

Engaging in Sensitive Conversations

Lisa Delpit said, “We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears but through our beliefs.” In other words, how we see, understand and interpret the world is filtered through our own experiences, values and beliefs. This is why we can experience the same event and have very different reactions and thoughts about it.

When dealing with trauma, civil and social unrest, systemic racism, community-based violence, destructive climate events, as well as accidents and death in the school community, it is important to understand that the climate of the school is affected. These elements influence the behaviors of students and adults in and around the school community. Our desire can sometimes be to render help, aid, and support by creating space or opportunities for students and/or adults to openly discuss what’s coming up for them or we may choose to stay silent and continue with business as usual because we’re unsure how to engage in these conversations. It is important to note that responding to disruptions to the learning routine provides opportunities for teachable moments, practice of social emotional skills and deeper intellectual inquiry. Educators play a key role in working with students and each other to explore current events and the impact on personal and community life.

The first step in doing this effectively is to start with yourself. Personal awareness of one’s own skills and beliefs affect educator’s ability to lead discussions, to support each other, and to support students. Consider implicit and explicit bias, understanding of and feelings about an event, issue or topic and communication skills around talking and listening. Of particular importance is an ongoing understanding and exploration of systemic racism, as it exists in schools and in society. Through continuous exploration of personal beliefs and skills, educators may be less likely to cause more harm.

Begin with yourself first.

- Know what you are feeling.
 - How are you feeling? Are you feeling defensive, guarded, fearful, anxious, numb, peaceful, etc.?
 - What is your personal understanding of, proximity to, and experience of, trauma, natural disasters, systemic racism, suicide, and community or school violence?
- Identify, know, and understand your values and beliefs around power.
 - How are your experiences, beliefs and dispositions influenced by intersectional identity?
 - What are your beliefs and values about power? How does that influence your understanding and experience of trauma, natural disasters, systemic racism, suicide, and community or school violence?
 - Does it mean you need to position yourself to have an answer or appear to have an answer in the moment every time? What is the impact of this?
 - In what ways do you hold power and how do you use it? Can you identify the impact your power has on others?

- Know and understand your response patterns and behaviors.
 - How do you feel when confronted by individuals or ideas that are different from your own? What has been your response to these individuals or ideas?
 - Do your responses honor and respect others' differences? Can you grow in your ability to respond with respect and compassion?
 - How might the knowledge, experience, beliefs and dispositions about trauma, natural disasters, systemic racism, suicide, community or school violence, in your school community differ from your own and why? How will you respond respectfully to these differences?
- Identify and understand your privilege.
 - We all have identities that yield privilege and privileged positioning.
 - Do you know or can you identify the privilege you hold and/or in what situations you experience privilege?
 - What are ways in which your privilege impacts others?
- Listen for understanding not to respond.
 - Most often, we listen to respond and not to understand. It is important know how you listen to and respond in conversations, especially when they're challenging or sensitive.
 - What makes it difficult for you to listen in a given situation? What are ways that you can mitigate these difficulties?
 - Do you feel the need to respond when there is silence? Why? How can you lean into the discomfort silence brings for you?
- Be aware of your perspective & lack of perspective. Identify your understanding of the situation.
 - Identify how you understand the situation. How does your understanding differ from others? How do your experiences, beliefs, and values inform the way you see and understand the situation? How can your experiences, beliefs, and values distort how you see and understand the situation?
 - What do you need to learn about this situation? Where will you seek this information or learning?

Now that you've taken stock and assessment of yourself to build personal awareness, there are steps that you can and should take as you navigate sensitive and uncomfortable conversations. It is important to remember that personal awareness of your feelings and triggers, your ability to listen for understanding and not to respond, and recognizing your skill and comfort with engaging in sensitive conversations helps to reduce potential harm to those you are engaging in conversation with. Additionally, remember that the following steps are guidelines meant to help you tap into the basic skills you know and use.

1. Be aware of how you're feeling, and the views and opinions you hold.
2. Ground yourself to be fully present in the conversation. Breathe to center yourself and release any fear, anxiety, anger, or confusion you may have.
3. Listen. Really attempt to listen to what is being said. Stop yourself from wanting to debate or refute what is being said and instead consider questions you can ask to learn and understand the context, totality and impact of the situation. Use phrases like: "What I heard you say was..." or "Tell me more about..." or "Can you give me more details about..."

4. Reflect back what the speaker is saying using their words and ask clarifying questions. Avoid presenting an argument as a question; and ask questions that are not judgmental or could be perceived as judgmental. Use questions and phrases like: “How has this affected you?” or “When you said...it made me wonder...” or “What angered or hurt you about this situation?”
5. Summarize what you heard the speaker say prior to responding. For example: “What I heard you say was...did I hear you correctly?”
6. A positive response is an indication that the speaker feels heard and that you understand what the speaker is saying; and now you’re ready to respond in a clear and culturally appropriate way.

The takeaway from engaging in sensitive conversations is not to engage in a debate or argument but rather to listen and build understanding. Know that as emotions rise in conversations you can opt for a timeout or break. However, you should not abruptly end the conversation without mutual consent. Give yourself and the speaker time to take a breather and ground yourselves again before returning to the conversations. You are encouraged to give each other space to realign and recalibrate yourselves in order to effectively continue the conversation.