



Building a Container for Robust Conversations

[W. Craig Gilliam](#)

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Founder/Owner of Gilliam & Associates, LLC

Having a strong container is essential to have robust, generative conversations, whether in businesses, communities, congregations or other social contexts. I liken the container to an old alchemist's flask. The flask uses the heat generated from the fire and loops it back on itself to transform both the flask and the content. For the alchemical process, the container has to be robust and durable to hold the heat and transform the content. This image of the strong container equates to people, conversation, and change, both individually and systemically. For deep level change, a strong, resilient container is a catalyst.

Whether in a business or other social context, imagine yourself creating a container as part of the preparation for a difficult conversation. The size of the group can be two or 102 people. When people talk honestly and have diverse perspectives, heat is going to be generated out of passion. As such, the container has to be strong enough to hold the heat. Otherwise, it cracks or blows apart, harming those who are part of it. Moreover, the negative emotions from the fallout carry over to the rest of the workplace or community, damaging morale, feelings of fairness, and engagement.

In contrast, if time and energy are utilized to create a stable container, instead of fracturing, the container holds the heat and potentially transforms the participants, the content, the relationships, the system, and the space between them. Thus, this article suggests some best practices and strategies to create robust containers for difficult conversations.

BUILDING A CONTAINER

How can you help build a container so that honest, open, respectful conversations can occur? The following are some components to consider.

The physical setting of the conversation is significant. The physical setting and setup can create opposition or togetherness; an atmosphere of stillness, calmness, and listening; or one of chaos, resistance, and confusion. Be aware of the physical space, for it influences the integrity of the container. Some questions to ask when considering physical space include:

- Is it a space where people can talk honestly, openly, and freely? Is it neutral?
- Is it a quiet location without interruptions?
- Is it clean and clutter-free? Is it spacious and open or aesthetically pleasing?

Sit in a circle when possible. Since early in our history, humans have sat around fires telling stories and making decisions about their future. When people sit in a circle, all on the same level, we are together differently than when standing over or sitting around the boardroom table and not seeing the faces and eyes of others. In some contexts, to sit in a circle might upset the homeostasis too much. In those cases, sit in whatever arrangement is most helpful. Circle is not just about a geometric configuration; it is also about a way of being together.

Create a center. Creating a center that represents the core values of the organization or community is helpful. When we engage in conversations about things that matter to people, it is easy to forget our deeper values in the passion of the conversation. A center representing the core values, mission, and vision of the team or organization can remind participants who they are at their best and what they are in their position to accomplish. A center helps remind us not to confuse the content with the emotional process. Examples might be a statement of the organization's vision, mission, or values; an object that represents the team or organization at its best; or asking group members to bring an individual object that represents them at their best and place it in the center.

Set a clear intention/purpose for the conversation/meeting. A clear intention/purpose serves as a compass and helps people stay focused and on topic. When possible, frame the purpose/intention as an open, honest, high-level question that invites conversation. Only ask the question if you are willing to listen and consider what emerges from the group.

Begin the conversation with what is right, going well, or aspirational. When starting meetings with what is right, working well, going well, or aspirational, groups find more energy, resilience and creativity to address challenges.

Invite each individual to hold his or her space with dignity and integrity. Give attention to the way the invitation and expectations are extended to participants. It is about managing oneself and one's own anxiety and reactivity. If the leader is willing, have the group develop agreements on how they will be together and conduct the conversation and how they will conduct themselves afterwards. The purpose of these agreements is to open and sustain space and safety. Some samples might include making "I" statements in a way that does not belittle those who stand at a different place; treat people with respect and honor their dignity; do not speak for a "lot of people"; if you get anxious, take three deep breaths before speaking.

If appropriate, use a talking object for the conversations. The guideline for using a talking object is that the only one to speak is the one holding the talking object. The challenge for everyone else is to listen with compassion and curiosity. The focus becomes listening, learning, and understanding self and other(s). Using a talking object slows the conversation down and lessens interruption amongst people. It invites and makes space for introverts to contribute along with the extroverts.

Close the meeting and container. Harvest or summarize what was learned, agree on what to do with the information that surfaced in the conversation, acknowledge confidentiality and what that means. Discuss next steps, if needed.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Be aware of the relationships in the group. Be aware of friends and allies, adversaries, relatives, and those who are in opposition. Try to observe the relationship between the people and the context of the system itself. Pay attention to how the differences in culture and other dynamics influence the way the container is formed, grown, shaped, nurtured and sustained.

Moreover, the history of the organization is important as well as the way power differentials, previous conflicts, decision-making, issues of fairness, inclusion, diversity, and equity are acknowledged and have been dealt with in the past. All these impacts the container.

Appropriate vulnerability can help open space and influence

containers. When the leader can be authentic and appropriately vulnerable, it opens the way for others to be vulnerable and can create deep connections. Appropriate vulnerability is not manipulative or coercive, but honest and invitational. Timing, spirit, and context are to be considered.

Safety is an essential component to a container. If the leader, facilitator and/or participants cannot create and sustain a safe space, the container will be compromised. People need to feel safe to be honest, and to go deeper into the conversation. Power differentials are part of the dynamic of safety. Safety can involve physical and emotional threats.

Stay calm and non-anxious. During a conversation if an anxious or tense moment emerges, stay responsive, calm and non-anxious. If the leader can remain calm and non-anxious, it has a salutary effect on the people he or she leads. Calmness and responsiveness is contagious, as is anxiety and reactivity. Conversations and cultivating strong containers are about self-awareness, emotional processes, and emotional intelligence. To regulate the anxiety of the space means to monitor one's own anxiety and reactivity first and foremost. The area around you is only as open as is the space within you. Parallel processes are always at work. Thus, before entering a conversation on difficult topics, do your own inner work.

Moreover, listen for the invitations that honestly emerge from the group conversations. These invitations can serve as the breadcrumbs leading you and your team to the next steps. Befriend complexity. When the invitations that emerge are not consciously considered, resistance, reactivity, and sabotage increase. Acknowledging, acting on, and honoring the genuine invitations that emerge from a group lessens reactivity and resistance and increases the possibility for broader ownership, higher morale, greater wisdom, and deeper engagement.

Another question is how to create genuine meetings between and among people and teams? The philosopher of dialogue, Martin Buber, comments that all real meetings are encounter (Kaufmann, 1970). He contrasts meeting with mis-meeting (Friedman, 1967). Meeting is when people genuinely connect, and as a result, both or all parties leave differently than how they entered. Mis-meeting or mis-encounter (Friedman, 1967) is the description for when people come together but no connection is made. Genuine meeting is relational. Relationship is not necessarily about feeling, but how we behave, function, or perform together and how we are towards another. Positive feeling is a bonus. As humans, we live in the flow and universal currents of the reciprocity of relationships, as Buber comments (Kaufmann, 1970).

In summary, giving attention to the container is essential to constructive conversations that yield positive outcomes in our organizations, workplaces, and personal lives.

This article offers some best practices for creating robust, deep, broad containers for difficult conversations that I have learned as a facilitator in various contexts over the last twenty-five years. Creating a container is not merely a science or "how to" checklist. At its best, cultivating a container is a necessary art and focuses on the space between us and around us. People do not

have to have their way. They want to feel heard, respected, and appreciated. They want to encounter others and themselves as real human beings together solving challenges and making a difference.

A colleague, David A. Hooker, reminded me, people are not the problem; the problem is the problem. Similarly, Chip and Dan Heath stated, "What looks like a people problem often is a situational problem" (2011, p. 18). Our most pressing challenges and opportunities for conversation, change, and evolution are interpersonal nested in the complexity of the intrapersonal and organizational systems, culture and structure. Chaos and disruption create clarity. The container and conversations are partners on the path.

John Paul Lederach offers wise words to guide us as we build the container and navigate the invitational and complex currents of conversation when he writes: "Reach out to those you fear. Touch the heart of complexity. Imagine beyond what is seen. Risk vulnerability one step at a time" (2005, p. 177). To summarize, no container, no conversation.

Agree or disagree, you are invited into the conversation!

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