

# Facilitating a Difficult Discussion

Following distressing local and national events, individuals may experience a broad range of emotions including fear, anger, anxiety, and intimidation. It is important that we address how these situations may impact our team, their interactions and relationships, and their work/personal life, particularly if the situation pertains to discrimination and exclusion against a person's identity.

Facilitating a sensitive discussion can be emotionally charged, especially if colleagues have opposing views and opinions, yet it's important that these meetings are handled correctly to avoid creating resentments or strained relationships.

The following tips may be beneficial to you when facilitating a difficult discussion surrounding a sensitive topic:

## **Manage Your Emotions**

It is natural for you to have your own feelings regarding events, and the topic may not be comfortable for you, however, it's important to remember that your goal is to support your team as they express their feelings and emotions. Thus, it is important as a facilitator that you remain neutral and navigate the topics without becoming emotionally reactive.

If you are feeling anxious or uncomfortable before the meeting, take a moment to practice some breathing exercises or mindful relaxation techniques.

## **Begin with a clear agenda and discussion guidelines**

Open your discussion by reviewing the agenda and the purpose of the meeting. Be clear with attendees that they are in a safe space to confidentially express their views and opinions. Remind everyone to listen respectfully, and allow everyone the chance to speak.

## **Avoid 'blaming' others**

Situations and events which discriminate against a specific community can often result in feelings of resentment and blame. If the discussion becomes a conflict over who is to blame, try to steer the conversation back to how the group is made to feel as a result of these events. In this way, your team can focus on their personal feelings and responses.

## **Try not to fill all silences**

When discussion topics are sensitive and may cause heightened emotions, it's important to give people time to process how they are feeling and what they wish to say. For this reason, try to avoid jumping in and filling silent moments, or cutting people off who may be trying to find the words to describe how they feel.

## **Ask questions that individuals can reflect on**

Try asking questions which allow for individuals to self-reflect on how they may be internalizing or processing their emotions. Use phrases like: "How is this situation impacting me?" or "What support do I need right now?"

## **Do not end the meeting in conflict**

As the meeting comes to a close, ensure that you reflect back on the discussion and opinions you've heard.

Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation and thank everyone for engaging in the discussion in a respectful way. Offer

resources for support, and remind everyone that the discussion was held in a safe confidential space. Make a note of anyone you wish to check in with afterwards to ensure they are ok.

Take a moment for the group to practice a breathing exercise or mindful relaxation technique before ending the meeting.

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