means that you share the responsibility of leading some sort of educational experience with one or more other persons. Co-facilitating is a helpful approach to leading critical conversations that occur in a training or workshop format because a person shares in processing content with participants, addressing group dynamics, learning from one another, and balancing one another's facilitation styles. It can be a rewarding experience working with partners in a co-facilitation relationship. However, like any relationship, co-facilitators should take time to develop rapport and get to know one another. Reflect on the following questions and share with your Faculty Advocate team member(s) your thoughts.

1. What are your hopes and fears about being a Faculty Advocate?
2. What are your strengths as it relates to facilitation? What are your areas of growth?
3. What are your triggers? How can your team best support you regarding your triggers?
4. What do you need from your team member(s) overall?

## More About Triggers

Recall that a trigger is language or behaviors that cause us to have an automatic emotional reaction. Understanding triggers will help you facilitate critical conversations that are beneficial for everyone involved, including you. This is because you will be able to lead a conversation more effectively knowing how to manage triggering situations as the facilitator. The first step to managing your triggers is through self-reflection. People experience all kinds of reactions when they are triggered. Check all the reactions you experience when you are triggered.

Emotional		Physiological	
	Anger		Racing pulse
	Frustration		Pounding heart
	Defensiveness		Fidgety energy
	Fear		Blushing
	Anxiety		Urgent sense to respond
	Sadness		Difficulty breathing
	Embarrassment		Eye twitches
	Guilt		Pointing fingers
	Shame		Pacing
	Excitement		Eye rolling
	Joy		Tapping feet
	Compassion		Making fists
	Empathy		Other:
	Other:		

## Self-Reflection Questions

1. Think about times that you have been triggered. Are there themes or patterns that connect your experiences? If so, what are they?
2. Do you have a default reaction when you are triggered (e.g., tapping feet)? How might it differ based on the context of the situation, for example, if you are working with students one-on-one vs. in a classroom vs. among peers?
3. Triggers can feel more intense because of the social identities we hold. Are there any connections between your social identities and your triggers? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

### Strategies for Navigating Triggers\*

1. Use self-disclosure to share personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences to make connections with the participant(s).
2. Reflect on triggered reactions and use them as a gauge for what might be occurring in the group.
3. Ask questions to gain time to get more centered, accurately understand the participants' perspectives, and intentionally choose a response.
4. Engage in perspective-taking and try to relate to those whose behavior is the source of the trigger to build a connection *before* offering a differing perspective.
5. Ask the participants to walk you through their thought processes so you can better understand how they came to their assumptions and conclusions.
6. Invite others to share their reactions.
7. Acknowledge the triggering moment and invite others to express their feelings.
8. Summarize or paraphrase the central issues or feeling statements you heard mentioned.
9. State where you agree as well as where you disagree.
10. Describe the behavior that was the source of your trigger.
11. Ask others to take the pulse of the situation and reflect on the group process.
12. Interrupt the group dynamics to reestablish the group's norms and guidelines.
13. Invite participants to explore their triggered reactions.
14. Confront the other person with care.
15. Invite others to join in the dialogue if only a few people are speaking with each other.
16. Pause and meditate or seek reflective insights.
17. Take a timeout or table the discussion for a later time.

\*Special thanks to Andrea Hauser, Higher Education Administration PhD student, BGSU, for developing this list, adapted from Obeir, K. (2007). Diversity practitioner tools: Navigating triggering events: Critical skills for facilitating difficult dialogues. *The Diversity Factor*, 15(3), 23-29.

### Activity Instructions

In groups of two or three, discuss your assigned scenario. Using the preparation steps outlined on page one, develop a plan about how you would address the situation, including specific things you would say. Then, we will come back as a large group and a person from each group will role play their response to the scenario. We will begin the “skit” from the point at which you begin to address the issue. Allies team members will play the role of the person/people making the problematic comments.

We acknowledge that these scenarios may be triggering for you. While the expectation is that everyone participates, we recognize that there may be different levels of participation based on your need to take care of yourself. We respect that.

### Scenarios

#### Scenario 1

Jordan and Peyton are co-facilitating a two-part Faculty Allies workshop about how social identities show up in the workplace, with a specific emphasis on implicit bias within academic departments. As a part of the workshop Jordan and Peyton break the large group into smaller groups for an activity. As Jordan and Peyton are observing the small group activity, they notice that a faculty member, Reece, has begun a conversation about “reverse sexism,” which Reece defines as men being under attack, referencing the #MeToo Movement as leading to widespread false accusations against men of sexual assault. You notice that some people are shocked by Reece’s comments, but you also notice some people nodding their heads in agreement.

#### Scenario 2

Colleagues are in a third-year review evaluation meeting to discuss pre-tenured faculty members in your department. During the committee meeting Quin discusses the grants that Kendall secured this past year. Another colleague, Taylor, states that there is a lot of money out there for racial minorities and women so Kendall should not get “gold stars” for this achievement. Taylor also states that Kendall’s “niche” research does not compare to another pre-tenure faculty’s work that is more “mainstream.”

#### Scenario 3

Remi and Payton are at a faculty training session together that focuses on how to make academic departments more inclusive. Remi has just received tenure and Payton is the department chair. During the training, Payton shares that they are happy that trainings like this exist for people who “really need it,” but bias and inclusion issues do not happen in their department. Remi is aware of multiple climate issues concerning gender, ethnicity, and ability status within the department; however, a “space” does not currently exist to voice these types of issues. In addition, when people have tried to voice concerns in the past, they were met with resistance and now the more seasoned faculty members have encouraged newer faculty members not to communicate their perspectives because “it will not get them anywhere.”

### Resources

*Below are the sources used to develop these materials. If you would like more information about any of the topics discussed in today's session, please use this list to locate additional resources.*

- Beale, R., Thompson, M., & Chesler, M. (2001). Training peer facilitators for intergroup dialogue leadership. In D. L. Schoem & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *Intergroup dialogue: Deliberative democracy in school, college, community and workplace* (pp. 227-246). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
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