Words are powerful. Even with the best intentions, we can say or do things that shut down dialogue before it gets started. It’s especially easy to do this when the topic is sensitive, controversial, or provocative. But we need to have these tough conversations to understand and bridge differences¹ and successfully collaborate in teams.² Create opportunities for connections by using words that invite different perspectives and help people feel heard and valued.³

CREATE CONNECTIONS, NOT CONFLICT, IN TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNSUPPORTIVE ←</th>
<th>SUPPORTIVE →</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHAT PEOPLE SAY</td>
<td>HOW IT’S UNSUPPORTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“IF YOU DON’T HAVE SOMETHING NICE TO SAY, DON’T SAY IT AT ALL.”</td>
<td>Shuts down a conversation. Doesn’t allow for disagreement or the safety to call out others’ missteps.⁴</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Be SUPPORTIVE of tough conversations by encouraging honesty and transparency, even when what is being shared may be challenging to hear.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT CURIOUS ←</th>
<th>CURIOUS →</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHAT PEOPLE SAY</td>
<td>HOW IT’S NOT CURIOUS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’VE HEARD THIS ALREADY.”</td>
<td>Sounds dismissive. Can be hurtful to suggest that your colleagues’ feelings, perspectives, or experiences do not deserve to be heard.⁵</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Show CURiosity by asking questions, being open to new or different perspectives, and being willing to go beyond what is familiar or comfortable. Listening to and acknowledging the emotions of others lets them know you are interested in their experiences.⁶

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOT HUMBLE ←</th>
<th>HUMBLE →</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHAT PEOPLE SAY</td>
<td>HOW IT’S NOT HUMBLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“OH NO, HERE WE GO AGAIN.”</td>
<td>Puts the speaker on the defensive and closes the opportunity for open dialogue.⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demonstrate HUMILITY by accepting that your views may be incomplete and showing your willingness to hear other points of view.
Express **EMPATHY** by showing that you understand and appreciate another point of view or experience. Actively listen to the meaning of others’ words to deepen your understanding of their perspectives.

Communicate **COURAGEOUSLY** by acknowledging that talking about some topics is challenging but that you are open to doing so, even when difficult. Demonstrate that it is safe to bring sensitive issues up with you.

Demonstrate **ACCOUNTABILITY** by taking responsibility for how your words and actions affect those around you. Invite feedback to learn how your impact might be different from what you intended.

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**BE OPEN**

Start with an open mind, and invite conversations by asking questions. Respect and affirm your colleagues’ views, even if you disagree or their views are different from your own.

**LEAD WITH INTENTION**

Use your words and actions to purposefully create different opportunities for dialogue. Rethink the “I tried once, and it did not work…” mindset—it takes time to build trust and connection. Continue to assume positive intent.

**ROLE MODEL**

Inspire others to connect across divides through your example. Seek to learn, even in tough situations, and encourage others to do the same.
SOURCES:
1. Catalyst, Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace (2016).
3. Catalyst, Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace (2016); Catalyst, Conversation Ground Rules (October 20, 2016).
5. Gibb; Forward, Czech, and Lee.
6. Catalyst, Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace (2016).
7. Gibb; Forward, Czech, and Lee.
9. Gibb; Forward, Czech, and Lee.
11. Catalyst, Engaging in Conversations About Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Workplace (2016).
12. Gibb; Forward, Czech, and Lee.

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