



# Prepare for a Curious & Courageous Conversation

Before engaging in a curious and courageous conversation with another person, prepare by spending the time to be clear on these questions. Push yourself to reflect on issues from the other person's point of view. The more you consider the other person's perspective, the smoother the conversation is likely to progress.



## **A. WHO & WHY?**

» With whom do you need to have a curious and courageous conversation with? \_\_\_\_\_

» Why is it important and what do you hope to achieve from meeting with the person?

*For example: Do you hope to achieve a better working relationship going forward, re-establish a friendship, or bring some closure to a situation?*

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## **B. LOOKING BACK**

Think about your last conversation with this person.

Only part of what is going on in our heads is verbalized and often, the unspoken information, expressed through body language, tone, and facial expressions, colours a conversation just as much, if not more, than words.

- » What did you say?
- » What did they say?



- » Were you afraid to ask the key question on your mind?
- » What held you back from asking?
- » Why did you hold back the way you did?

- » What assumptions were you making about the other person and their intent? (By intent we mean the other person's conscious purpose for doing something.)

*For example: Did you assume that they meant to exclude or shame you or do you think they simply forgot to include you?*

- » What were you thinking, but kept to yourself?
- » What do you think they were thinking but kept to themselves?

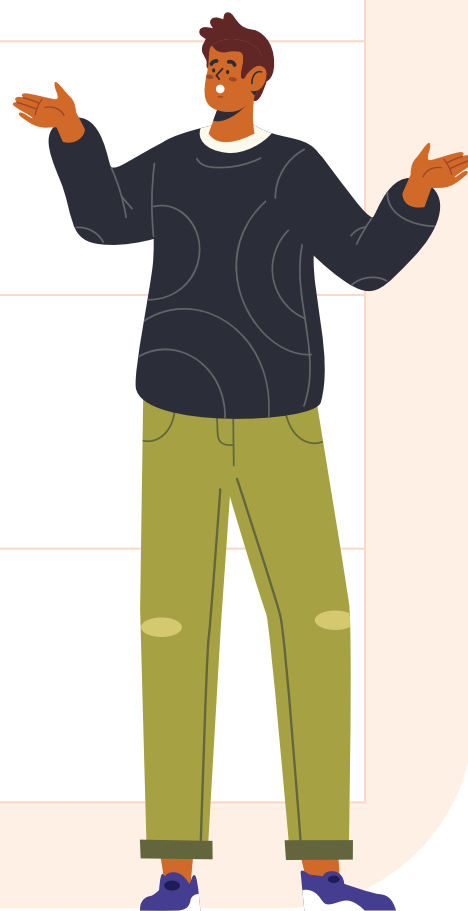
- » What went well during the conversation?

*For example: Did you remain respectful and open to hearing what the other person had to say?*

- » What do you wish you handled differently and how?

*For example: Did you wish you had sought clarification on an important point or ended the conversation sooner?*

- » What was left unresolved?



## C. THE THREE CONVERSATIONS

Think about the three conversations: the What Happened, Emotions, and Identity.<sup>1</sup>

What happened?



### THE “WHAT HAPPENED” CONVERSATION:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |  |
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| » Is it important for you to be right?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |  |
| » How would the conversation go differently if you demonstrated curiosity and checked out your assumptions about what happened, their intentions, and what you know? What information do they have access to that you don't?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |  |
| » On what facts can you agree and build upon? (Finding common ground can help build momentum in a conversation.)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |  |
| <p>» What are your intentions? Do they know your intentions? What do you believe their intentions are? What would happen if you assumed positive intentions on their part?</p> <p><i>(Intentions are different from impact. As described above, intentions refer to the conscious thought behind someone's actions and what they are trying to achieve. Impact, on the other hand, is the effect those actions have on you or others, regardless of the original intent.)</i></p> <p><i>For example: Someone's intention might be to score an 80 on a project. To achieve this, they might take on 90% of the work themselves. Their focus is on meeting a performance goal, not necessarily on excluding you. However, the impact on you might be feeling undervalued, or like your contributions don't matter. As you reflect on a situation, consider both the intentions behind others' actions and the impact those actions had on you.</i></p> |  |



» **How might you share the impact and demonstrate vulnerability to advance the conversation?**

*For example: You could say, “I don’t think you meant to be dismissive, but when you took on nearly the whole project, it made me feel like my contributions weren’t needed, like my ideas didn’t count. The impact on me was that I felt unnecessary, even like I didn’t deserve the grade.”*

» **What has been your contribution to the situation? What have you done or not done that may have contributed to what happened?**

*For example: Was your email so cryptic that it left room for misunderstanding? If so, you might say, “I reread my email and can see how it might have come across as if I didn’t want to work with you on the project. That wasn’t my intention and I’m sorry if that’s how it landed. I do want to work with you and value your input.”*

*What if you were late to a meeting, which caused the group to rush and skip discussion? You could say, “I’m sorry I was late for the meeting. I realize that caused us to cut into our discussion time and meant that not everyone could share their put. I wonder if we could schedule a follow-up so everyone has a chance to contribute fully.”*

*(By acknowledging your contribution, it can aid in understanding that both parties contributed.)*



## THE “EMOTIONS” CONVERSATION:

» What emotions are you experiencing with this conversation?

» What emotions do you think they might be experiencing? How do these emotions make you feel?

» When a conversation becomes emotional, it is important to pause and address the emotion(s). What might you ask if you notice the other party getting emotional?

*For example: If the other person seems quieter, avoids eye contact, or checks out of the conversation you might say, “Hey, I notice you’re a bit quieter now, have I said something, or not said something that is bothering you?”*

*If someone is raising their voice or dismisses everything, you might say, “It seems like you might be upset I just want to check in, did I say something that upset you? I’m noticing that your voice is a bit louder, and I want to make sure we’re on the same page. Is everything okay?”*

*(When you demonstrate curiosity about what might be distressing for them or share what is emotional for you, you are enhancing trust and advancing understanding.)*



**THE “IDENTITY” CONVERSATION:**

This conversation may be the most fundamental yet most risky. When someone challenges our identity, it can feel incredibly threatening. We may fiercely try to protect it, which will make the conversation too high stakes and not go well.

*For example, if you are running a project and someone questions you, it may feel threatening to your role and identity as a leader. Or if an academic advisor questions your request for an accommodation, it may trigger old identity issues of not being trustworthy or shame of having a mental health issue.*

**Think about your own many identities.  
List as many as you can, then list 10 more.**



**I AM...**

*These may include being queer, a scone baker, a biochemistry and math student, a beginning base guitar player, a little brother, the “fun” uncle, an early riser, a Labrador Retriever lover, a coffee enthusiast, a horror picture aficionado, etc.*

It is important that you have a wide and deep sense of your identity because it will help you be more present and stable during a courageous conversation. If the other party challenges one of your identities, you have many, many more to lean on. You will feel stronger and more able to maintain your curiosity.

**During the conversation, if your identity issues are triggered, you can remember that you are multidimensional.**

*You can reflect and say to yourself, “Wow, I can see my identity issues of being a successful biochemistry student is being triggered. Okay...but I am more than that. I am also a wicked good uncle, and I am good at math.” (This will help you recenter and re-engage in the conversation.)*

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**What identity issues do you think may be at stake for the other person?**

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## D. THE INVITATION TO TALK

When you invite someone into a conversation, it's important to do so thoughtfully, knowing that they may not be ready to engage. Be prepared for a "no" and have a response ready that respects their space while keeping the door open for future dialogue.

*For example: "I understand that you might not want to talk about this right now, and I respect that. If you feel ready to discuss it later, I'm open to having that conversation. Our working relationship is important to me, and I want to make sure we're both on the same page."*

### DRAFT YOUR INVITATION IN YOUR OWN WORDS

## E. CONVERSATION STARTER FRAMEWORK

Prepare How You Will Start the Conversation – In This Order

### STEP 1 THANK



**Thank** them for meeting with you.

*For example: "Thanks for talking with me about Saturday, I appreciate it."*

### STEP 2 FACTS



Start by **describing the facts** as you see them, understanding that the other person likely see things differently. Provide details on what actually happened, it will help ensure that both parties align on the sequence of events.

*For example: You might say, "Last Saturday evening when we were meeting for the Student Experience event, you were late. I texted you but didn't get a response. Sarah was eager to head out, so we decided to go ahead, and I texted you to meet us at the venue. I didn't hear back, so I ended up just hanging out with Sarah. I'm not sure how you experienced the night though."*

### STEP 3

#### ASSUMPTIONS



**Describe your assumptions**, while being open to learning which of ones may be off the mark.

*For example, continuing with the previous scenario:*

*You might say, "I assumed that you made other plans, which is why I didn't hear from you. Looking back, that might not have been a fair assumption, and maybe I should have come to your dorm room to check in on you."*

### STEP 4

#### IMPACT



Talk about how the situation **impacted** you. The more open and vulnerable you are, the more likely it is that the other person will lower their defenses.

*For example: "It made me feel really badly, like you were ghosting me, even though I know that might not have been the case. I just didn't know what was going on."*

### STEP 5

#### ASK



**Ask** for what you need. This step allows you to be proactive in shaping the outcome of the conversation. It might involve seeking more information, checking in with your assumptions, or exploring whether the relationship can be repaired. The key is to be specific about what you need and want moving forward.

*For example: "I would like to understand what happened from your perspective, and whether I might have upset you somehow. I also want to know if you are still interested in hanging out together again."*



## F. AFTER YOUR CURIOUS AND COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

Now is a time to reflect on what you think you did well and what you would like to do differently next time to enhance your skills.

It can be difficult to have these conversations, but practicing will make them easier and smoother over time. Demonstrate compassion for yourself as you reflect. Give yourself some grace.

**What you did well (write at least five things that you are proud of):**



**What can you do differently next time (to file away and review later):**



Special thanks to Dr. Chandlee Dickey at the University of Western Ontario for contributing to this worksheet.

### Reference

1. Stone D, Patton B, Heen S. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin Books; 2010.