

Developing Community Guidelines

Community guidelines gives each group member a framework for respecting each other's opinions and respecting and understanding each others' opinions and lived experiences. Guidelines can help dialogues stay on track when conflict emerges. Establishing community guidelines is an essential part of creating a brave, inclusive space. While we believe it is preferable to invite the group to create their own guidelines, in the interest of time facilitators may present a pre-determined list and review it with the group for modifications. Community guidelines should be viewed as a "living document" that are open to modification as needed. The following are the guidelines we have found to be most helpful.

1 Be present and engaged; avoid technology distractions. In order for people to share vulnerably and bravely, they must feel that the other participants are also invested in the dialogue. It is important that all participants commit to being present, stay engaged, and avoid using electronic devices or checking out of the dialogue in other visible ways.

2 Share airtime. In dialogue it can be easy for those participants who feel most comfortable speaking up in large groups to dominate the conversation and for those who are more introverted to stay quiet. However, in order for everyone to grow and learn, it is important to balance who is sharing. Challenge participants to be reflective about how often they are speaking up.

3 Be aware of intent and impact. We often refer to the difference between intent and impact when facilitating dialogue. We remind people that no matter how good their intentions might be, if the impact of what they said was hurtful, then they probably need to apologize.

4 Don't suppress voices. Don't suppress marginal or unpopular voices. Civility does not mean lack of dissent.

5 Expect and accept discomfort (and joy); we are on our learning edge. Learning happens more when you are on your learning edge, not when you are feeling comfortable. Social justice work is uncomfortable. We invite you to view discomfort as an indicator that learning is happening and recognize that new learning can also lead to feelings of pride, understanding, growth and joy.

6 Speak our emotions, as well as our intellect. Our emotional reactions to this process often offer invaluable learning opportunities, and give us insight into processes of which we may be unaware. We will share these responses, including our discomfort, in the spirit of learning and growing; we will try to not attack, blame, shame or dismiss others.

7 Speak from your own experience. Encourage participants to use "I" statements when sharing to avoid assuming others in the room share your perspective.

8 Listen to learn, not to respond; listen harder when you disagree. Unlike typical discussions where people often focus primarily on what they are planning to say next, in dialogue we invite people to listen generously with the intent to understand rather than to interject. Participants should listen even harder when someone is saying something about which they disagree to try to understand their perspective.

9 Do not freeze people in time. The primary goal of dialogue is personal growth. In the most successful dialogues, participants have gone through transformative growth between the first and last session. Dialogue requires that participants take risks, be brave and vulnerable. This inevitably means participants will make mistakes. We often learn the most through making mistakes. Hence, when we ask one another "not to freeze people in time," we are recognizing that we all want the opportunity to grow without being judged or remembered in perpetuity for a mistake we might make along the way.

10 Anticipate unfinished business. Naming from the outset that we will not resolve centuries of oppression in one semester, we invite participants to see dialogue as one step in addressing social injustice and recognize that the work is on-going and that oppression will not be solved in our lifetimes.

11 Take the learning, leave the stories. We hope that participants take what they learn in dialogue and apply it to the rest of their lives. At the same time participants also need to be able to trust that they can be vulnerable and that the stories they share will not be repeated outside of the group. We specifically do not promise confidentiality because we cannot guarantee it, but we believe the underlying concept of confidentiality is maintained by asking people not to repeat others' stories without permission.