

# Challenging Conversations

At this time, many of us are trying to navigate challenging conversations in the classroom and with individual students and colleagues. It takes courage and it may feel risky. Below are some ideas for making these conversations productive. These ideas are organized in four emotional intelligence groupings as described in the book *Primal Leadership* and also noted in the social and emotional learning literature; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. You will see that the first two groupings—self-awareness and self-management—have to do with the importance of checking in with yourself and managing your own response as a way of supporting others in this conversation.

## Self-Awareness

- Notice if your breathing is stopping in your chest or going all the way into your diaphragm.
- Notice if your breath is slow or fast.
- Notice any muscle tension or clenching.
- Notice how you are feeling.
- Notice any conversations in your mind.

## Self-Management

- Take a deeper breath.
- Take a slower breath.
- Interrupt the conversation in your head.
- Challenge the things you are telling yourself.
- Make intentional choices.
- Identify the values or goals that will guide this conversation such as equity of voice, inclusion, collectivism.
- Ask yourself what is most important to you about this discussion.

## Social Awareness

- Listen
- Empathize; share your understanding of the other person's perspective and feelings, to do this respectfully give them the opportunity to correct your understanding.
- Clarify; ask questions that can help you gain a deeper understanding of the other person's perspective.
- Stay curious about the other person's values or goals.
- Identify underlying interests using empathy.
- Evaluate, discuss and build trust and rapport.

## Relationship Management.

- If you are doing the first three, you are less likely to be shut down. The less shut down you are the more likely you can create a dialogue.
- Reflect to the other person what you heard them say they are feeling or thinking.
- Share your feelings.

- Be aware of your non-verbal communication and make eye contact.
- Reflect on both your and the other person’s values, roles and goals.
- Communicate limits to keep the communication from becoming harmful or traumatizing, for example: no name-calling, explicit recognition that anyone can call a break to gather themselves and/or no interrupting.
- Collaborate to create expectations.
- Try a soft start up with some structure; utilize self-reflection and perhaps questions that give people some control over risk such as questions about family routines, values, rituals, or food.
- If you feel stuck or the conversation is escalating, pause and go back to self-awareness, self-management and/or social awareness.

### **Speaking Up Without Tearing Down**

According to Dr. Loretta Ross “In conversations and debates about social justice issues, insisting someone take responsibility when they say or do something hurtful—regardless of their intent—is a common way to protect vulnerable communities and individuals.” In contrast to calling out she offers the concept of calling in. She says “calling in is speaking up without tearing down”.

She offers the following examples of “how to start a call in conversation”

- “I need to stop you there because something you just said is not accurate.”
- “I’m having a reaction to that comment. Let’s go back for a minute.”
- “Do you think you would say that if someone from that group was with us in the room?”
- “There’s some history behind that expression you just used that you might not know about.”
- “In this class, we hold each other accountable. So we need to talk about why that joke isn’t funny.”

### **Articles**

**Speaking Up Without Tearing Down** by Dr. Loretta Ross

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2019/speaking-up-without-tearing-down>

**Three SEL Skills You Need to Discuss Race in Classrooms** by Amy L. Eva

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/threeselskills\\_you\\_need\\_to\\_discuss\\_race\\_in\\_classrooms](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/threeselskills_you_need_to_discuss_race_in_classrooms)

**Professor Ahmad’s Six-Month Wall: Rehumanizing The Virtual Workplace** by Nancy Doyle, Ph.D.,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/drnancydoyle/2020/09/24/professor-ahmads-six-month-wall-rehumanizing-the-virtual-workplace-with-the-human-touch/?sh=77abf14368ad>

**Fostering Civil Discourse: How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter?** <https://www.facinghistory.org/books-borrowing/fostering-civil-discourse-how-do-we-talk-about-issues-matter>

### **Books**

**Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence (Leading with Emotional Intelligence)**

by Daniel Goleman Ph.D. Richard Boyatzis Annie McKee

**Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High** by Kerry Patterson , Joseph Grenny , Ron McMillan, Al Switzer

**Handout**

**Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics with Students** by Teaching Tolerance A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER TOLERANCE.ORG  
[http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Responding\\_to\\_Strong\\_Emotions.pdf](http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Responding_to_Strong_Emotions.pdf)