

LEADING SENSITIVE CONVERSATIONS

This document provides helpful strategies to use when facilitating group discussions about sensitive topics. While the techniques outlined can help to create more open dialogue in any meeting, they will be particularly valuable during potentially difficult conversations in which it's important to hear the perspectives of everyone present.

Use this template to set up and help guide your team through your next sensitive discussion.

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INTRODUCTION

Although many leaders might wish to avoid them, group discussions on potentially sensitive topics are a necessary part of business.

In fact, given that a group of people will inherently have differing perspectives and opinions, if your meetings are entirely devoid of conflict, there is a high likelihood that all people present are not fully sharing their opinions.

Still, there are some subjects that are admittedly touchier than others. And, if group discussions in sensitive areas are handled poorly, the results can range from wasting everyone's time to creating ongoing resentments and strained relationships. Thus, as a meeting leader, it behooves you to manage group dynamics so that you can foster an environment in which people feel "safe" to express their views and engage with one another.

In this type of high-stakes meeting, your goal is to manage your emotions, while also helping the participants to manage theirs.

In this way, everyone can improve their objectivity in the moment, reduce the likelihood of being swayed by knee-jerk emotional reactions, and listen more effectively.

The ultimate goal of these types of discussions is for the group to get all opinions out on the table, while also leaving the room without lingering grudges.



Prepare Yourself to Facilitate a Sensitive Conversation

Few people look forward to facilitating sensitive conversations.

Yet, when these discussions are managed effectively, they can enhance understanding, collaboration, and strengthen teams. Afterwards, group members have increased confidence in their ability to constructively handle these types of topics when they inevitably arise in the future.

As the facilitator, it is normal to have some anxiety when anticipating the meeting. However, managing your own emotions regarding the discussion is essential for laying the groundwork for a productive dialogue.

Therefore, as you prepare:

Be aware of how you are framing the meeting.



Are you expecting the discussion to be “difficult?”

If you’re labeling it that way, you’re much more likely to feel nervous about it!

Instead, it can be helpful to **reframe your perspective** by considering your goals for the meeting.

- Is your desire to have a constructive conversation in which everyone contributes?
- Do you want to hear a variety of opinions, even though some may be different from your own?
- Do you want to ensure that there are no unspoken “elephants” in the room?

Reminding yourself of your goals and recognizing that disagreements aren’t “bad,” can help you to approach the meeting in a more positive frame of mind.



Be mindful of the psychological factors that can influence group discussions.

Although some leaders assume that because it is “business,” participants will leave their emotions at the door, the reality is that each person comes to work with unique perspectives, experiences, biases, and feelings.

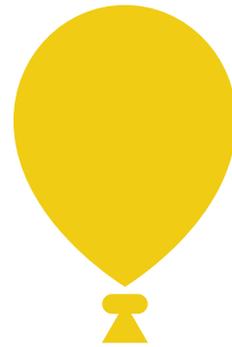
If you are not factoring in the role of emotions and group dynamics, you will limit the effectiveness of the meeting.

Prepare to deal with your own anxiety.

When discussing sensitive topics, there may be moments at which you, as the facilitator, might feel uncomfortable or “on the spot.” To address this, practice deep breathing (also known as diaphragmatic breathing) ahead of time, so that when needed, you’ll have it on-hand as a well-practiced skill.

To practice diaphragmatic breathing:

1. Start by pretending that you have a balloon in your abdominal area.
2. Slowly and gently inflate the imaginary balloon during your inhale (i.e. your waistband should expand).
3. Then let the air seep out as you exhale (i.e. your waistband will be moving back towards you).
4. Continue to breathe in this way until you feel yourself relaxing.



Research has shown this form of breathing can calm your body down and help you to clear your thoughts during heated moments.



DRAFT MEETING AGENDA

You'll create the bulk of the meeting agenda to fit the specific topic of the meeting. The draft agenda provided here will help you successfully open and close this discussion.

- ① **Welcome**
- ② **Commit to Discussion Guidelines**
- ③ **Discussion**
(replace with additional topics as needed)
- ④ **Closing**

Other meeting processes that may be combined with the guidelines provided in this template:

- [Structures for Making Decisions with a Group](#)
by Rick Lent
- [Five Meetings for Remarkable Leaders](#)
by Paul Axtell
- [An Urgent Problem Solving Meeting](#)
by Elise Keith



STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

Before the Meeting

If the meeting has an agenda, make sure to send it out ahead of time. Doing so will give everyone a chance to get their thoughts together and support those in the group who are more comfortable when they are able to process information ahead of time.

Scheduling

Make sure to allot adequate time.

To handle a sensitive topic well, the group will likely need time to work through it. Be aware that it may take people a bit of time to warm up and get comfortable enough to express their true opinions. So, make sure to set aside ample time to do the subject matter justice.

As a rule of thumb, add another 5-7 minutes per participant to your expected meeting length.

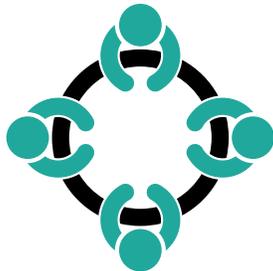
Get Ready to Present the Guidelines

You'll find sample discussion guidelines below, and an explanation for each. Review these and determine whether to make any changes that will help the guidelines speak better to the situation facing your group.

You'll present the discussion guidelines during agenda item two. Decide in advance how you want to do this. For example, you may want to write them on a flip-chart if you're meeting face-to-face, hand them out, or create a presentation. The draft agenda in Lucid Meetings includes a sample presentation you can edit.



Prepare the Meeting Space



Best: In Person

The ideal environment for meetings about sensitive topics is in-person.

Being able to see participants' nonverbal behavior gives you, as the facilitator, helpful data about how they are responding to the content and to one another. A clenched jaw, exchanged glance, or look of despondency can communicate much more information than the words that someone chooses to express.

The ability to see their colleagues can also help meeting participants assess others' reactions, and reduce miscommunication.

Whenever feasible, aim to have sensitive meetings in-person.



Acceptable: Video Conferencing

If you can't meet in-person, work to get any remote participants on video so that you can gauge their responses.



Undesirable: Audio Only

Finally, if the meeting is only able to be done by phone, it can become much more challenging to keep everyone focused and present. This tends to be even more problematic for sensitive topics, when people might be more prone to disengage as a defense mechanism.

If you must meet online and can't use video, you will need to keep track of who is speaking up, and do your best to draw out those who remain quiet.



DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

- Approach the discussion with a sense of curiosity, a willingness to learn from others' perspectives and experiences, and a desire for constructive dialogue.
- Accept every person's perception as being true for them.
- Avoid making judgments about others. Assume positive intent and be empathetic.
- Speak only for yourself.
- Be mentally present. Stay engaged and guard against "shutting down."
- Say it here. Say it now.
- Listen actively to everyone. Avoid interrupting, side conversations, checking smartphones, and other distractions.
- Be courageous and authentic. Share with others what is going on in your mind, even if it isn't very pretty. Express your feelings genuinely.
- Support others in their efforts to broach uncomfortable topics or experiment with unfamiliar behaviors.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Hold one another accountable for adhering to these guidelines.



Facilitator's Guide to these Discussion Guidelines

Approach the discussion with a sense of curiosity, a willingness to learn from others' perspectives and experiences, and a desire for constructive dialogue.

Emphasize that an attitude of openness is essential to having a productive dialogue. To guard against participants staying stubbornly wed to their opinions, encourage them to strive to be willing to be influenced by what others in the meeting have to say. (Or, as written so eloquently in Stephen R. Covey's [*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*](#), "Seek to understand, as well as to be understood").

Accept every person's perception as being true for them.

Reinforce that each person comes to the meeting with their own unique backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Even though you might not agree with that person, accept that person's point of view is true for him or for her.

Avoid making judgments about others.
Assume positive intent and be empathetic.

Guard against making evaluative judgments about each other. Again, just because you disagree with someone's opinion, that doesn't mean you should judge the person negatively. Assume the individual is coming from a positive place and try to empathize with him or her. Consider the content of what the individual is saying, as opposed to judging the person.



Speak only for yourself.

Sometimes, people can distance themselves from a topic or avoid expressing their own opinion by saying “we” instead of “I,” or by speaking on someone else’s behalf. Let each person speak for himself or herself.

Be mentally present.

Stay engaged and guard against “shutting down.”

Encourage participants to stay mentally engaged in the conversation. Particularly if they are calling in remotely, have them commit that they will not multitask. Further, if group members feel themselves “shutting down” in response to something that is said, encourage them to deep breathe, and do a quick internal check to see what they are telling themselves about the situation that is causing them to disengage. Suggest they remind themselves of the importance of having a constructive discussion, so that they can reengage with their colleagues.

Say it here. Say it now.

Stress that this is people’s opportunity to speak up with their opinions. If they have a thought, now is the time to say it.

Listen actively to everyone.

Avoid interrupting, side conversations, checking smartphones, and other distractions.

Encourage participants to use effective listening techniques. Avoid interrupting your peers or having sidebar conversations, in which people talk quietly amongst themselves, as opposed to the group as a whole. Have the group commit to waiting until breaks to check smartphones.



Be courageous and authentic. Share with others what is going on in your mind, even if it isn't very pretty. Express your feelings genuinely.

Point out that sometimes, expressing an opinion that might be unpopular requires courage. Stress the importance of hearing everyone's opinions so that the group can make well-informed decisions.

Support others in their efforts to broach uncomfortable topics or experiment with unfamiliar behaviors.

Emphasize that people will only be willing to speak if the group creates a "safe" space. Therefore, people need to be supportive of one another and assume positive intent, even if something is worded imperfectly.

Maintain confidentiality.

Stress that confidentiality is critical. If group members violate this by talking about the discussion with others after the meeting, it will undermine trust, and reduce the group's ability to have open dialogue in the future.

Hold one another accountable for adhering to these guidelines.

Have the group agree to hold one another accountable to the guidelines. This doesn't have to be done in a "policing" sort of way, but rather, in the spirit of trying to encourage constructive dialogue.

While these guidelines are particularly helpful for sensitive topics, they are also useful to use on a regular basis for meetings. Using them frequently can help the group to become effective at engaging in open and constructive dialogue. That way, when sensitive conversations do arise, the group is already well practiced at speaking up, listening to one another, and staying engaged.



Leading the Discussion

1

Welcome the Group

Outline the purpose of the meeting and review the agenda, if applicable. Thank everyone for attending and stress the importance of the meeting. Let the group know that you value hearing all perspectives, and want to hear from each person and have them engage with one another during the meeting.

2

Introduce the Discussion Guidelines

Acknowledge that, given the topic, the meeting may be uncomfortable at times, and that therefore, it will be useful for the group to agree to some guidelines for the discussion to follow.

Use the following steps when reviewing the prepared guidelines:

1. Provide a brief explanation for each guideline.
2. After you have reviewed all of the guidelines with the group, ask them for their thoughts.
3. Ask if people have ideas for any guidelines that should be added to the document.
4. Ask if anyone disagrees with any of the guidelines, or sees them as not applicable to the group. Have the group discuss any points that come up.
5. Finish by having each person commit to following the agreed-upon guidelines (either by a show of hands, or by affirming their commitment out loud).

While you might be tempted to rush through this process, resist the urge to do so. Setting the tone for having a constructive conversation is critical - without it, people are less likely to speak up.

Once the group has discussed and agreed to the guidelines, move on to the next topic on your agenda.



3

Lead the Discussion

Dive into the subject matter.

To maintain safety during the discussion, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Make sure you are following the agreed upon discussion guidelines** yourself, by modeling openness to others' perspectives, empathetic listening, etc. If the facilitator is not engaging in these behaviors, it reduces the chances that others will.
- **Hold the group accountable to the guidelines.** So, if for example, someone is interrupting, or speaking for someone else, redirect him or her.
- **Manage your emotions in the moment.** Although you are the facilitator, it's normal to feel anxiety at times. Use your diaphragmatic breathing to calm down, if needed.
- **Get comfortable with silences.** At times, people may need a chance to process the information or get their thoughts together before they speak. If you jump in too quickly when the group is silent, you run the risk of cutting off potentially productive dialogue.
- **Solicit the opinions of those who are quiet.** If there are people in the group who are not speaking up, ask their opinions. Doing so can help to keep people engaged. Further, during active and emotional discussions, it might help some of the introverts, who might be having difficulty getting a word in edgewise.

Once the group has concluded the planned discussion topics, move to close the meeting.



4

Closing

Start by reinforcing the importance of the discussion that occurred.

Thank everyone for contributing, and express your appreciation for their willingness to engage on the topic. Stress that being able to have conversations like this helps to make the group stronger.

Then, review any decisions that were made, next steps, and assignments.

Finally, thank the group again and invite their feedback. Did they find the guidelines useful? Did they feel the meeting accomplished what it need to?

Take some time either as a group before leaving or individually after the meeting to talk about how these discussion guidelines worked so you can learn ways to improve the process in the future.



After the Meeting

Send out the follow-up email to all involved, which makes sure everyone gets their action items and a full report in their email.



RESOURCES FOR MASTERING SENSITIVE CONVERSATIONS

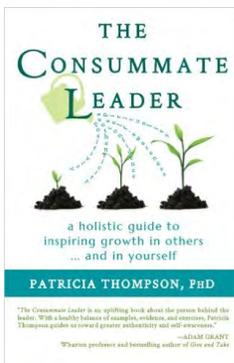


Websites

Patricia Thompson's website and course material
www.silverliningpsychology.com

[The Executive Mindfulness Online Course](#)

[Infographic: The Benefits of Mindful Leadership](#)



Books

Patricia Thompson, PhD,

“The Consummate Leader: a Holistic Guide to Inspiring Growth in Others...and in Yourself” 2014
<https://smile.amazon.com/Consummate-Leader-Holistic-Inspiring-Yourself/dp/0996047905>

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler,

“Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High, Second Edition” 2011
<https://smile.amazon.com/Crucial-Conversations-Talking-Stakes-Second/dp/0071771328>



Lucid Meetings Blog

<http://blog.lucidmeetings.com/blog/a-mindfulness-based-technique-for-facilitating-a-group-through-a-sensitive-discussion>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This template was designed by Patricia Thompson, PhD, founder of Silver Lining Psychology.

Dr. Patricia Thompson is a Corporate Psychologist and founder of Silver Lining Psychology, a management consulting firm devoted to helping businesses flourish by making well-informed hiring decisions, cultivating talent, and developing a positive organizational culture. Notable clients include The Home Depot, Baylor Scott & White Health, SunTrust Banks, Mercer, Chick-Fil-A, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, the United Way, Performance Food Group, the Georgia Department of Revenue, Colonial Pipeline, and others.



Dr. Thompson enjoys helping others achieve greater success by drawing on the science of positive psychology. She is the creator of [The Executive Mindfulness Online Course](#), and the author of *The Consummate Leader: a Holistic Guide to Inspiring Growth in Others...and in Yourself*. Her work is featured in the Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, Entrepreneur, Money Magazine, The Huffington Post, Time, The CEO Magazine, Investor's Business Daily, Monster.com, CareerBuilder, and a host of other sites, sharing valuable business advice.

On a personal level, Patricia enjoys playing tennis, classical piano, working out, reading, meditating, and writing. She lives in Atlanta with her husband and son.

For more information about Dr. Patricia Thompson, visit: www.silverliningpsychology.com.

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