

INTERVENING WHEN THINGS GET HOT



five essential tips for group facilitators

At Essential Partners, we believe that 80% of the work of dialogue happens before people enter the room, following the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. If you have designed a conversation carefully, prepared thoughtfully, and implemented the structures necessary to achieve your purposes, then the *need* for intervention will be minimal.

And yet—even with all that prevention—intervention may be needed. Someone might slip up on a ground rule or go off on a tangent. A participant might speak in a way that feels presumptuous or disrespectful to others. One participant may feel attacked by another, even if that wasn't the speaker's intention. What can facilitators do to get the conversation back on track?

Essential Partners has been facilitating and designing difficult conversations for more than thirty years. Here are five tried-and-true practices to reach for when you need to intervene.

1. Slow Things Down

Neuroscience studies tell us that when we perceive a threat, it takes just one-fifth of a second for the thinking part of our brain to shut down. As a result, we lose access to our inner resources, or, as our colleague Dave Joseph puts it, “conflict de-skills us.”

We can counteract that neurobiological response by slowing things down, taking a few deep breaths, and even taking a time-out from the situation for a few minutes.

Suggesting 2-5 minutes for individual reflection and writing can help participants process what they are thinking and feeling in a constructive way. It can also allow you, as the facilitator, a few moments to collect your own thoughts and discern what the best next step might be for the group.

2. Transparently Manage the Dilemma

A facilitator doesn't have to have all the answers. You don't need to solve the group's problems on your own in the moment.

When the conversation gets stuck or heats up, simply naming what you observe can help the group look at it from a more detached or objective perspective. Participants can also play an important role in determining how to move forward.



You might say, “I’m feeling a little stuck right now. I’m noticing that there is a lot of emotion in the room and I wonder if others notice it too.”

Inviting the group to notice their own internal and interpersonal dynamics—and the ways in which they may have slipped into old, unhelpful patterns of communication—can be a powerful first step in managing this moment together.

3. Stay Rooted in Purpose

It’s helpful to name the purposes for this dialogue, to help the participants—and yourself—reground yourselves in the stated goal.

Frequently, the reason that a conversation gets out of hand is because people forget, in the course of the discussion, that their goal is to find mutual understanding, to hear one another, and to be truly heard. It’s natural for people to slip back into old habits and patterns.

A gentle reminder can help people find their way back into the space of dialogue.

4. Ask Questions

A good question can help people get unstuck. When things get hot, pause the conversation and invite the group to answer some reflective questions that might prepare them to re-enter the dialogue either in the moment or at a later time. Some examples include:

- How have you been impacted by the conversation?
- What do you wish people knew about your thinking or feelings about this issue?
- What question do you wish you could ask right now, but don’t feel like you can?
- What question do you wish someone else would ask you?
- Where are you feeling stuck in this conversation? Why?
- What do you need to bring forward or hold back in yourself in order to re-engage?
- What do you need from others, including the facilitator, in order to re-engage?

5. Be Compassionate (With Others and Yourself!)

It’s unproductive for interventions to feel like a reprimand or a judgment, particularly in response to an individual’s comments or behavior.

To avoid that, focus on the behavior and its impact, not on the person or people involved. Speak with care and express compassion. Stay curious as well. Don’t assume that you know the person’s intention, even if you know the impact.

Finally, practice some self-compassion as well. This work can be messy and challenging. You won’t always have the right words. You won’t always know the best way to intervene. If your intervention falls short, grant yourself the same compassion you would a participant, get curious, and try again.