

In this time of increased polarization, there has been interest and concern about how to have productive conversations with colleagues, friends, and loved ones. Below are some suggestions.

Preparation

- **Determine your goal for the engagement.** Do you want to reinforce your own worldview? Build a relationship? Move someone to consider another perspective? The clearer you are about your purpose, the more effective you will be in choosing the most adaptive strategy to achieve your goal. If you are not clear about your purpose, you might want to postpone the conversation until you are.
- **Know your triggers.** It is hard to stay clear, on purpose, and adaptive when we are triggered. What are the physiological signals to watch for to let you know you are triggered? What do you do when you triggered? Withdraw? Attack? Go numb? Appease? Be prepared to recognize and deal with your reaction.
- **Suspend judgement.** Be ready to be curious. Remember that suspending judgement might be an ongoing task throughout an engagement if triggers emerge.
- **Reflect on what you know about the other person.** Who are they? What matters to them? What are their values? What struggles have they had? Who in their life (that they care about) might be impacted about the concerns or issues you most care about?
- **Be prepared to use your intercultural knowledge and skills.** People whose primary orientation is Polarization/Defense (Us vs Them) often experience difference with a sense of fear that something they hold dear (a belief, way of life, etc.) is being threatened. The developmental intervention for people with a Polarization mindset is to support them finding commonalities, even when commonalities with the people they perceive to be “them” are not readily apparent.
- **Remember: Authentic relationships** tend to be built on curiosity, dialogue and empathy, not on ideology, jargon, or the transmission of data.
- **Transformation takes time.** Shifting someone’s mindset will likely take more than one conversation. Check in with yourself about your energy, level of commitment, etc.

Engagement

- Listen to understand. Be sure you aren’t just waiting to plan a response. Continue to listen until the other person feels understood
- Be curious. Ask about their concerns, fears, hopes, and visions for the future.
- Empathize as you are authentically able to do so.
- Share how you are feeling, your concerns, fears, hopes, and visions for the future. Be real.
- Tell stories that help connect their experience, issues, or concerns to those of someone (or a group) who they might have perceived as a threatening “them.” Try to help them discover commonalities to support a shift from “us vs them” to “we.”
- Find stopping points so that you can end a conversation in a place of understanding and then revisit the conversation.
- Once a rapport is established, a follow-up conversation can go deeper through sharing more experiences and stories to support the development of empathy and a more complex worldview.