



THRIVING WORKPLACE

Creating the space for conversation

Creating the physical and mental space for conversations is an important and often overlooked step. Taking time to do this increases the chances that your conversation will promote trust and respect such that participants can speak – and be heard – without fear of retribution. Creating the space for conversation established the critical conditions for open dialogue, inclusivity, and an engaged workplace.

How do you create the space for conversation?

Reacquaint yourself with the definition of conversation. Remember that conversations are multi-directional; otherwise, it's a lecture. Encourage contributions by everyone at the table. Ask questions. Listen with intent (you should aim to listen about 80% of the time). Conversations should be focused, frequent, and look to the future; don't try to tackle everything in one sitting. Conversations are real; acknowledge that some conversations can feel uncomfortable. And remember, real conversations require trust. You can't demand trust, but you can create explicit parameters – an open-door policy, a track record of fairness, a celebration of differences – that can foster it. (See more tips for thriving conversations [here](#)).

Think about environment. When having a one-to-one conversation, eliminate the barrier of a desk and forgo the telephone; get out of the office, or grab a cup of coffee together. If it's a group conversation, consider a different, flexible venue, or a room with moveable tables and chairs. Changing the venue can help colleagues think and act in different ways, and transform a conversation.

Establish the rules of engagement. When facilitating a team conversation, encourage the group to develop their own ground rules whenever possible. A quick way is to start with a short list and invite people to add parameters that they think would help the group engage in a safe and productive conversation; this helps people know what is expected, establishes a policy of respect, and allows everyone to be heard. Establishing ground rules also includes creating confidentiality boundaries. Once the ground rules are in place, follow them and hold yourself and others accountable for adhering to them.

Set the tone. Create a comfortable, distraction-free environment and model the behavior you want to see in the conversation. Encourage participants to speak from their own experience, and recognize that viewpoints are rarely universal.

Mind your role. Are you an active participant in the conversation or a facilitator? It's difficult to manage the responsibilities of both. If you need or want to be part of the active conversation, consider asking a colleague to be the facilitator so you don't have to keep track of details like time and fairness of airtime.

Put smartphones away and out of sight. Focus on the people in the room, not the virtual ones and other distractions on the screen of your phone.