

### How to Facilitate Group Discussions

The extraordinary events on the national and international front can be triggering emotions, anxiety, and the need to voice one's views. Talking is helpful in coping with stress and anxiety. Group discussions can create an opportunity for constructive dialogue and even help prevent and resolve potential conflict. Student leaders and supervisors may feel a heightened sense of responsibility at this time for facilitating group discussions. By using these guidelines, you can help provide the opportunity to connect people through shared experience, genuine dialogue and potentially healing interactions.

#### *Organize Structured Discussion Groups*

Organized discussions offer a structured time for people to talk, especially if they're talking in the hallways anyway. Publicize the meetings, but make them voluntary. Personally invite people who are particularly loud or assertive, especially if their style is potentially aggressive. If there is already conflict, or high risk for conflict, the meetings may not make things better, but they will rarely make things worse.

#### *Use Ground Rules, and Enforce Them*

It is **essential** to have ground rules. And it is essential that you **enforce them**. In fact, it is better to have no ground rules at all, than to have ground rules, but allow people to ignore them. Be sure you go over the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. Also, be sure that you get verbal or non-verbal agreement from everyone – e.g., people nodding their heads “yes” if not actually saying “yes.” In addition, after reviewing the rules and obtaining agreement, it's helpful to ask if there are other ground rules people want to suggest. Allow the group to consider any ideas even if the group decides they're not necessary or useful for the meeting at hand.

Here are some simple but helpful ground rules.

#### **The discussion stays in the room.**

What is shared in the room, stays in the room. Agree that people can speak for themselves outside the room, but they will not presume to speak for others.

#### **Listen respectfully.**

At the very least, this means allowing people to finish their thoughts, without interruption. If you're concerned that the discussion could be particularly divisive, this is where you can introduce the 'Dialogue' model – where the goal is not to debate, but to really listen, so that each person in turn can be truly heard. (In fact, it is possible for one of your unstated goals to be that you want to teach people what dialogue looks like and sounds like, even more than

getting to the subject at hand. After all, there's always time for the subject in future meetings as long as you create a climate that enables people to talk respectfully about the issues.)

### **Speak from your own perspective.**

Encourage the use of "I" statements, such as "I think," "I feel," "I believe" etc.

### **Agree to disagree.**

In any group we expect different feelings and opinions, and it's no different on this occasion. Remind people that it is our commonalities that connect us, but it is our differences that teach us. Nudge people to genuinely consider the possibility of learning something, but that in any event, if they want to be heard it's in their best interest to listen, too.

Be sure the ground rules are posted so everyone can see them. Also, say that you are committed to holding a genuinely respectful discussion – that if someone inadvertently breaks a ground rule, you'll remind him or her. And add that if someone keeps breaking them, you'll ask them to leave, or at least take a break from the group. In the worst-case scenario, you must end the group before you allow any individuals to repeatedly violate the agreements.

## ***Consider these Principles of Genuine Dialogue***

### **Suspension**

*Suspension* is a commitment to notice and to temporarily suspend our reactions, opinions, beliefs and assumptions. It is being aware of our internal thoughts and feelings -- e.g., "he's naive," "she's uninformed" -- and to put them aside.

### **Identifying Assumptions**

*Assumptions* are our beliefs and opinions about how the world works and what is true for us (e.g., people over 50 don't like to change, silence means people agree with me, silence means people disagree with me).

### **Listening for Meaning**

*Listening* with a willingness to be influenced, as though the speaker is wise, listening as an ally.

### **Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy**

*Inquiry* involves asking others what underlies their opinions ("What led you to that point-of-view?" "What experiences do you base your opinion on?")

*Advocacy* is the act of sharing our thoughts and feelings in relation to others.

### **Reflection**

*Reflection* is the thoughtful contemplation in the search for meaning. It opens the door for creative breakthroughs. It focuses attention on what is going on in the present. It arises from SILENCE -- a time to allow the pieces to move around and suggest new patterns, meanings and relationships to emerge.

### ***Be Gentle***

Encourage people to be gentle – gentle with themselves and gentle with others. Also, emphasize that gentleness includes respecting our differences. We each have our own unique history, memories, stresses, levels of support and ways of coping. Encourage people to slow down, to honor the differences that enable our own ideas to be genuinely considered.

### ***Highlight the Difference Between Dialogue and Debate***

Debate plays an important role in our academic and political lives, but it is not the only framework for expressing ideas. Here are the key differences between debate and dialogue.

#### **Debate**

- differences compete in a win/lose fashion
- driven by individual interest/advocacy
- exploits weaknesses
- designed to increase separation, to distinguish agendas

#### **Dialogue**

- seeks out underlying meaning/principles
- supports strengths
- builds community
- embraces differences while highlighting our commonalities

### **For More Help**

For further assistance and/or consultation, contact:

- **If you work with students**, Counseling Services for Students is available at 2-9494.
- **If you work with faculty and staff**, CARE Services for Faculty and Staff is available at 3-7754.

Also see:

**Supporting Others During Times of Crisis: Tips for Faculty, Managers, Supervisors, Residence Hall Directors and Others in a Leadership Role**, available at [www.uhs.berkeley.edu](http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu).