

# Disrupting Old Patterns

Using Agreements to Invite Constructive Dialogue Across Differences

**NYC-DR Monthly Roundtable Breakfast**

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# Identity and Safety: Creating a Container

## Purpose:

This exercise is a way to co-create the circumstances people in your community, team, classroom, etc. need to foster intentional, diverse conversations that bridge differences. It asks: what is necessary for people in a group to share something risky, something that is connected to their identities – and remain connected, resilient, and constructive?

We have used versions of this exercise when teaching classes, doing multi-stakeholder engagement projects, mediations, and culture change work in schools and organizations.

## Instructions:

Reflect on the following prompt, focusing your thinking on the three questions in the worksheet below. Take notes; use the reference pages if you'd like or add your own responses from your own experiences. Be prepared to share your responses to each question in the chat.

## Prompt:

Imagine a context, community or institution where you are a stakeholder in conversations that impact you, your experience in that place, and your future. It could be in a dispute resolution setting - but it could also be a class, a Board meeting, a team meeting, or an academic collaboration. In this meeting, the leader asks a question. The first seven responses to the question have all generally reflected the same way of thinking or looking at the problem - they've all been largely in agreement. As you've listened, you've realized that your perspective or beliefs on this issue are different from everyone else who has spoken up until this point.

In fact, there is something about *who you are* that you might want to share - that is important to you, but not necessarily obvious to people who don't know you. Sharing this might help people understand the issue differently if they could hear it - but you are not sure you could, should, or would share at this point. It feels risky. You know that sharing your perspective might help you be understood for who you are (if it was heard); besides, you think it is important for other people to hear different ideas and you want to have your perspective included in discussions as you move forward. You think people are missing something important, and they aren't understanding some core piece of this discussion without your perspective. In this moment, you've got to make a decision, though, as to whether you share that thing - or not.

Take a few moments to reflect on what you might need to be in place in order to share what matters to you, then fill out the worksheet on the next page. Refer to the examples on the subsequent pages if you would like to do so. (You won't be asked to share the context you reflected on - but we'll invite you to share your responses to each of the questions below.)



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1. What should the facilitator or leader of these conversations be thinking about as the structures that will help you take that step (and help others take steps) to share fully?

<b>Structures</b>

2. What agreements would need to be present in the group before you would be willing to share something that differed with others from the group?

<b>Agreements</b>

3. What do you need to bring forward in yourself for you to share? What parts of yourself do you need to hold back? What would you hope others would bring forward or hold back?

<b>Intentions</b>



## Resource: Example Structures

*Structures or processes put in place to create a container for conversations that meet the needs of the group and purposes of the work together.*

Structure	Problem Prevented	What it Promotes	Notes
Planning / Debrief Meetings to prepare for projects, debrief how they went	Miscommunication or missed steps; lack of clarity around roles; unilateral decisions	Alignment; space for reflection, learning, and celebration; embeds collaboration	A project manager can schedule planning and debrief meetings.
<b>(Virtual)</b> Meeting Roles: Facilitator, tech support, note taker	Losing track of who speaks next or next steps	Clarity about expectations; nothing gets missed	Decided in advance of the meeting - and can rotate!
Reflection Questions Pre-Mediation: What do you wish the other party understood about your story? What do you need to be your best? Imagine a dream scenario where everyone walks away happy. What does that look/ feel like?	People showing up to the mediation prepared for battle or a repeat of past conversations. People are reactive from the outset.	Helps people enter the room intentionally and more grounded. Makes the most of limited prep time (e.g. in court mediations while you set up a room)	If it's a long-term mediation, you can spend some time with these prompts to co-create some agreements for the sessions with the parties.
<b>(Virtual)</b> Pass the Baton / At Bat and On Deck	People worrying about when they'll speak; speaking over others	People know when they'll speak; know they'll have a chance	At-Bat needs facilitator + some structure
Start meetings with a connecting question	People feeling isolated, unseen, unappreciated	People settle in; feel connection + empathy	Can be longer, too (e.g. coffee hour)
Add time for reflection into conversations	Reactivity; spiraling	Invites introverts and thoughtful speaking	Before meetings, during, and/or after
Add goals and/or framing questions to invites for meetings	Tangents; Aimless conversation; lack of direction in meetings	Invites everyone in; prompts creativity and reflection	Also helps people decide what needs a meeting
Timed responses (e.g. 2 min per person)	2-3 people taking over the conversation; the time ending before everyone has had time	Everyone has the same opportunity and limited time is used equitably	May be adapted for flexibility / equity - "everyone will get the time they need"



**Resource: Example Agreements**

*Observable, objective behaviors a group of people agree to abide by during their work and conversations together*

Agreement	PREVENTS	PROMOTES	Notes / Alternatives
“Pass”/ “pass for now” if you are not willing or ready	People feel a loss of control/ agency or an obligation to speak	People feel invited, but not compelled; people have agency	Can be used for video or social time as well as for speaking up
Allow others to finish their thought by speaking one at a time and not interrupting	Side conversations; “meetings within meetings”; people feeling disrespected, or unheard	People feel heard and taken seriously. Slows down the conversation and focuses attention.	This can/ should include use of the chat box (note that Zoom saves all chats in the same record)
Respect time limits and “move up” or “move back” to share airtime	Side chats; 2-3 vocal thinkers and verbal processors take up most of the space	Everyone has a chance to speak and meetings/ dialogues end on time	Or: no one speaks for the 2nd time until everyone has a chance to speak
Speak for yourself and not on behalf of others	Making assumptions about general or shared experiences	People invited to be seen and understood for who they are	Or: ask about their experiences vs. those of the group
Take a breath between speakers	Talking gets so fast that listening is hard	People invited to really hear what others say	Also helps disrupt spiraling

**Resource: Example Intentions**

*Motivations, efforts, or encouragements a team chooses to try to hold themselves to as individuals while working together or engaging in dialogue.*

Intention	Problem Prevented
Do your best to act in ways that invite understanding and empathy	Lack of ownership over actions that may have negative impact
Try to stay present in conversations and let others know when your attention is diverted	Distractions (or a lack of acknowledgment of them)
Assume good intentions: different people need different things, or face different challenges. Pause before reacting	Lack of empathy for different circumstances

