

Preparing for Tricky Moments in Conversation

A practice handout for OSS conversation guides

Overview

Facilitating conversations takes practice. You will not always feel like you handled a moment perfectly - that is normal.

When Conversation Agreements are clearly introduced at the beginning, you can trust yourself as a guide and trust participants to stay mindful of what is respectful. You can also pause, redirect, or end a conversation early at any point. Taking a break to regroup is always allowed.

The examples below are offered as possible options, not scripts. After each scenario, write language or actions that feel true to YOUR voice.

1. One participant, Cora, keeps asking and answering the questions on the conversation roadmap for themselves rather than asking their partner, Rachel, the questions. The exchange becomes one-sided instead of creating a back-and-forth dialogue with each other.

Example response:

“Excuse me, Cora, can you go ahead and ask Rachel the next question on the roadmap? And then Rachel, can you ask it back? We can go through the rest of the questions this way.”

What I might say or do:	

2. One participant, Jane, really wants to analyze a political issue. Another participant, Maya, is trying to redirect the subject and sending signals that they want to back off from that topic, but Jane isn't getting the hint.

Example response:

"I want to check in. It sounds like there may be different comfort levels with this topic. Let's pause and see where each of you would like to go next."

What I might say or do:	

3. The conversation is across political differences, and the participants stay fairly vague when they address a question about how they describe their "personal political values." Then, as the conversation goes on, they begin remarking how similar they are, and seem perplexed and even a little disappointed that they aren't more different.

Example response:

"This happens. What might you do differently next time to get more into the details of your differences? Would you like to have a Part II to this conversation?"

What I might say or do:	

4. One participant, Gordon, is VERY long-winded, and consumes much more “talking time” than the others.

Example response:

“Pardon me - Gordon, would you like to take a moment to ask Denise or someone else in the group a new question, or a follow up question? I want to make sure we’re taking time to hear everyone’s perspective.”

What I might say or do:	

5. Both participants grew up in evangelical religious communities. They end up in a long academic discussion about the role of Christianity in the founding of the United States.

Example response:

“I’m going to ask us to go back to personal experience rather than analysis. Other than in the news or books you’ve read, how does this show up in your own life or story?”

What I might say or do:	

6. One participant, Emilia, describes a very traumatic memory, and another participant says “I’m sure that was difficult, but I think incidents like that are very overreported and exaggerated in the media.”

Example response:

“I want to pause here and acknowledge what Emilia just shared with us. This isn’t a moment for inserting our own thoughts. Let’s focus on listening to the experience. Do we have any follow up questions or affirmations for Emilia?”

What I might say or do:	

7. In a group conversation, one participant is dominating the conversation and making many sweeping generalizations and disparaging comments about the homeless individuals he sees walking to work every day. Some other participants are nodding in agreement.

Example response:

“I am hearing a lot of generalizations being made. Does anyone else want to share, perhaps a perspective on this we might not have heard yet?”

What I might say or do:	

8. The participants keep involving the facilitator in the discussion, referencing them by name.

Example response:

“This conversation belongs to the two of you - try to speak directly to each other. I’m here to support the structure. José, do you have any experience with what Ray just shared?”

What I might say or do:	

9. A participant repeatedly remarks that their partner Regina reminds them of their own son/daughter, and then makes assuming statements about the partner because their son/daughter is “the same way.”

Example response:

“It sounds like you’re drawing from a familiar relationship, but let’s check in with Regina directly instead. What’s something you’re learning about your partner that stands on its own?”

What I might say or do:	

Reminders for guides

- You are not expected to be perfect.
- You do not need to be completely neutral to be fair.
- You will start to recognize patterns. You may pause, redirect, or end conversations early.
- Participants share responsibility for keeping conversations respectful.

Tricky moments are a small percentage of all conversations. Practice helps!

Notes:	