

## The Art of Difficult Conversations: A Short List of Best Practices

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The following are best practices I have learned over the years working with organizational/congregational leadership as they prepare for difficult conversations. The challenge is how to increase the opportunities for these anxiety producing interactions to yield positive results or, at least, how to increase the possibilities for better outcomes.

Over the years, below are some of those practices I have observed, utilized, and studied. I offer them to you and your workplace or community as you prepare for robust conversations. I trust you will find it helpful.

- **Prepare in advance** both the space around and within you.
- **Seek wise guidance** from a trusted, wise friend, associate, or professional.
- **Have a clear focus or purpose for the conversation.** When possible, put your focus or intention for the conversation in the form of an honest question because questions open space and invite conversation.
- **Focus on curiosity, compassion, and understanding.** Pete Senge frames this as focusing on inquiry rather than advocacy (*The Fifth Discipline*, 2006).
- **Manage yourself** first and foremost. **Focus on regulating** your own anxiety and reactivity. When needed, **take a three deep breath** to calm and ground self.
- **Take a break**, if needed, to calm emotions.
- **Use silence** for heavy lifting. Do not be afraid of the pause or deep silence. Silence is its own language.

- **Take clear stances without steamrolling or sugar-coating.** Practice beforehand on stating your stance, focus, or question in a calm, non-anxious, non-reactive way.
- **Stay connected** to the other person(s) in a genuine way, if possible.
- **Honor their agency**, even if you do not like his/her choices or decisions.
- Regardless of what happens, **be fair, honest, and a person of integrity.**

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