



A FIRST-DRAFT CONVERSATION ABOUT THE ELECTION



This exercise is designed to invite each person to be heard, fully—without interruption or distraction. That dedicated opportunity to share a personal story enriches the experience of being heard while advancing the connection between speaker and listener.

The deceptively simple design of the exercise creates a unique experience for each person to be heard and seen by the other. The prompt in this example focuses on the upcoming election, but the basic format can work for a wide array of difficult issues.

EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS

- 1) **Find a conversation partner you trust**, and who trusts you in return. Invite them to have an honest, open conversation about the election—one that doesn't require filtering, debating, or convincing. There will be no fear of being dismissed. This should be someone with whom you already have a close relationship—a friend, family member, or confidant. With that partner, decide who will be interviewed first.
- 2) **The first person asks, “How are you as we approach the election?”** Then they listen deeply to how their partner responds. They'll listen not just to the language and the content, but also to what that person is communicating about their emotional state, their core values, and their perceptions. They should pay particular attention to these five elements:
 - a) Peculiar or unusual language (especially if it feels unusual for that person)
 - b) Words that repeat, stick out, don't seem to fit, or are particularly arresting
 - c) Words that coincide with a shift in non-verbal behavior
 - d) Words that coincide with a shift in tone or gesture
 - e) Language that seems to be used with strong or unexpected affect



- 3) **The first person then asks a follow-up question that delves more deeply into one of the things they heard.** These questions might invite more description or explanation, explore deeper meaning in their language, or open a reflection on the person’s values, meanings, or assumptions about themselves or others. Here are four tips to keep in mind:
- a) Get curious about a word or phrase, especially if you’re having a hard time forming the “perfect question.” Use the other person’s language to show them you heard them and to invite a deeper reflection into what they said. For example: “You said ‘[repeat their words],’ could you tell me more about that?”
 - b) As you listen to their worries, complaints, or fears, keep in mind that these expressions imply an opposite that is not named: isolation implies a wish for connection; despair implies hope for a different future. When people name something that upsets them, listen for that implied desire or hope and ask questions that invite the other person to reflect on these values, hopes, and commitments, and to make them more explicit.
 - c) If you get stuck, you can always return to the first question and encourage a more in-depth response: “So how are you?”
 - d) If a question leads to a response that isn’t constructive (“well I can tell you about what I hate more than what I love”) or gets the other person stuck (“I don’t know what you mean” or “I’m not sure I can answer that”)—don’t worry, it happens. Take that as an indication of the direction your next question should take. You can also ask, “Is there something else you wish I could understand better?” or “Is there a question you wish I had asked you?”
- 4) **Repeat this cycle until half of the time you set aside for the conversation is over**—or until you both decide the conversation has reached a natural stopping point. Then repeat steps 1–3 with the roles reversed.

Follow-Up Question Ideas

- What is most important to you about X?
- What does X mean to you?
- What is lost if X is ignored?
- What is at the root of X for you?
- What have you learned about X that might be important for me to know?
- How might your understanding of X differ from other people’s understanding of it?
- How does X impact your decisions?