

Conflict conversation guide

Addressing conflicts or concerns with honesty and compassion is critical to keeping the Forum safe and maintaining trust and respect. The Conflict Conversation Guide helps two individuals talk through and listen to an issue that has come between them. The Moderator facilitates the conversation, coaching both parties through as needed. See Moderator facilitation notes at the end of this guide.

Person with the concern shares:

- "I have a concern I'd like to share. Is now a good time?" (If not now, agree on a time.)
- "The specific facts as I remember them are..." (Pure, observable and objective facts; not judgments, attacks, conclusions)
- "This leads me to think/wonder..." (This is a way to share our interpretations, theories, wondering and conclusions about this set of facts. Our thinking may be right or it may be wrong; the important thing is to own it using "I" language.)
- "I feel..." (Honestly share the emotions you feel; once again, owning them, even if they're negative feelings like being angry or disappointed. Emotions are always shared in words, not sentences. "I feel like _____" is not a feeling.)
- "The part I've played in this is..." (Try to take ownership for some part of what's gone wrong.)
- "What I specifically want or hope for is..." (Describe what you're hoping for from the person; this paves the way for resolution and closure.)

The person/group listening to the concern responds:

- "Let me see if I understand you..." (Paraphrase what you've heard; no interpretation, reaction, rebuttal or explanation. Just "catch the message" as it was shared, be thorough and try to put in your own words everything you've heard.)
"Is that accurate? Did I miss anything?" (Check to see that you got it right.)
- "Is there more you'd like to share?" (Ask with sincerity. It takes courage for your Forum mate to be honest with you.)
- "Have you said everything you want and need to say?" (If yes, then offer your response.)
- Person listening responds: "Thank you."
- "My reaction to hearing your concern, my feelings and my thoughts are..." (This is not an explanation, but a chance to say what it felt like to hear this; eg, "I feel surprised and embarrassed, I did realize being late a few minutes bothered you.")
- "My response to what you want is..." (Respond to what they have said they wanted; can you meet their request, or do you want to negotiate it or counter-propose?)
- "What I want or need from you is..." (There may be something you need in order to resolve the issue; share it.)

Moderator tips

Facilitating a conflict conversation

- Everyone participating in, or listening to, the conversation should have a copy of the Conflict Conversation Guide in front of them and be familiar with it.
- Request that all those not directly in the conversation maintain quiet, respectful listening and not jump in.
- Remind the participants that you will be helping them follow the guide as they share and listen. You may intervene to guide the process.
- Remind participants of the importance of "I" statements to take ownership of their experience, and to avoid "you" statements, which are more likely to feel attacking in nature.
- Follow the sequence of the conversation guide. If you're feeling lost at any point, stop the conversation and inform the two parties: "Let's stop for a moment to notice where we are in the process." This will help redirect them back to the sequence of steps.
- It is very important for the person with the concern to fully share their thoughts and feelings, and not hold back the negative emotions. Some people need support to be really honest in doing this.
- It is very important that the receiver paraphrases the most important, emotionally charged parts of the sender's message. They may need help to do this.
- By the end of the conversation, the individual with the concern needs to truly be able to say they can now let it go, that it has been cleared.
- The receiver also needs to feel as if they have said everything they need to say. They should also feel clear.
- Sometimes, action steps or commitments result from this process. If they do, restate these at the close of the conversation.
- Ask for any observations or feedback from the observers.
- Acknowledge and thank the two participants.

9. Clearing the air

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EO chapter	South Florida
Shared by	Cesar Quintero
Type of exercise (icebreaker, team-building, closing, etc)	
Time required for this exercise	
Objective of the exercise	
Outcome of the exercise	
Tools needed	
Handouts and pre-work if any	

Objective of the exercise

The foundation of a high-functioning Forum is its ability to maintain a safe environment. There are several fundamental behaviours that allow this safety to exist: Confidentiality, Forum Mindset (Gestalt) and personal responsibility. A behaviour that is at the core of personal responsibility is recognizing and acknowledging conflict. If a situation arises where a member feels conflicted about another member, their responsibility is to go to the source of that conflict and have a conversation with that person in order to put that conflict to rest for their own benefit, that of the other individual, and to maintain the safe environment of the Forum.

In a perfect Forum with all members dutifully practicing personal responsibility, nothing would have to be done to maintain this safe environment, which is foundational to creating a high-value Forum experience. The reality, however, is that no Forum is "perfect." Populated by humans with varying degrees of emotional intelligence, maintenance of the safe environment is often necessary.

One highly effective process introduced within the Forum communities and adopted by other Forum groups in EO, HBS Alumni Forums and others is called "clearing," "issues clearing," or "clearing the air." The details of this process have some variation across communities and Forums. What follows is a description of the process that I have evolved and used both in my own Forums, and with many other Forums in my role as a Forum retreat facilitator.

"Clearing the air"

Clearing requires someone to lead the group through the process. This can be an outside facilitator, the Forum's Moderator, or if the Moderator has something that they need to clear with another member, they can have their Moderator-elect or elect-elect lead the process. If the Forum is not experienced with this process and the Moderator is aware of a significant, unresolved conflict, then engaging a facilitator to both lead the process for the first time, as well as teaching the Forum how to utilize this process on their own at future meetings, may be a wise decision.

- Clearing the air can be used when needed, or more proactively on a quarterly basis as part of the Forum's annual rhythm.
- Ideally, make sure all members of the Forum have advanced notice that the clearing will be happening at the following meeting. This can be a catalyst for members who are aware of a conflict to reach out directly to a member they have a conflict with and work to resolve it one-on-one prior to the issues clearing in the Forum meeting.
- Schedule the clearing at the beginning of the meeting with enough space and flexibility in the agenda to avoid feeling rushed or running out of time, as the length of this process can vary. My experience has been that after a well-run clearing, members often feel very open to each other, and this can have a very positive impact on the safe environment for the balance of that meeting.

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9. Clearing the air - continued

- Whoever is leading the clearing process should be the first to share, setting the tone and allowing that person to focus all of their attention to facilitating the overall session.
- There are three parts of the clearing process.
 1. The first round
 2. The clean-up round
 3. (Optional) The facilitated communication session if there are still any members who are not clear with each other after the clean-up round.

Note: If the members who have an unresolved conflict have not discussed this before, then they may wish to get together prior to the next Forum meeting on their own. If they have already tried to resolve the conflict and have been unsuccessful and are not comfortable processing the conflict with the facilitated communication process in front of the Forum, they are welcome to have the facilitated communication done mid-month with the assistance of the Moderator or another member of the Forum. The advantage of having the facilitated communication take place in the Forum meeting is that it allows all members to become more comfortable with this part of the process and develop the skill themselves, which can be utilized in other parts of their lives.

a. The first round

The person leading the clearing starts with the member on their left and looks directly into the eyes of that member for the amount of time it takes to take a deep breath in and out, and checks in with themselves to see if anything is getting in the way of them being clear with that person. This starts by seeing if any negative feelings bubble up. If there are none, then verbalize "I am clear with you." If there is something, then verbalize "I am not clear with you," and communicate the feelings you are having and why you are having them. This lack of being clear or clean with someone tends to either be because you have done or said something, or not done or said something, that is getting in the way of you being clear with them.

Example: "Bill ... I am not clear with you. I told you that we would meet up, and I would share with you the hiring and on-boarding process we have adopted, and I had to cancel on you twice at the last minute. I have been feeling guilty about that and want to let you know that I meant no disrespect. I apologize and would like to commit to you that I will make it a high priority to meet with you as soon as it works for our schedules."

Or someone else has done or said something that is getting in the way of you being clear with them.

Example: "Sally ... I am not clear with you. At our last Forum meeting, I presented about the challenges that I am having with my teenage son. It was difficult for me, and I was feeling very vulnerable. You made some comment to Jim, and you both laughed. Given how raw I felt at that moment, the timing of your comment and laughter hurt me. I hadn't thought about it until I saw you at the beginning of the Forum meeting and the feelings immediately came back."

Notice in both cases that the person shared their reality without judgment or accusation. We are all allowed to feel what we feel as long as we don't blame others for our feelings. The person leading the clearing should be listening carefully and observing not the person speaking, but instead the person being spoken to, in order to both hear and see if they are feeling judged. If so, coach the person who is doing the clearing to share their piece of what is keeping them from being clear.

There is no response back from any of the Forum members. The person leading the clearing thanks each member after they have cleared all the way around the Forum. Each member takes their turn until all have spoken, concluding round one.

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9. Clearing the air - continued

b. The clean-up round.

The person leading the clearing starts the clean-up round by looking around the circle to see if there is any residue left with anyone, and then shares anything they need to share, making sure they are clear. This goes more quickly and doesn't require looking each person in the eyes and stating that they are clear. Either you are clear with everyone or you are unclear with someone, and again, you share your feelings. Each member then does the same. This clean-up round allows the Forum members who went early in the first round to address anything that came up after they cleared. This could come in the form of a clarification or an apology. If everyone is clear after the clean-up round, then thank everyone for participating and move on to the next item on the agenda. If someone is still unclear, then there needs to be a brief discussion as to whether or not the group wants to support closure by having the person leading the clearing round facilitate a discussion between the two members. If a member is still not clear with another member and they have not yet met to discuss this, then that would be a good next step for them. If they have met but couldn't work through it on their own, then the facilitated discussion could happen in private prior to the next Forum meeting, or it could be done right after the clean-up round.

c. The facilitated discussion.

The two members who did not reach clarity in the first two rounds would sit across from each other with no table in between them, and with their profiles to the Forum group. The person facilitating the discussion would sit at 90 degrees to the two members facing the Forum. The following steps should then be taken:

Step 1. Ask each person to share with the other person something that they appreciate about the other. If it is evident that one member has a stronger issue than the other, start with them. Some people have the tendency to close down when someone is upset with them, and appreciation opens them back up and allows them to more clearly hear the other person. By identifying something that we appreciate in someone we feel hurt by, it reduces our tendency to attack.

Step 2. Again, select the member who has the stronger issue to start, or ask who wants to go first if the lack of clarity seems mutual. Ask person A to share with person B what it is that is causing them to be unclear with person B. Observe person B as person A is sharing, and then ask them to reflect back to person A what they have heard, then ask person A if person B was accurate. If person A feels that person B reflected them accurately, then ask person A if there is anything else they want to share. If they don't feel that they have been accurately reflected, ask person A to repeat what they wanted to share with person B, and have person B attempt to reflect it again.

Repeat this until person B feels that the reflection is accurate. Then ask person A if there is anything else. If there is, ask them to share it, and repeat the sharing and reflection process until person A says that there is nothing else. Now ask person B to tell you how they think person A is feeling. Check in with person A to see if person B is accurate, and if they feel anything else. Thank them both and ask person B what they want to share with person A, and then repeat the same process that you used with person A.

Note: You may need to interrupt the person sharing to allow the other person to reflect if the person sharing goes on too long, if their sharing has complexity of detail, or if you observe the person who is listening becoming defensive.

Repeat this facilitated communication process until both parties have been thoroughly heard and acknowledged.