

# Courageous/Difficult Conversation

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss a particular conflict resolution process designed to help parties engage in difficult conversations. The particular areas of focus include:

1. When and Why to Have Courageous Conversation
2. Ground Rules and Guidelines for Better Conversation
  - a. Suspend Judgment
  - b. Don't Make Assumptions
  - c. Listen Actively
3. Successful Outcomes of Courageous Conversation

## 1. When and Why to Have Courageous Conversation

When people find themselves in conversation with somebody who has a widely different viewpoint on an important issue, this can often lead to increased tensions and even conflict. However, it is possible to have a productive dialogue about difficult issues by using a method called **courageous conversation**. The goal of courageous conversation is not to change others' opinions or get people to agree with you; rather, the goal is to achieve some form of mutual understanding between the parties.

As a process, courageous conversation aims to shift perspectives and the way people interact with one another, leading to increased understanding. Quite often, one of the biggest problems in conversations about polarizing issues is that each party tends to demonize or label the other. Through that labeling and demonizing, the parties lose their humanity in each other's eyes. If they can instead come together and speak to one another respectfully, that process can do a lot to restore harmony and reduce conflict.

It's important to understand that courageous conversations shouldn't happen in the heat of the moment. If there's been a **provocative event**, meaning somebody said or did something that elicited strong emotion, that is not the time to sit down and try to have a courageous conversation because emotions will be too high for a productive dialogue to take place. Instead, you want to have this type of conversation when both parties are calm and have agreed to come together with the goal of achieving mutual understanding and restoring respect in the relationship.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Courageous Conversation

A conflict resolution process intended to help build mutual understanding between parties with different perspectives or beliefs about highly contentious issues.

### Provocative Event

A statement or action drawing into focus people's differences of belief on highly contentious issues, usually eliciting a strong emotional response.

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## 2. Ground Rules and Guidelines for Better Conversation

If the parties do decide to come together and have the conversation, making that conversation successful will involve establishing some ground rules.

These ground rules need to come from both parties, as opposed to being created by an intervener. The ground rules should take into consideration what each side needs to conduct this conversation productively. Based on these needs, the intervener can then generate a list of ground rules from both sides that everyone can agree to adhere to throughout the conversation.

While the specific ground rules need to come from the parties, there are some more general guidelines that both sides can follow in order to have a better conversation.

*a. Suspend Judgment:* **Suspending judgment** means not evaluating an idea, person, or situation, and instead allowing each person to speak their truth. If you're suspending judgment in a conversation with someone, you're accepting that the person's point of view is their truth. You don't have to accept it as your truth, but you're not going to evaluate the other person based on their view. Instead, you're going to hear that person out.

*b. Don't Make Assumptions:* When having a difficult conversation, it's very easy to make an assumption about what someone on the other side is going to say. You assume you already know where that person is coming from, when in reality, you don't until that person has had a chance to share. Instead of assuming, let the person speak and be heard. You might also want to ask clarifying questions to better understand their viewpoint.

*c. Listen Actively:* Finally, it's important to listen actively. Oftentimes in these situations, it's human nature to want to speak and be understood. However, it's just as important to understand the other side. When you honestly open yourself up to listen to and understand the other side, that openness can be reciprocated. The other side will then listen to you just as actively when you speak. When you do speak, use I-statements to own your feelings and your views as your truth. In this manner, I-statements help you refrain from blaming, which can elicit a strong emotion from the other side.



#### BIG IDEA

Suspending judgement, refraining from making assumptions, and listening actively are all important tools that you can use to have a difficult conversation.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Suspending Judgment

### 3. Successful Outcomes of Courageous Conversation

While having courageous conversations can be challenging due to the high importance of the issues at stake, there have been many successful outcomes of the process.

#### IN CONTEXT

The Public Conversations Project in Boston has been conducting difficult conversations around the country with a variety of groups. The first occurred some years ago with members of both pro-life and pro-choice groups who agreed to come together to engage in a dialogue.

The result of these conversations was not that either side's viewpoint changed, but that there was a real shift in perspective regarding how the sides viewed each other.

Both became much more thoughtful about the language and rhetoric they used to describe each other, which did a lot to de-escalate the conflict and move toward mutual understanding.

It's also possible for these conversations to have success within families and community organizations.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Families sometimes need to have discussions about difficult issues, such as the end of a family member's life. If a family member has a terminal illness, there may be a disagreement between the rest of the family regarding hospice care. While this is an emotional, difficult conversation that no family wants to have, using the method of courageous conversation can help the dialogue to be productive.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** There have been groups who have used courageous conversation in churches when discussing the subject of homosexuality, which can be a contentious issue when people are on opposite sides. The method can also be used for other hot-button, polarizing issues, such as immigration.



#### BIG IDEA

Through courageous conversation, it's possible to come together and have a conversation that will not change your views on the issue, but instead, change your views regarding how you see and interact with the other side.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned **when and why to use courageous conversation** as a conflict resolution method: courageous conversation should occur when both parties are calm (as opposed to during or immediately after a provocative event), and the goal of the process is create mutual understanding by changing not how the parties view the issue, but how they view one another.

You now understand that there are **ground rules and guidelines for better conversation** that should

be established up front. While ground rules must come from the specific parties, the general conversation guidelines are that you should **suspend judgment**, refrain from **making assumptions**, and **listen actively** when the other party is speaking. While the process can be challenging when the issue at hand is particularly polarizing, there have been many **successful outcomes of courageous conversation**, proving that having productive dialogues about difficult topics is certainly possible. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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A conflict resolution process intended to help build mutual understanding between parties with different perspectives or beliefs about highly contentious issues.

### **Provocative Event**

A statement or action drawing into focus people's differences of belief on highly contentious issues, usually eliciting a strong emotional response.

### **Suspending Judgment**

Refraining from evaluating an idea, situation or person.