



Anti-Racism, Equity &  
Human Rights Services

# Tips for Managing Difficult Conversations





## Eight Tips to Manage Difficult Conversations

### 1 Acknowledge your feelings:

Take a deep breath. Acknowledge how you are feeling without allowing shame to interrupt this much-needed step for courageous conversations. It is imperative to check in with yourself, especially during challenging situations. Have empathy and understanding toward yourself.

#### Resources:

[How to Have Difficult Conversations](#)

## 2

Practice active listening. Give full attention to the other person(s) speaking. Active listening entails hearing what the person is saying and paying attention to tone of voice, emotions, and body language. Do you feel threatened? If yes, remove yourself from the situation. If what the person is saying constitutes harassment, a threat, or hate speech, please disengage immediately and, when possible, stop them. If not, listen attentively and minimize interruptions. Summarize what you heard to ensure mutual understanding and to avoid making assumptions.

#### Resources:

- [Silent vs. Active Listening](#)
- [Body Language that communicates you are listening](#)
- [Bystander Intervention for Harassment](#)



## 3 Respect diverse perspectives:

We are committed to respecting and valuing the diversity of our community and the diversity of perspectives we bring. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that all views and ideas are respected, no matter how different they might be from our perspectives.

When engaging in difficult conversations, avoid personal attacks and automatically labeling someone as problematic due to differing opinions. Commit to listening (if safe) and then state your opinion to the other person.

Respecting diverse perspectives does not mean tolerating hate speech, harassment, or threats, and it does not mean a mutual agreement or understanding will be reached. People can disagree and still engage in respectful discourse.

### Resources:

- [Facilitating respectful dialogues in academic settings during times of conflict or crisis - University of Alberta](#)
- [Guide to Respectful Conversations](#)
- [Interpersonal Communication](#)



## 4 Commit to learning the nuances of the issue(s) at hand:

Seek out reliable sources of information on nuanced and complex issues. Consider:

- Taking some time for self-reflection to identify your biases, triggers, and potential growth areas.
- Reflecting on how your social location (personal experiences, beliefs, abilities, race, gender identity, and privileges) may influence your understanding of the issue at hand.
- Challenging yourself to confront uncomfortable truths and be open to unlearning and relearning as needed.
- Researching information from diverse perspectives with an intersectional lens.

- Actively seeking out diverse viewpoints and voices, including those from equity-deserving groups, and asking subject matter experts proficient in discussing these issues or those comfortable speaking with you about these topics.
- Attending talks, workshops, conferences, reading social media posts, and engaging with professional registered organizations (e.g. [Teaching and Learning Exchange](#) (TLX), Local Unions).
- Encouraging dialogue and collaboration with colleagues, students, and experts from different backgrounds to broaden your understanding.

### Resources:

- [TLX Anti-Racist Pedagogy](#)
- [University of Alberta - Teaching During Global and Geopolitical Crisis A Companion Document for Parafaculty Educators](#)
- [The University of Sydney - Managing difficult conversations in the classroom](#)
- [Interrupting Bias: The PALS Approach](#)





## 5 Commit to understanding when to “call in” or “call out”:

Some situations warrant “calling in” or “calling out” folks.

- “Calling in” refers to pulling someone aside for a private one-on-one or smaller group discussion, where they are informed that their conduct was harmful to an individual or group of people. It can also include an opportunity to provide them with resources to support changing their behaviour and making space for an apology to the larger group.
- “Calling out” refers to openly and publicly bringing attention to and addressing a person or group’s harmful comments or behaviours. The intent is to stop the person immediately.

Both approaches have risks. Consider finding allies and support for either approach

### Resources:

- [Harvard University – Calling In and Calling Out Guide](#)
- [Loretta J. Ross: Don’t call people out -- call them in | TED Talk](#)
- [Suzanne Young, Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning - Difficult Conversations in the Classroom\\*](#)



## 6 Commit to taking ownership of your mistakes:

Although you might have had good intentions with your remarks or behaviours, when someone brings to your attention that your remarks or behaviours impacted them in a harmful way, take ownership, listen attentively, and apologize.

If needed, take time to process, research, learn, and/or speak to a support person. When apologizing, ensure it is a sincere apology, and when possible, follow through with a learning process and commitment to actions that bring harmony or understanding.

### Resources:

- [How to Apologize](#)
- [Intention vs. Impact - Infographic](#)
- [Intent vs. Impact - Video](#)





## 7 Commit to understanding others when they make mistakes:

On some occasions, distancing yourself or stopping all communication might be warranted. In other occasions, not communicating stops growth opportunities and makes working and learning environments very uncomfortable. If you have the capacity, try to understand others' perspectives and goals with the awareness that people can learn and change their perspectives. Also, remember, you too will likely make mistakes and will need some understanding from others.

Seeking understanding does not equate to tolerating discriminatory, harassing, racist, or otherwise bigoted speech or behaviours. If you find that you are being treated in a discriminatory way, you can contact human rights advisor at OAREHRS.

### Resources:

- [Human Rights Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#)
- [Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Policy](#)
- [AODA Accessibility Policy](#)



## 8 Understand your rights and responsibilities:

As a GBC community member, you have rights and responsibilities. You have the right to work and learn in a physically and psychologically healthy environment, inclusive and free from discrimination and harassment. You deserve to be free from pestering and differential treatment, regardless of your race, citizenship, place of origin, ethnic origin, disability, creed, age, sex/pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or religious affiliation.

You also have responsibilities. You are responsible for creating an environment that is healthy and inclusive. You are responsible for conducting yourself in a professional manner in compliance with GBC's policies.

If you have witnessed or experienced discrimination or harassment, please contact OAREHRS at [diversity@georgebrown.ca](mailto:diversity@georgebrown.ca).

### Resources:

- [Freedom of Expression Policy](#)
- [Human Rights Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#)
- [Employee Codes of Conduct](#)
- [Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Policy](#)





## Additional relevant resources:

- [Office of Anti-Racism Equity and Human Rights Services \(OAREHRS\)](#)
- [Queen's University - Eight Good Practices for Engaging in Courageous Conversations](#)
- [Develop Interpersonal Skills for Inclusive Workplaces](#)
- [Government of Canada - Best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion in research practice and design](#)
- [Toolkit: Continuing Courageous Conversations](#)

