

CDI Guide to Conversations in Times of Crisis

Crises that occur on our campuses or in our communities may provoke a range of emotions and fears. We offer this conversation guide to help campus leaders prepare to host conversations in the wake of distressing events.

1. Assess Conditions for Dialogue

Conversations on every campus may be different. Ask yourself if the time and setting are conducive to having this type of conversation on your campus. Consider factors such as:

- Are participants likely to come to the conversation with at least some openness, rather than a desire to argue or debate?
- Is there a place where the group can gather that offers a sense of confidentiality and psychological safety?
- Are facilitators comfortable setting group norms, handling strong emotions, and pausing if things get too heated?
- Are there additional resources and supports in place for people who need them? Be aware that you may have students who have had prior experiences with similar traumatic experiences. You should have a plan for directing anyone who needs additional support to available mental health resources at your school.

2. Communicate a Clear Purpose

If possible, connect the purpose of the conversation with your institution's or group's values and mission. Emphasize that the goal is not to debate about the factors that contributed to the event, persuade others to a certain point of view, or achieve a particular outcome. Rather, it's to understand each other's feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

This might sound like:

Because we believe in building a culture of mutual respect, we are creating a space for people to express how they're feeling and responding to this moment in a way that's open and encourages understanding.

3. Revisit or Establish Shared Group Intentions

If your institution or group has an existing set of community intentions, reintroduce them and ask participants to agree to do their best to practice those intentions during the conversation.

If you do not already have well-established group intentions, we recommend introducing a list like the one below and asking participants if they can agree to practice these together during the conversation:

- **Speak with care and clarity.** We share our perspectives thoughtfully, with the aim of being understood.
- **Listen with curiosity.** We give others the benefit of the doubt; we seek to understand before we judge.
- **Use your own voice.** We use “I” statements, sharing our own experiences and expressing our needs rather than making assumptions about others.
- **Own your impact.** We take responsibility if our words cause confusion or offense.
- **Embrace discomfort as growth.** We acknowledge that discomfort and ambiguity are often signs of real learning.
- **Honor confidentiality.** We understand that others’ stories are only theirs to tell.
- **Your participation is your choice.** We can choose to pass or step back when we need to.

When members of a community are impacted, it can be helpful to regularly return to shared intentions to co-create a space where everyone feels comfortable participating and heard. Checking in each time a group re-convenes, or scheduling in time to connect about community intentions can be especially helpful.

4. Build Connection

Begin with an activity that meets the solemnity of the moment and allows participants to connect with each other’s common humanity. Invite people to answer one of the following prompts, with a reminder that they can pass if they are not ready to share:

- **Share one word** that describes how you are arriving at our conversation today?
- **Name a value** that feels especially important to you right now.

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- What's a **personal practice, tradition, or ritual** that helps you get through difficult moments?

If emotions are especially raw, you might invite people to talk in pairs or small groups, which can be more comfortable than sharing with the full group.

5. Ask Constructive Questions

Craft a set of discussion questions that are open-ended, accessible to a range of experiences, and invite people to share personal stories and perspectives, not just facts. The questions should focus on aspects of the topic that are most relevant to your stated purpose for the conversation. Consider framing your questions in a past-present-future structure (what happened, how are you feeling now, what do you need moving forward).

Here are two examples of question sets:

- What were your reactions when you heard about [insert brief description of event. For example: *"the shooting at Brown University"*]?
- What have you been thinking about since?
- What do you need to take care of yourself moving forward from here?

Or

- What values are most at stake for you in moments of violence or harm?
- What principles or values do you wish were more prominent in [insert relevant context. For example, *"our community discourse"* or *"American political conversation"*] right now?
- What helps you stay hopeful, even in challenging moments?

6. Guide the Conversation

Remember that a facilitator's role is to guide the conversation, not participate fully in it or drive toward a specific outcome. Your goal is to help sustain the conversation and help the group stick to their shared intentions. Helping the group to adhere to their shared intentions is critical to maintaining an environment and conversational space that feels comfortable and safe for participants.

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To do this, you may need to model how to share your experience. This can be an effective way to set the tone or guide participants through a rough patch. But disclosing your experience of the event can shape the dynamics of the group conversation, so make sure it's an intentional choice.

If you notice a participant failing to adhere to the group's intentions, be sure you avoid shame or blame when pointing out the behavior. The intentions are intentions for a reason – everyone slips up sometimes.

You might say something like: *"I am noticing some interrupting, which was something we wanted to avoid in our group intentions. This can be difficult when so many of you have things you'd like to share. As much as possible, I'd like to invite you to keep to the intention we set, which was to 'speak one at a time' so that everyone can have their voices heard."*

You might use structures like small groups or pairs, go-rounds where everyone speaks in turn, or moments of silent reflection to encourage broad participation and provide processing time for those who need it. If you are planning to use a go-around format, remind people they can choose to pass.

As the conversation unfolds, name the values and feelings beneath people's words and check for understanding.

This might sound like:

It sounds like the ability to speak freely on our campus is really important to you. Am I getting that right?

I hear that you are feeling afraid this kind of event is becoming normalized and that you're confused about what to do to try to make change. Do those feelings – fear and confusion – resonate with what you're experiencing?



7. Make Time for a Closing

Make sure you save time to intentionally close the conversation. Thank everyone for their participation and invite a moment of reflection, either silently or by inviting everyone to respond in a word or phrase. Then, set the stage for future conversations if that's an option in your context.

This might sound like:

Thank you all for being here. It takes a lot of courage to have conversations about a topic as difficult as this. I'm impressed with the care and respect you showed each other.

As we close, what is one thing you heard or experienced today that you did not expect to hear or experience? [Reflect quietly or invite people to share a word or phrase.]

One conversation can't possibly cover everything, and it's normal for things to feel unresolved. You might be leaving with more questions than answers. We'll have more opportunities to talk together [share time or what the conversation will focus on, if known, or say "We'll share details on a future conversation soon."]

