

How to Have Difficult Conversations

Supporting Handout for Workshop: #2 Effective Conversations

The Methodist Church 

Positive
Working Together



Opening up a difficult conversation with one other person

A – Acknowledgment

A – Apology

R – Recognition

R – Reassurance

E – Explanation

E – Engagement

An AARREE conversation might look like this...

- *I just want to acknowledge that we are in a difficult place, and I'd like to apologise for my part in not sorting out our differences earlier.*
- *The disagreement has made me feel quite ill at times, and I'd like to reassure you that I am prepared to try and sort this out.*
- *Maybe we could have a coffee? I'd like to tell you where I am in all this, and to hear your story. I am committed to finding a solution that works for us both.*

AARREE was developed by John Sturrock, Core Solutions Edinburgh. Used with permission (www.core-solutions.com)

Facilitating a difficult conversation between parties

Preparation

This is perhaps one of the most important stages in facilitating a conversation between two or more parties. Things to consider include:

- * Have all parties had the same opportunity before the meeting to share their story with you?

- * Have you read all the paperwork that might be relevant?
- * Are you the best-placed person to facilitate this conversation?
- * Do you know if you are a partial insider or independent of the situation?
- * Are you leading towards a certain outcome, or enabling those involved to reach their own solution?

Rapport

Building and maintaining a rapport is vital for effective listening and communication. This may involve many aspects of relationship building, such as understanding how someone is feeling, discovering similar interests and taking a genuine interest in another person.

Setting

Decide on the best meeting space. Does it need to be neutral or away from the church building? Does the space enable everyone to be able to see each other and sit on chairs of the same height? Are you creating a formal or informal atmosphere? Will everyone be able to hear?

Ways of working

Establishing some group norms when the parties first come together can be essential in how the group moves on to work together. A good question to ask might be, “What do we need to agree in order to make this conversation an effective space?”

Self awareness

One of the most likely obstacles to effective conversation, which could occur when you are involved either as a participant or a facilitator, is a lack of self-awareness. Before and during the conversation, you should ask yourself:

- * What issues might I struggle to remain objective about?
- * What might arise that could trigger a personal reaction from me?
- * How can I manage these reactions so that the conversation remains generative and effective?
- * How can I remain present in the conversation, rather than being overwhelmed or anxious?

In every conversation you face a critical choice – to suspend or defend your own position; your own embedded patterns of seeing, thinking and feeling.

If you choose to defend your position then there's a good chance you could have a stimulating, skilful discussion and debate. However, bearing in mind that we are seeking to learn from one another – rather than arguing until one side gains a victory – consider that a better choice could be to suspend your own position and leave yourself open to hearing what others have to say. This can lead to reflective dialogue and a generative discussion.

Being aware of whether you are defending your position or suspending it – and making a conscious decision regarding what path you take – can aid an effective conversation. Signs that you have chosen to 'defend' will include only partially listening to what a person is saying because you are waiting to 'jump in' with your next point.

