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Tips for Facilitating Difficult Conversations

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Conversations that center around or include areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can be challenging. While there are a number of resources out there that can help you sharpen your facilitation skills, these tips are offered with those DEI conversations in mind. While this list is not a comprehensive breakdown of how to facilitate difficult conversations it does highlight some of those critical tips setting up an environment that allows for growth.

Start with Why

An often overlooked step its to understand why you are trying to facilitate conversations that include topics of DEI. Are you hoping to foster inclusion? Is this to learn from each other? In his book, Start With Why, Sinek (2011) offers that your why taps into the part of the brain of emotion. In a groundbreaking study, Damasio and Immorino-Yang (2007) argue the role of emotions in learning and that our emotions are the driver for learning. DEI has become a topic encumbered with emotions. So it is important to fully understand why you are seeking to have these conversations.

Be Intentional

Along with understanding your why, intentionally is critical. Because you understand your why, you can deliberately approach the conversation. Intentionally will help you structure the meeting and keep you only alert for attempts at detracting from the intention of the conversation. A challenge when facilitating conversations around DEI is the number of related topics, however, if your intention is to discuss disabilities in the workplace it can be to get back on the topic of race. Both topics are within the DEI realm, but race is not the purpose of the current conversation. Not every conversation has to include everything, you can decidedly not include things. Start with why and lead with intention.

Build from Safe to Brave

If you do not have an environment that is not psychological safe, you should consider refraining from these topics because they may cause harm. Once the basic levels of safety have been established it is important to move on to higher levels of safety where the team can contribute their ideas and be challenged. This sets the foundation for a brace space. There are several qualities of a brace space including taking risks, welcoming multiple view points, and challenging with care. A brave space acknowledges that the space may not be comfortable (i.e. safe), but within a trusting relationship it can be a space for connecting, learning, and growth.

Call In More Than Call Out

Along with challenging with care, to facilitate DEI conversations, it is important to call in when possible. Calling someone out brings public attention to their behavior and can potentially

isolate someone or make the space feel unsafe. Calling in invites a more personal conversation about the behavior to biting attention to an individual's harmful words or behaviors. At times it will be necessary to call out harmful behavior, but when possible discuss the issue with the individual in private.

Transparently Manage Dilemmas
No facilitator has all the answers and not every group issue has to be resolved in the moment. If the conversations gets stuck or heats up, name what you observe and help the group see it from a different perspective. Invite the group to be a part of managing issues when they come up. This can help the group see their own internal and interpersonal dynamics and model how to address them.

Recognize the Challenge
A way to be transparent is to acknowledge that these conversations can be challenging and emotionally charged. Pretending that it is like any other conversation or that it is not challenging is unhelpful. Acknowledging that DEI focused conversations can be challenging because people have differing perspectives can help create some connection at the start.

Stay Curious
It is important to remember that not everyone is a great communicator and what is initially stated may not be what was actually meant. Stay open and curious about what people are saying. If something does not make sense ask questions. It is best not to assume intention (even if you know the impact). Staying curious about people's thoughts shows interests and helps build an environment where people can be open.

Allow Time for Reflection and Processing
From a neuropsychology perspective, we need sufficient time to process information in an active way. Not everyone will have an immediate response because they need time to think. This should not be considered a lack of engagement in the discussion, but rather a critical step in their authentic engagement.

Be Kind to Yourself and Others
Conversations focused on DEI topics can active strong emotions. Remember to be kind to yourself and others. Speak with care and compassion. These conversations are not intended to make people feel bad or angry. Kindness is not a strategy to move diversity, equity, and inclusion forward, but being kind to yourself and others can help keep the dialogue moving forward.

Do Not End in Conflict
When bringing the conversation to a close, acknowledge the challenging things that were discussed but do not end in conflict. Thank people for participating and try to highlight positive notes from the conversation. If needed, practice some mindfulness or relaxation exercises to end the meeting. It is likely that not every meeting will go well so when it not going well, have a plan ready so it does not end in conflict.