

**Inviting Others to a Conversation**  
**Speaking the Unspoken**  
**Virginia Tech Office of Interactive Communication & Empowerment**

Sometimes, just getting people to “the table” and being open to a conversation is the biggest hurdle when a difficult conversation needs to happen. Think of the following steps as “prerequisites” that increases the likelihood the person will be open to engaging in conversation.

**Step One: What’s the Value?**

What would be the benefits for you and the other person of having a conversation? As much as you are willing to participate in a conversation don’t forget that there needs to be some value for the other person too in order for them to engage in conversation. What’s in it for you *and* them?

Ask yourself:

- Are you open to learning & sharing your concerns with the other individual(s)?
- Are you able to acknowledge how you might be contributing to the situation?
- What do you hope to accomplish? What do you think they might hope to accomplish?
- Are you open to listening to the other person’s concerns?
- Are you willing to compromise, try a different approach or do something different in the future if it makes the situation better?

**Step Two: Setting the Stage**

Conversations might sometimes fail, or not even begin, because the correct “stage” is not in place. Some factors to consider include in setting the stage include:

- **Time:** When would be the best time to have this conversation? Sometimes, conversations fail for the simple reason that others are approached at an inconvenient time when they are focused instead on other matters and so they would rather say ‘no’ to the conversation in that moment.
- **Place:** What is the most optimal location for a conversation that reflects neutrality and where individuals feel physically (not just psychologically) safe? Consider whether in-person, video, or phone is a better medium than the other. If the conversation is in-person what is the best environment for the conversation? Meeting in a conference room, restaurant/coffee shop, or even taking a walk together will create different experiences for different people.
- **Manner:** How is the conversation going to take place? Is it simply 2 individuals or will there be more individual in the conversation? If one-on-one/direct conversation have been attempted in the past, consider bringing in a trusted, mutual friend/colleague or having a facilitator/Ombuds help with the process.

**Step Three: The Invitation**

How you frame the invitation to enter into a conversation might be the single most important step because depending on how the other person receives the offer, the conversation may or may not happen. In order for a challenging conversation to occur there must be a crystal-clear declaration of why you would value the conversation and how the conversation would benefit the other person. Also, consider whether the following is best delivered in-person, via email, via text,

a card or some other means. Depending on the person one approach may be better than the other and so tailor your approach accordingly.

Sample template (modify, add, & delete as necessary)

[State your intent and the value for the both of you]

“(Insert person’s name), I’ve been thinking about (insert the nature of the situation here and frame the matter in a neutral manner as possible) and would like your help in figuring out some solutions. I’d like to have a respectful conversation about (insert topic here) so that I can better understand your perspective and what I can do to also make things better for us. I would also like to be crystal clear that I want you to feel you are being treated with respect & dignity (or, insert similar language such as “being listened to”) and I’d like the same.

[State the possible cost of not having the conversation]

I’m concerned that if we don’t have that conversation then things may (insert here the reality of what may happen such as “escalate”, “continue to deteriorate” etc.). I think we can both agree that the current situation isn’t working for either of us.

[Specify the possible benefit to them of having the conversation]

If we did talk though then maybe the situation can turn around. I say this because I’m committed to making things better and I think you would like the same. Specifically, I think having this conversation would \_\_\_\_\_ (insert benefit to them here).

[Offer logistics]

I was thinking that perhaps we could talk (insert proposed location space here) on (insert proposed time here).

[Alternate idea if a one-on-one does not seem viable]

If you’re open to it I’ve also been thinking that (insert here individual such as mutual friend/colleague, mediator/Ombuds) can help us have that conversation.

In your opinion, what do you think/feel about this?”