

# CONVERSATION GROUND RULES

"A conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue." –Truman Capote

Work of any kind requires communication—and you may need to broach difficult subjects. Your challenge is to create open and productive discussions where people feel safe sharing their experiences and perspectives, and are receptive to learning. Start by following some fundamental ground rules for all conversations—whether with colleagues, in a team, or in larger group settings.<sup>1</sup>

1

## ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT.

- Embrace a mindset that talking will lead to something good.
- Put aside your own judgments, viewpoints, and biases to focus on what the person actually means—and recognize that you might not know his or her true intent or what he or she has experienced.
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language, and silence).
- Ask whether you are being understood and whether you are understanding correctly.

2

## ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE—NOT DEBATE.

- Dialogue is open-ended—you express your experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives and learn from someone else's.
- Be open to being challenged, accept the other person's understanding, and retry if necessary.
- Shared learning is the goal—not winning an argument.

3

## HOLD YOURSELF AND OTHERS ACCOUNTABLE FOR DEMONSTRATING CULTURAL HUMILITY.<sup>2</sup>

- Pause for self-reflection and to analyze your assumptions, behaviors, and experiences. Role model this behavior for others.
- Suggest alternative ways of thinking and talking when you see others engaging in biased behaviors.

4

## BE OPEN, TRANSPARENT, AND WILLING TO ADMIT MISTAKES.

- Practice, practice, practice. Honest communication is a skill to be developed.
- Accept the fact that you won't always say the right thing.
- Approach miscommunication with openness and positive inquiry—the goal is to understand, not to accuse.

5

## EMBRACE THE POWER OF HUMBLE LISTENING.

- Don't just hear what someone is saying—listen.
- Put your own ego, assumptions, and viewpoints aside to reflect on and learn from someone else's experiences.<sup>3</sup>

6

## CREATE TRUSTING AND SAFE SPACES—WHERE A LITTLE BIT OF DISCOMFORT IS OKAY.

- Admit that sharing perspectives might involve taking a risk and that it might be uncomfortable.
- Be open to trying different approaches—different people will feel safe in different ways depending on cultural background, experiences, and expectations.

7

## COMMIT TO HAVING CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER BY SPEAKING UP TO BRIDGE DIVIDES.

- Engage in conversations in which people feel valued and respected for their differences.
- Be willing to speak up as a champion for inclusion when you witness difficult situations or exclusionary behaviors, bias, and discrimination.

<sup>1</sup> Catalyst, *Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace* (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Marcie Fisher-Borne, Jessie Montana Cain, and Suzanne L. Martin, "From Mastery to Accountability: Cultural Humility as an Alternative to Cultural Competence," *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2: p. 165-181.

<sup>3</sup> Catalyst, *Inclusive Leadership Training: Leading With Effective Communication* (2016).

