

# Facilitating Effective Conversations: A Framework for Command Team Leaders



**CAPT Delmy M. Robinson, USN, MBA  
Commandant**

**Daniel P. McDonald, PhD<sup>2</sup>  
Director**

**MAJ Roshonda Gilmore, USA, MBA<sup>2,3</sup>  
Department Head**

**Dr. Richard Oliver Hope Human Relations Research Center  
Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute  
366 Tuskegee Airmen Drive, Patrick Space Force Base, FL 32925**

1. JHT Inc.
2. Dr. Richard Oliver Hope Human Relations Research Center, DEOMI
3. Applied Science & Analytics, DEOMI

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Facilitating Effective Conversations ..... 3**

**Overview ..... 3**

*Definition*..... 4

*Alignment and Military Leader Responsibilities* ..... 4

**Impacts..... 6**

*Impact on the Individual*..... 6

*Impact on Groups and Organizations* ..... 6

*Impact on Interracial Interactions* ..... 8

*Ironic Effects of Stereotype Suppression* ..... 9

**Intervention ..... 11**

*Theoretical Framework* ..... 11

*Operational Framework* ..... 13

*Methods of Instruction*..... 15

*Steps for Facilitating Effective Conversations* ..... 17

*Key Skills* ..... 18

*Motivational Interviewing* ..... 24

**Considerations..... 26**

*Assessment and Evaluation* ..... 26

*Challenges* ..... 27

*Addressing Challenges*..... 33

*Organizational Culture* ..... 34

**REFERENCES**..... 38

**Appendix A..... 50**

**Facilitator’s Effective Conversations Worksheet** ..... 50

**Appendix B ..... 51**

**FACILITATION GUIDE**..... 51

**Appendix C ..... 64**

**AFTER-ACTION REVIEW (AAR) WORKSHEET** ..... 64

**Appendix D – Learning Activities ..... 65**

**Scenario-Based Learning Experiences**..... 65

**Perspective-Taking and Sensemaking**..... 70

**Pause Strategy** ..... 70

**Independent Learning Exercises** ..... 71

**Optional Reading** ..... 71

## **Facilitating Effective Conversations**

### **Overview**

In a complex sociopolitical climate, it is critical to create intentional space where Service members are encouraged to discuss difficult social justice issues that have individual and unit impacts. Communicating respectfully, openly, and with the goal of learning from one another requires preparing members to have their viewpoints challenged in conversations that are commonly avoided yet necessary for personal and professional growth. Developing and implementing strategic interpersonal communication skills will increase resilience at all levels by enhancing member morale, promoting unit cohesion, and increasing leaders' capacity to assess climate. A systematic approach to facilitating effective conversations on sensitive topics, in which members may have potentially divisive viewpoints, will foster unit cohesion by creating an inclusive culture of diverse experience unified by shared military values and a common mission.

Effective conversations are a structured and systematic approach to addressing external issues that can socially divide units; they include verbal communication in the form of facilitated discussions that are respectful, objectives-driven, and learning-focused. Relevant, candid, and effective conversations reinforce higher-level goals related to unit cohesion by providing mechanisms for diffusing conflict, building trust, and establishing common ground around shared military values and the mission (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Logan-Terry, 2013; Weger et al., 2014). In military and law enforcement contexts, research shows enhanced interpersonal communication skills, combined with the ability to objectively take different perspectives, increased tactical competencies related to cross-cultural conflict, de-escalation, investigation, and intelligence activities (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Damari et al., 2015;

Klein et al., 2014; Sands, 2013). Training and encouraging employees to speak up about their concerns improves safety outcomes, including in life-or-death scenarios (Maxfield et al., 2005; Moss & Maxfield, 2007).

### ***Definition***

Effective conversations can be defined as a structured and systematic approach to addressing external issues that can socially divide units. This includes verbal communication in the form of facilitated discussions that are respectful, objective-driven, and learning-focused with a goal of increasing situational awareness that promotes unit effectiveness through improved cohesion and morale. External issues are sensitive, controversial, and high-consequence issues that originate from outside the unit, e.g., geopolitical events, societal problems, or force-wide policy changes. These issues can impact members psychologically or physically and have the potential to impact unit cohesion, performance, and mission readiness, if not confronted in an effective manner. Effective conversations seek to reframe highly charged emotional conflicts as beneficial opportunities for communication. In positive conflict, open discussion is emphasized, and the belief that interpersonal relationships can be constructively managed is reinforced (Alper et al., 2000). According to several studies, encouraging open discussion and the free exchange of ideas helps teams solve problems more effectively (Alper et al., 2000; Deutsch, 2006).

### ***Alignment and Military Leader Responsibilities***

Training in effective conversations integrates recent policy goals and requirements specified by the U.S. Secretary of Defense and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD P&R), by providing assessment and intervention tools, among other tactics, that leaders can use for managing climate issues. By engaging in effective conversations, key

personnel can get a better understanding of the issues that impact members and the work environment.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense memorandum titled *Immediate Actions to Address Diversity and Inclusion and Equal Opportunity in the Military Services* (Esper, 2020), dated 14 July 2020, directed training for commanders to conduct relevant, candid, and effective conversations as a specific initiative against discrimination, prejudice, and bias, and as part of a broader approach to promote morale, cohesion, and readiness of the force.

Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1350.02, *DoD Military Equal Opportunity Program*, dated 24 September 2020, mandates prevention and response programs to ensure that Service members are treated with dignity and respect (Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2020). It also prescribes training in political dissent and protest activity, requires that leaders at all levels foster a climate of inclusion that supports diversity and is free from prohibited discrimination, and charges commanders with the responsibility to assess and improve their command climates.

This training offers senior leaders the opportunity to develop skills designed to facilitate effective conversations among unit members. Additionally, acquiring these skills can enhance senior leaders' key leadership competencies, including self-awareness and self-management, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, diversity awareness and management, and transformational leadership including building, motivating, and fostering effective teams and positive command climates.

## **Impacts**

### ***Impact on the Individual***

By engaging in relevant, candid conversations on sensitive topics, individuals can improve interpersonal communication skills, which can enhance performance in professional (e.g., Ibrahim & Ahamat, 2020) and social settings.

#### **Psychological & Physical Consequences:**

- Enhances cultural awareness and perspective-taking
- Decreases stress, social anxiety, aggression, confusion, and social isolation
- Develops tactical competencies and active listening, which are critical in de-escalation, conflict resolution, and cross-cultural communication
- Offers protective health factors that can increase physical and psychological safety and resilience

### ***Impact on Groups and Organizations***

Using best practices for effective conversations allows groups and organizations to improve unit cohesion and trust among members and to decrease conflict despite internal disagreements. Research finds that active listening, attentiveness, empathy, and non-judgmental exchanges of personal narratives result in more positive outcomes than factual arguments for socially divisive issues.

#### **Psychological & Physical Consequences:**

- Reduces vulnerability to social division and political distraction resulting in greater efficiency and focus on the mission
- Improves group communication and facilitates unit operations

- Fosters open communication with leadership in which leaders actively seek member input to monitor and assess climate
- Enhances feelings of psychological and physical safety
- Balances group cohesion by establishing common ground for military values and orients the group toward the unit mission while preserving respect for individual identities (Shore et al., 2011)

Effective conversations take place in a group with a focus on learning and discussing current relevant social and cultural issues. Such conversations encourage individuals to learn and share from one another's diverse cultural identities. Additionally, they emphasize common belonging within the organization itself, which can increase diversity and inclusion force-wide. (eCornell, 2018). Evidence shows that low-ranking individuals from underrepresented groups experience higher pressure than their colleagues to self-monitor, assimilate, and socially conform to advance professionally (Anderson, 1999; Ely, 1995; Hewlin, 2009; Phillips et al., 2009). At the same time, promoting diversity merely by emphasizing social, cultural, and racial differences can make individuals feel isolated by emphasizing how they are different from the group (Ely & Thomas, 2001, 2020). Unaddressed, this can exacerbate bias, foster resentment, and create undue psychological and social burdens, which can lead to disengagement and burnout (Shore et al., 2011). Among the various approaches to organizational diversity, a learning-based approach to inclusion has been shown to be the most effective for reducing conflict and improving the work process of diverse teams. By encouraging members to establish common ground through mutual inquiry about their different views, effective conversations balance organizational goals, military values, and individual member identity to foster the perspective and culture necessary for effective diversity inclusion.

***Impact on Interracial Interactions***

Despite the racial diversity of the military and the nation, interracial interactions remain fraught with difficulties. Interracial interactions are often besieged by stress and anxiety (Trawalter et al., 2009) and divergent goals and assumptions (Bergsieker, et al., 2010), and can result in individuals feeling drained cognitively and emotionally (Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Research shows that different people may experience the same situation with a different set of emotions and perceptions of the interaction (e.g., Shelton et al., 2005a). For instance, interracial interactions may cause White folks to be concerned about appearing prejudiced, while racial minorities in that same interaction may fear or anticipate experiencing prejudice or confirming stereotypes (Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Many White individuals seek to be liked during interracial interactions, whereas African-American individuals seek to be respected and viewed as competent (Bergsieker, et al., 2010). The fact that both members of the conversation have different goals and outcomes can lead to physiological symptoms, such as being less attentive, being less able to process information, and having a less positive attitude or engagement in the conversation (Shelton et al., 2005b; Trawalter & Richeson, 2006). Such anxiety-ridden interactions may also lead to attempted compensatory responses such as freezing, avoidance, and overcompensation (Trawalter et al., 2009). Consequently, many of these interaction challenges often result in divergent feelings and perceptions of the exact same event or interaction (e.g., Shelton et al., 2005a). To negotiate effective conversations between those from different racial and/or ethnic groups, therefore, requires attention to the many ways in which these interactions may go awry. See Figure 1 below for a model of interracial interaction developed by Richeson

and Shelton (2007).

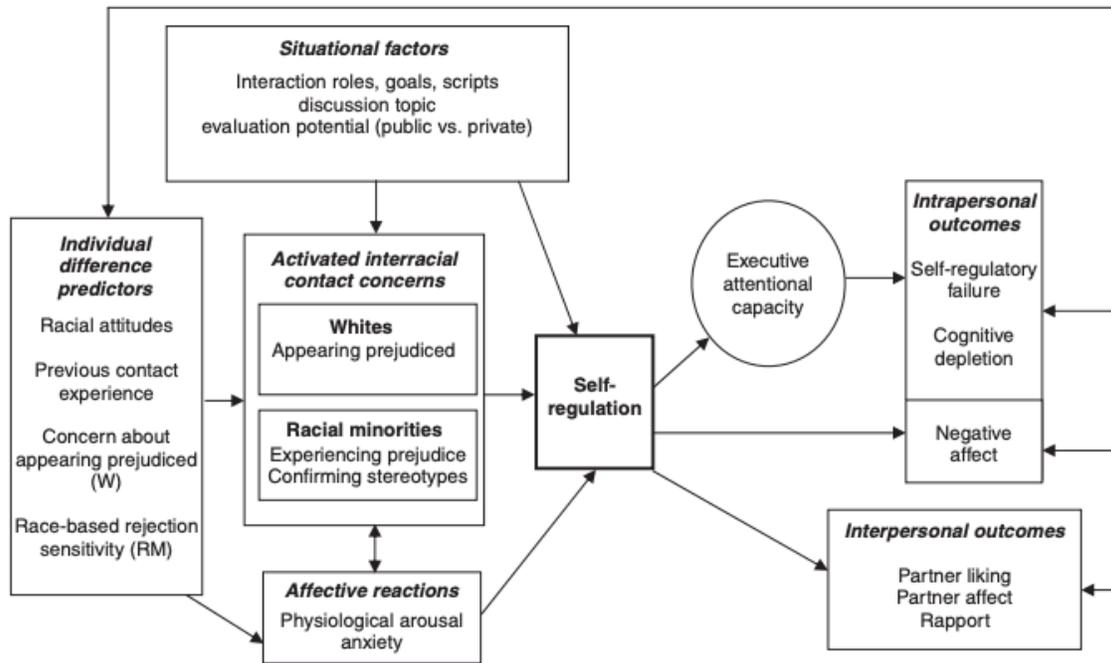


Figure 1. Model of interracial interaction developed by Richeson and Shelton (2007).

### *Ironic Effects of Stereotype Suppression*

Even those low in prejudice sometimes have unwanted prejudicial or stereotypical thoughts, particularly when they are cognitively taxed (e.g., busy, hurried, stressed, etc.). Indeed, most of the techniques used to regulate one's thoughts and emotions to engage in effective dialogue with different others involves some form of suppression – that is, trying to push or keep unwanted thoughts out of mind. For example, someone who finds herself thinking about another in terms of stereotypical traits may try to ignore the stereotype and instead focus on individuating characteristics of the person that run counter to the stereotype (Wyer et al., 1998).

Unfortunately, thought suppression is a double-edge sword. Although it may be effective when one is trying to attenuate an unwanted thought, the act of doing so leads to that very thought returning at greater strength later when the person is actively no longer trying to suppress the thought (Wegner, 1994). That is, the very thought one is attempting to keep at bay, ironically “rebounds” into consciousness, perhaps when one least expects it. This occurs with stereotype suppression.

Many studies have shown that when participants are told to be careful to suppress their stereotypes or are warned that stereotypes might bias their decisions, in that moment, they are typically successful at doing so. However, in a subsequent task where stereotypes can be applied, those who initially worked hard to suppress their stereotypes are much more likely to use them than those initially not asked to suppress them (Macrae et al., 1994; Gordijn et al., 2004). In sum, the research suggests that people can effectively suppress stereotypic thoughts while they are focused on doing so; however, the stereotypes come back with greater force once people stop trying to suppress them and can affect people’s thoughts and actions in biased ways.

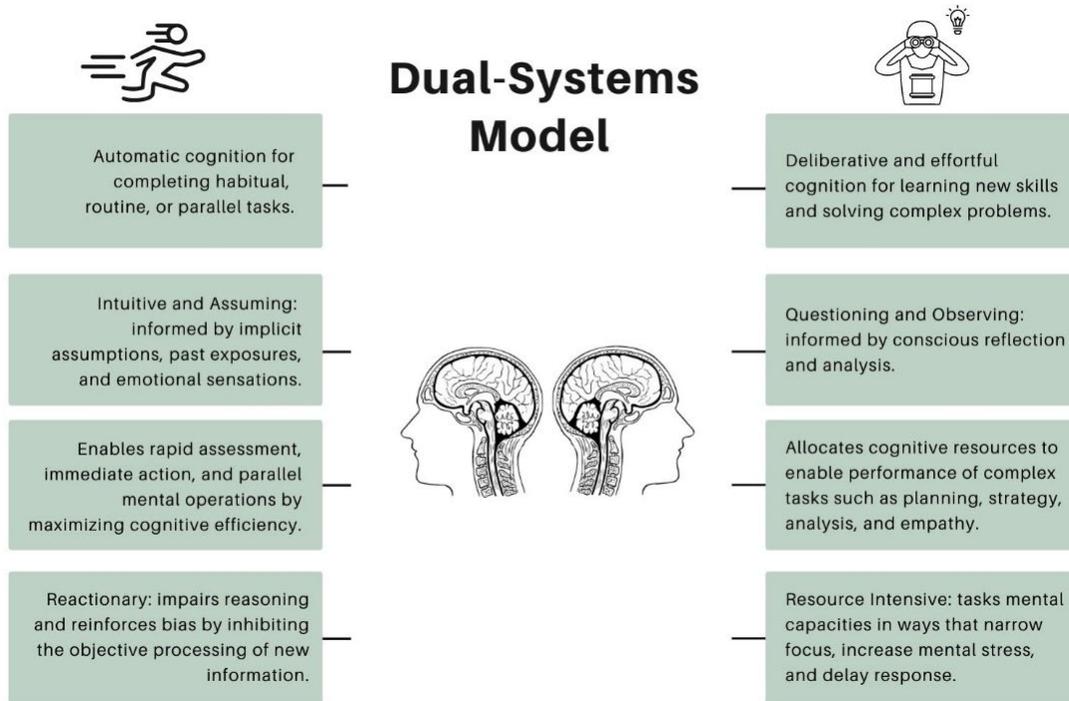
This research begs the question, then, of how one might go about avoiding such rebound effects to the point where they interfere with effective communication. Research suggests three promising avenues. The lowest of prejudiced people tend to have the most success in never having the stereotypes activated in the first place. Secondly, when strong social norms exist against displaying prejudice, people who are especially concerned about appearing prejudiced (those high in external motivation to control prejudice) will exert extra effort to avoid stereotyping, which then reduces the chance of later rebound effects (Monteith et al., 1998). Lastly, research suggests that repeated practice controlling such thoughts in a safe space can

eventually reduce the impact of those thoughts on behavior, and, thus, on one's conversations and interactions with others (Hodson & Dovidio, 2001; Monteith et al., 1998).

## **Intervention**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

To participate in relevant, candid, and effective conversations, individuals must engage in deliberative observation, questioning, analysis, and reflection. The dual systems cognitive model (Kahneman, 2011) categorizes human information processing and decision making in terms of two distinct yet interrelated domains—System 1 vs. System 2 (See Figure 2 below). People often describe System 1 as “thinking fast,” for example driving a car on an empty familiar road. The cognitive effort involved in System 2, “thinking slow,” would be needed for more complex, deliberate processes, such as parallel parking. To maximize performance, individuals should understand how each system works. This is especially true within the military context where leaders are required to respond quickly as well as strategically.



*Figure 2.* Dual Systems Model describing System 1 (left) and System 2 (right).

Characterized by maximum efficiency of mental resources, System 1 operates rapidly and automatically, with no sense of subjective choice or voluntary control. This type of cognition allows humans to instantaneously assess situations and react rapidly based on prior training and expertise. However, because it wholly relies on prior knowledge, previous training, existing expertise, and instinct, System 1 cognition is particularly vulnerable to bias and emotional influence.

In contrast, System 2 allocates attention and cognitive resources to the mental activities that demand it, including complex computations, concentration, and other mental operations that individuals subjectively experience as thought. This type of cognition allows humans to question, analyze, and reflect on new information and new observations. However, because these types of cognitive tasks require time and mental energy, System 2 cognition can lead to distraction and delay action. System 2 cognition is also vulnerable to unconscious bias. System

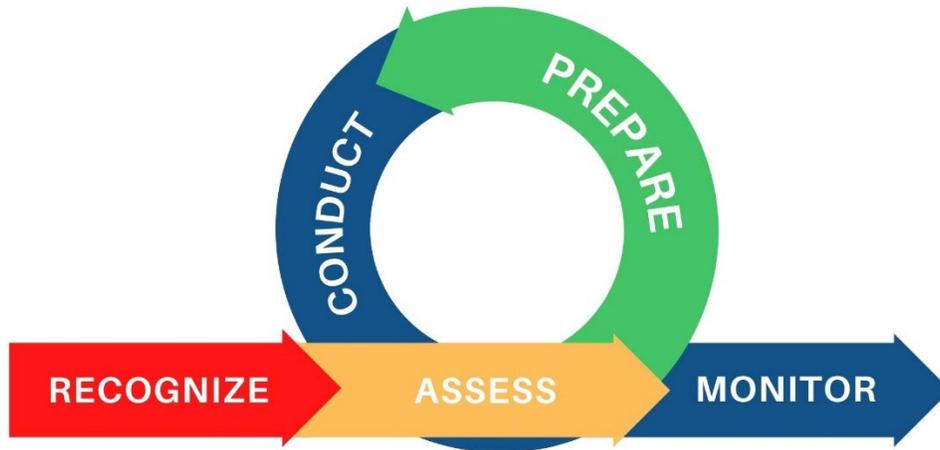
2, “thinking slow,” allows individuals to take time to understand, acknowledge, analyze, and potentially mitigate bias in their behavior.

For the purposes of conducting relevant, candid, and effective conversations, the dual-systems cognitive model can be a useful framework for developing strategies to regulate emotions and limit automatic reactions during highly charged and high-consequence verbal interactions. Specifically, emphasizing the need for effortful, deliberate reflection to buffer against inherent biases will foster more effective conversations.

### ***Operational Framework***

To determine whether to conduct an Effective Conversation, leaders should continuously monitor and assess command climate through formal and informal means to recognize if, when, and how external issues may be impacting units.

In this way, the Effective Conversation operational framework (See Figure 3) involves tasks and activities that some leaders already do while carrying out their normal leadership duties: communicating with members and attending to personnel concerns. Conducting a conversation is only one aspect of the process. Importantly, leaders who continuously work to build trust and rapport with their members’ team have a strategic advantage.



*Figure 3.* Effective Conversations Operational Framework.

**Recognize.** Key personnel can recognize when an external issue may be dividing a unit by maintaining awareness of current events, directly observing members, and reviewing informal or formal reports. Disruptive behaviors, interpersonal conflicts, member complaints, and low morale provide evidence that external issues may be contributing to social division within a unit.

**Assess.** After assessing the situation, facilitators should determine whether facilitating an effective conversation within the unit is an appropriate course of action. Commanders should follow Service-specific policies and procedures to determine whether incidents require formal reporting or possible disciplinary action and whether the external issue falls within the scope of facilitator responsibility. If an effective conversation is not immediately necessary, the situation should continue to be monitored.

**Prepare.** Key personnel should be identified to facilitate an effective conversation and/or provide necessary support. In preparation for conducting an effective conversation, facilitators should complete the Facilitator's Effective Conversation Worksheet (Appendix A) and review the Facilitation Guide (Appendix B) as well as any other relevant resources.

Logistical planning should involve selecting a time and location, and securing any necessary equipment.

**Conduct.** Facilitators should incorporate best practices for active listening and adhere to Service-specific policies and procedures. Crucially, they should convey clear, specific goals, help establish group expectations and ground rules for participation, model professionalism and best practices for active listening, and remain objective and neutral. After the conversation has occurred, the facilitator should complete the After-Action Review (AAR) Worksheet (Appendix C).

**Monitor.** Best practices for improving command climate, trust, and unit cohesion after effective conversations include soliciting feedback from members on their experience, taking deliberative action to build rapport with members, and periodically requesting status updates from members to determine the need for additional support and/or interventions.

### ***Methods of Instruction***

Curriculum developers may use a myriad of teaching methodologies to accomplish the effective conversations learning objectives, with an emphasis on experiential learning activities. As students participating in relevant, candid, and effective conversations in the class setting, leaders will adopt, implement, and develop the skills to conduct such conversations with members in the field. Recommended formats of training methods include lecture, interactive large-group discussions, small-group experiences, role-playing, and case studies (See Appendix D for available training activities).

Following sound educational methodology, such as Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction (The Northeast Texas Consortium, n.d.) instructors should implement training using a myriad of processes and procedures to meet DoD training requirements. The training process helps

learners gain all the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet mission requirements. For example, instructors may facilitate instruction in the following sequence:

- Gain student attention
- Inform learners of objectives
- Stimulate recall of prior learning
- Present the stimulus material (content)
- Provide learning guidance
- Elicit performance (practice)
- Provide feedback (performance correctness)
- Assess the performance
- Enhance knowledge retention and transfer to the job

The Socratic method is another effective strategy for teaching about human relations issues. Educators commonly use this strategy to teach about social issues by asking students structured questions (Coffey, n.d.; Weaver, 2020). Facilitated instruction should foster critical thought, evaluation, and knowledge application. Instructors should use questions as much as possible during the lesson presentation to ensure students understand the content.

Other instructional strategies include the following:

- Provide time for student reflection and thinking. During the presentation, allow students time to consider questions and their response before requesting an answer.
- Avoid yes-or-no questions (e.g., “Does this make sense?”). These types of questions (polar questions) lead nowhere and do not promote thinking or discussion.

- Ensure students have a basic understanding of the learning material, as well as the resources to respond to the questions posed. For the students to make progress, the instructor must understand their levels of knowledge and experience.
- Employ open-ended and closed questions. Open-ended questions promote critical thinking, while closed questions can focus attention. Always try to ask open-ended questions that encourage the students to express their thoughts. Questions that begin with “how” and “why” will give the students an opportunity to relate themselves to the question.
- Include clarifying questions, such as, “How does the environment an individual grew up in affect their perspectives on these types of activities?” Be prepared to offer the students guidance as they reflect on possible answers.
- Use questions from all levels of thinking. The goal is to help the students develop higher levels of critical thinking, not just to expand their knowledge and comprehension of the training material.

### *Steps for Facilitating Effective Conversations*

After assessing command climate and determining that an effective conversation would be beneficial to the unit, facilitators should consider all aspects of the process from preparation through follow-up (See Figure 4). See the Facilitation Guide for more details (Appendix B).

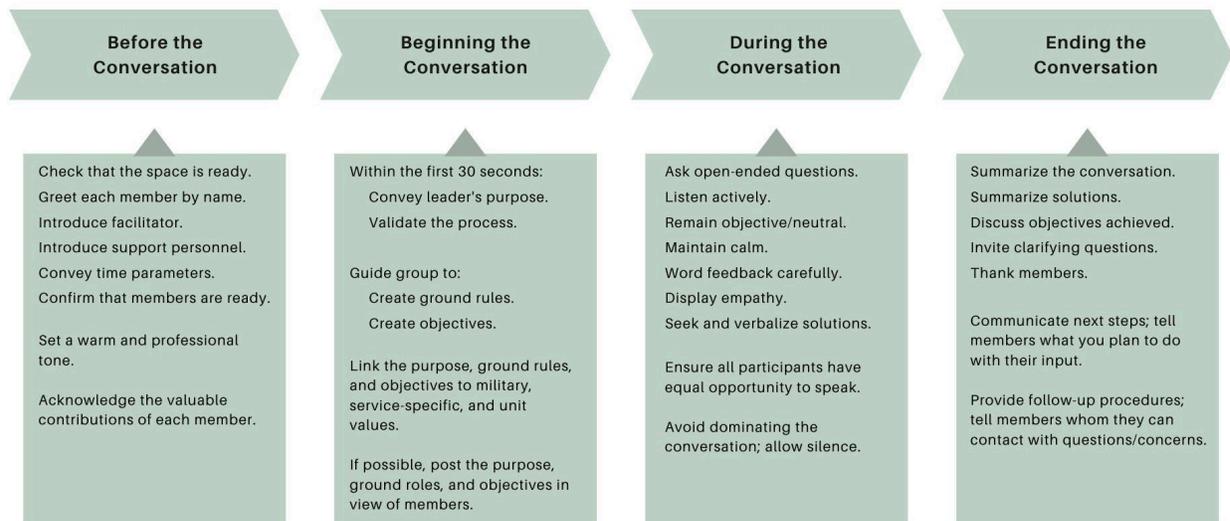


Figure 4. Steps for facilitating effective conversations.

### **Key Skills**

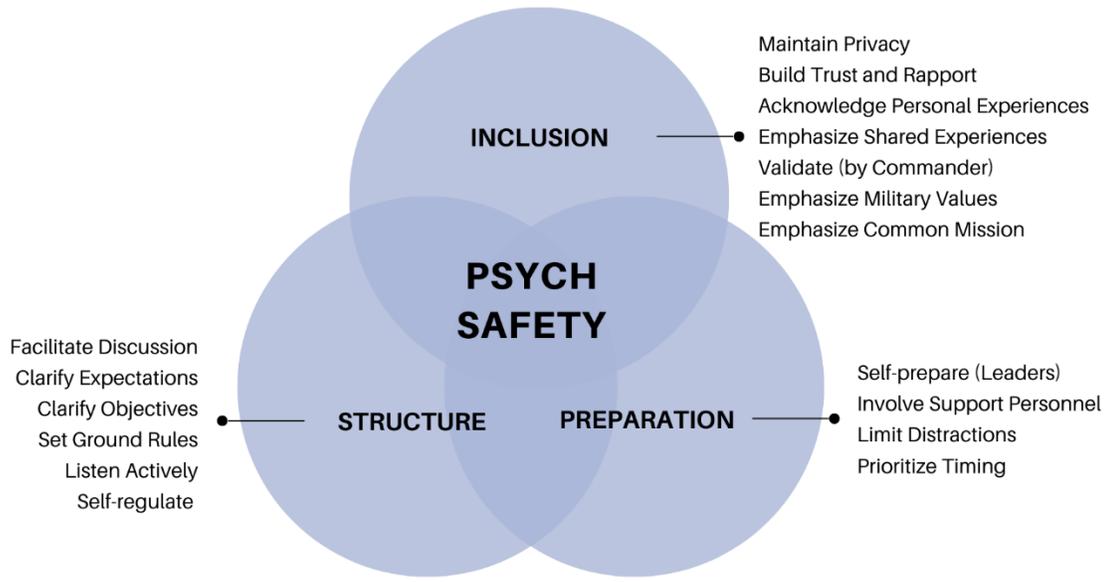
**Facilitation Strategies.** Facilitators of effective conversations should aim to establish rapport with the group and build their trust and confidence in the facilitator by projecting warmth and genuine interest, listening to their contributions with interest and focus, and demonstrating empathy and understanding without taking sides. They should ask specific questions that are relevant to the external issue; they should ask pre-determined questions but also tailor the discussion to integrate participants' ideas and emergent concerns. When appropriate, to establish credibility, facilitators should use expert knowledge/experience from other participants and encourage participation and discussion by sharing control of the discussion. Additional best practices include learning and using group members' names, acknowledging speakers verbally or non-verbally when they make a relevant contribution, applying best practices for active listening, and paraphrasing members' statements to clarify their points as needed.

**Perspective-Taking and Sensemaking.** Perspective-taking is the act of trying to perceive something from the point of view of a different individual. Sensemaking describes how

people interpret social events through the use of mental models that help them explain the intentions and motivations of others. These mental models are shared and unique. People develop these mental models based on their past experiences, as well as cultural and social factors.

Through learning-focused discussion, members can attempt to understand how others are making sense of the same situation differently based on their different experiences, beliefs, and values. To do this, members must first acknowledge that their own experience is not universal. They must be willing to suspend their own views temporarily. Moreover, they must deliberately gather information about the thoughts, views, and experiences of others by listening and asking questions.

**Psychological Safety.** The ability of effective conversations to promote unit cohesion depends on the extent to which members feel comfortable that their engagement will not have negative repercussions with leadership or with their team. This is a challenge in situations where social issues are dividing units. To prevent such divisions from becoming further entrenched, members must openly, honestly, and in good faith discuss what is dividing them. They also must be receptive and motivated to listen to others and to consider different points of view, with the ultimate mutual goal of reorienting the team around cohesion and mutual engagement in the mission. To that end, effective conversations train facilitators in specific practices and procedures that leaders can use to promote psychological safety among members (See Figure 5).



*Figure 5.* Psychological safety practices for effective conversations.

Three major components required for psychological safety are inclusion, structure, and preparation.

- **Inclusion:** Facilitators foster an inclusive environment when members are encouraged to share their authentic, individual experiences without negative consequences or judgement. Facilitators should use effective conversations to identify and emphasize common ground based on shared experiences, military values, and the common mission.
- **Structure:** Facilitated discussion allows facilitators to guide the topic of the conversation while maximizing member contributions to it. Clearly conveyed objectives and expectations help members understand what is expected of them, which can help reduce confusion and anxiety. By setting ground rules, facilitators can keep conversations focused and provide guidance on respectful communication. Presentation of the process as an operational skill set reframes the conversation to focus on shared military values within the context of diverse personal experiences.

- **Preparation:** Facilitators can create the conditions for psychologically safe engagement by preparing themselves mentally and by collaborating with key personnel to support members during and after the conversation. Commanders can also create conditions for psychologically safe engagement by making sure the conversation is planned in a way that reduces additional stressors for members. This includes planning a location with as few external distractions as possible and scheduling the event for a time when members have the most mental energy.

**Pause Strategy.** Facilitators and members can improve their performance in relevant, candid, and effective conversations by maintaining self-awareness, self-acknowledging any counterproductive motives they have, and asking themselves complex how/what questions. Even calm and self-disciplined individuals may become angry or fearful when discussing controversial or sensitive topics. When presented with counter-facts or divergent opinions, otherwise cooperative members may react with anger and aggression, attempt to belittle or dominate others, or try to assert the correctness of their own opinions. Others may withdraw to avoid confrontation.

Rather than repress strong emotions and ignore counterproductive motives, facilitators and members can employ the Pause Strategy to self-manage. The Pause Strategy, which follows the dual systems cognitive model (Kahneman, 2011), includes a series of questions to ask oneself to engage in inner reflection, self-management, and self-control (See Figure 6).

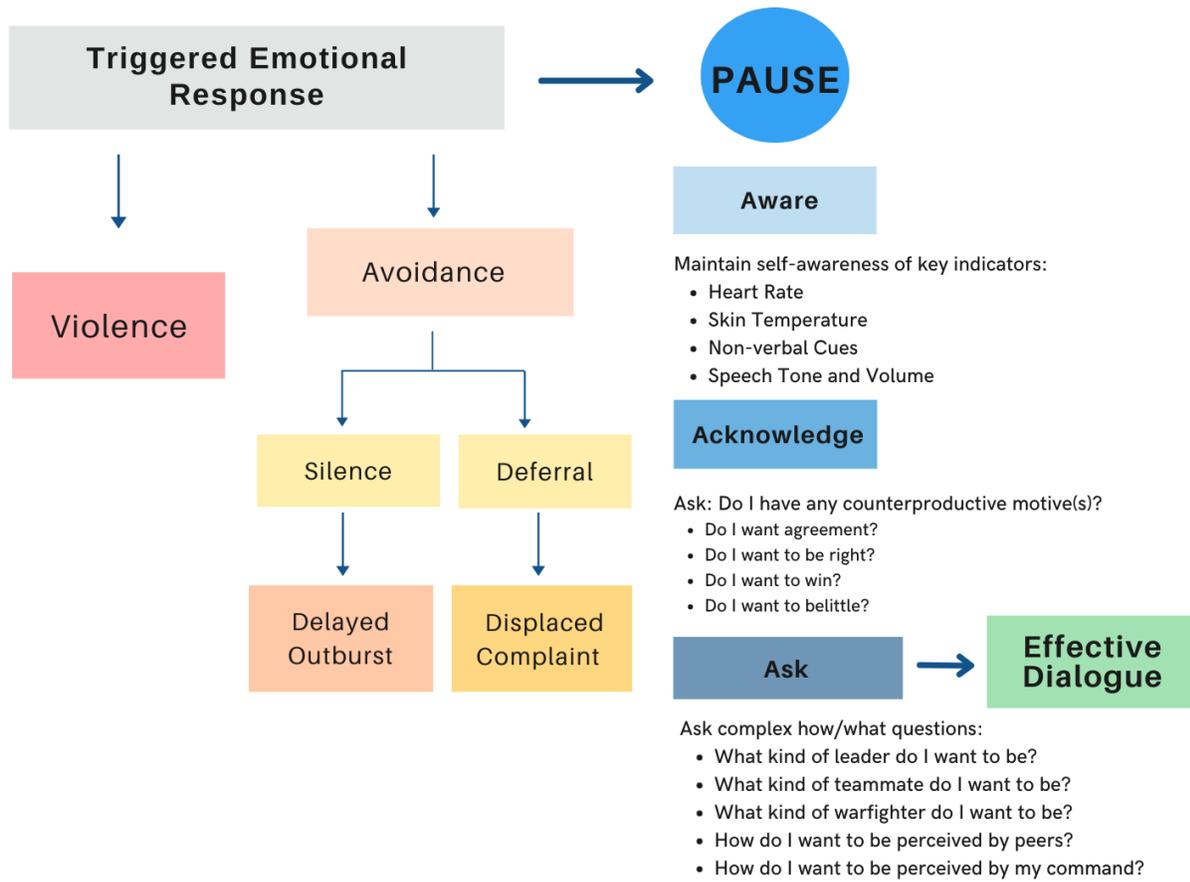


Figure 6. Pause Strategy Model

The series of questions in the Pause Strategy are intended to promote self-awareness, to interrupt reactionary thinking, and to help individuals re-orient themselves to the common goal of the effective conversations interaction, and to do so in a rapid, private, and non-disruptive manner that does not detract from the effective conversations group discussion (Figure 7). When deployed to guide others, facilitators ask members to conduct their own reflections and to pose questions to themselves.

**Step 1: Become self-aware of physical indicators of strong emotions.**

- Monitor your heart rate, skin temperature, speech, and volume.

**Step 2: Self-acknowledge counter-productive motives.**

- Ask yourself, "What is motivating me right now? Do I want agreement? Do I want to be right? Do I want to embarrass someone? Do I want them to feel bad?"

**Step 3: Ask specific how/what questions to trigger deeper level thinking**

- Redirect thinking toward collaborative goals by asking yourself: "What kind of leader do I want to be? What kind of teammate do I want to be? What kind of Service member do I want to be? How do I want to be perceived by my peers and/or those under my command?"

*Figure 7. Pause Strategy Questions.*

**Active Listening.** Active listening is a strategic, responsive, and collaborative approach to listening. When facilitating relevant, candid, and effective conversations, facilitators should use verbal paraphrasing and ask clarifying questions to improve understanding, build trust, and to increase members' favorable views of the conversation. The core components of active listening include paraphrasing, clarifying, and supporting (See Figure 8).



Figure 8. Core components of active listening.

### ***Motivational Interviewing***

Motivational interviewing, along with the Stage Model of Change, originated in the early 1980s and was originally used for addiction treatment (Miller, 1983). Its utility has been established extensively in clinical control trials (Miller et al., 1992). Today motivational interviewing is used in a wide variety of contexts in which individuals seek to change something in their lives they feel ambivalent about – may it be in medical or work settings (Moore, 2014). Researchers have identified five stages of change (Connors et al., 2001):

1. Precontemplation – the individual is not really motivated to change.
2. Contemplation – the individual has a serious consideration to change and weighs pros and cons.
3. Preparation – the individual is planning an action step toward change.
4. Action – the action plan is executed; the individual is actively working toward change.
5. Maintenance – the individual continues monitoring outcomes.

By utilizing motivational interviewing techniques, a facilitator of effective conversations can move/motivate an individual through the five stages of change. Motivational interviewing can be described as a collaborative communication style that consists of listening and offering expertise when appropriate (Galvani, 2014), with the goal of strengthening an individual's commitment to change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion (Miller & Rose, 2009).

The facilitator helps members to explore and resolve their ambivalence toward change using relational and technical components (Moore, 2014). The relational component entails the following: providing empathetic understanding and creating a supportive and facilitative atmosphere that fosters psychological safety. The technical component involves directing members to explore their ambivalence and reservations toward change. The facilitator creates a space where members can weigh the pros and cons of change and process and explore their resistance toward change. The facilitator assists in sketching out more adaptive outcomes that empathetically take individual patterns of ambivalence into account (Moore, 2014).

Specifically, Moore (2014) describes motivational interviewing as occurring in two phases:

1. The facilitator evokes change talk to elicit intrinsic motivation for change.
2. The facilitator strengthens commitment to change by converting motivation into commitment to a specific, goal-oriented action plan.

Tools utilized are asking open-ended questions, affirming individuals' experience, reflecting on and reframing perspectives, and summarizing to deepen understanding. Finally, Rollnick et al. (2008) suggest switching roles with the facilitator arguing against change and participants arguing for change, which allows for development of a deeper understanding of opposing perspectives.

## **Considerations**

### ***Assessment and Evaluation***

Assessment, as ongoing feedback, is a necessary component of the learning process. For the Effective Conversations Course, assessment is primarily conducted through instructor and peer (classmate) feedback that is delivered during discussion-based group learning exercises. Instructors should also give students time at the end of the lesson to reflect on their learning to increase metacognition and process what they have learned.

Educational evaluation is a systematic process of judging how well individuals, procedures, or programs have met educational objectives through observing learned behaviors. Importantly, when developers design lessons for the effective conversations course around discussion-based group exercises, facilitators can use these same assessment standards for evaluating their own readiness, as well as the readiness of their members, to engage in relevant, candid, and effective conversations.

As facilitators train, conduct, and evaluate the effectiveness of relevant, candid, and effective conversations, they need to understand how specific actions, motivations, and outcomes can either undermine, support, or advance operational objectives for effective conversations. To evaluate operational readiness and efficacy, facilitators and leaders can track skill development in specific areas (See Figure 9).

	<b>Undermines Operation Objectives</b>	<b>Supports Operation Objectives</b>	<b>Advances Operation Objectives</b>
<b>Actions</b>	Physical Aggression, Verbal Attacks, Personal Insults	Sense-making, Self-Monitoring, Good Faith Questions, Active Listening, Personal Reflection, Self-Acknowledgement	Perspective Taking, Empathetic Comments, Verbal Affirmation, Verbal Agreement
<b>Underlying Motivations</b>	To destroy, inflict harm, dominate, threaten, belittle, intimidate, aggravate, or avoid.	To observe, gather information, learn, or understand.	To affirm, support, facilitate, repair, or collaborate.
<b>Evidence of Skills</b>	<b>In Training, Leaders</b> demonstrate Lack of Skills by attacking others, resisting common ground, arguing about ideas, or refusing to share personal opinions and ideas openly and honestly.	<b>In Training, Leaders</b> demonstrate Developing Skills by interpreting interpersonal scenarios, and applying best practices to understand self and others by hypothesizing about others and through self-reflection.	<b>In Training, Leaders</b> demonstrate Skill Mastery by collaborating to solve problems, cooperating to establish common ground, and by applying and analyzing best practices during role playing and simulation.
	<b>During Effective Conversations, Members</b> demonstrate Lack of Skills by attacking others, resisting common ground, arguing about ideas, or refusing to share personal opinions and ideas openly and honestly.	<b>During Effective Conversations, Members</b> demonstrate Developing Skills by interpreting interpersonal scenarios, and applying best practices to understand self and others through hypothesizing about others and by self-reflection.	<b>During Effective Conversations, Members</b> demonstrate Skill Mastery by collaborating to solve problems and cooperating to establish common ground.
	<b>During Effective Conversations, Leaders</b> demonstrate Lack of Skills through inadequate planning, failing to convey objectives, and by inciting conflict, belittling members, taking sides, attempting to influence opinions, or dominating discussion.	<b>During Effective Conversations, Leaders</b> demonstrate Developing Skills by conveying expectations, enforcing ground rules, maintaining calm, remaining outwardly neutral, asking questions, and asserting common ground.	<b>During Effective Conversations, Leaders</b> demonstrate Skill Mastery by guiding members to develop ground rules and to establish common ground and by facilitating collaborative problem solving.
<b>Outcomes</b>	Conflict, Hostility, Anger, Distrust, Fear, Confusion	Situational Awareness, Mutual Understanding, Self-Awareness, Communication	Trust, Transparency, Resolution, Repair, Unit Cohesion, Resilience, and Mission Readiness

Figure 9. Actions, motivations, and skills assessment for effective conversations.

**Challenges**

A learning-based approach to inclusion has been shown to be most effective for reducing conflict and improving the work process of diverse teams; however, facilitating effective conversations successfully has its challenges. Proper training and awareness of such complexities will enable greater success in using this tool.

**Emotions.** Engaging in relevant and candid conversation about sensitive issues can trigger social embarrassment, anxiety, and fear in ways that can exacerbate existing conflicts or trigger new ones. Research in cognitive psychology illustrates how social anxiety and fear of embarrassment can engender a false sense of consensus (Sabini et al., 1999), prevent people from voicing their opposition to detrimental policies or social norms (Miller & McFarland, 1987; Rocha, 2011; Van Boven, 2000), and even prevent people from intervening to help or advocate for others (Van Boven et al., 2013). Crucially, research shows social anxiety and fear of

embarrassment can directly impair perspective taking and cause people to inaccurately predict the behavior of others (Van Boven et al., 2013). Creating safe spaces in the workplace, though challenging, is critical to foster environments in which facilitators can offer an invitation for members to engage in open discussion knowing that differing points of view are respected and appreciated without judgment (Killick, 2019).

**Social Identities.** Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their emotional sense of belonging to one or more socially defined groups (Tajfel, 2010). Self-categorization Theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990), an extension of Social Identity Theory, proposes that cognitive processing, attitudes, and behaviors about self and others are influenced by those social categories. Identification with social categories can shape self-concept, despite wide variances in scope and duration (Hogg & Ridgeway, 2003). Social identities based on categorizations such as race, geographic location, military unit and rank, gender, and socioeconomic status likely influence perceptions of others, strongly held beliefs, personal experiences, and behaviors as they relate to issues discussed within effective conversations.

Individuals from underrepresented and/or stigmatized groups experience higher pressure than their colleagues to self-monitor, assimilate, and socially conform to advance professionally (Anderson, 1999; Ely, 1995; Hewlin, 2009; Phillips et al., 2009). At the same time, promoting diversity merely by emphasizing social, cultural, and racial differences can make individuals feel isolated by emphasizing how they are different from the group (Ely & Thomas, 2001, 2020). Unaddressed, this can exacerbate bias, foster resentment, and create undue psychological and social burdens, which can lead to disengagement and burnout (Shore et al., 2011).

Military rank and status are social categorizations that must be considered in facilitating effective conversations. Communication may be hindered by the inherent power differential

imposed by military structure. Leaders in positions of authority may be less likely to engage in an open dialogue with subordinates when status is a primary concern (Ellis, 2020). Additionally, unequal power relationships can reduce interpersonal trust due to perceived conflicts of interest (du Plessis et al., 2022). Facilitators should work to emphasize a shared sense of identity within the group to overcome such challenges (Haslam et al., 2020). This can be done by emphasizing core, shared military values and a unified mission.

**Communication Styles.** Full participation is crucial in holding effective conversations. However, a wide range of communication styles makes it challenging to define what full participation means. Diversity in communication styles, particularly for sensitive topics, will likely influence group dynamics.

Culture is concerned with beliefs and values that influence how people interpret experiences and behave individually and in groups. Culture is often at the root of communication challenges. Awareness of cultural differences can help facilitators ensure that all members feel supported and heard, creating more effective communication. While full participation is crucial for effective conversations, the verbal and non-verbal expression of participation may look different for members based on their cultural backgrounds, personality, and experiences. Below are a few ways in which communication can be misunderstood.

- **Eye Contact:** Some cultures interpret frequent and direct eye contact as an indicator of attention, engagement, and respect, while others may engage in eye contact less frequently as a sign of respect or other cultural values (Uono & Hietanen, 2015).

Facilitators should be aware that they could mistakenly misinterpret lack of eye contact as lack of engagement or attention in a conversation.

- **Speech Volume:** Speech volume can communicate a variety of emotions, including shyness, anger, excitement, and uncertainty, and interpretation of speech varies across cultures (Bachorowski, 1999). Results of a meta-analysis on the accuracy of cross-cultural interpretation of emotions based on vocal expression demonstrates an in-group advantage, such that those from similar cultures had higher accuracy in emotional perception (Laukka & Elenbaas, 2021). Raised voices can be interpreted as aggressive, or may simply indicate high positive emotions, like excitement (Bachorowski & Owren, 1995). In some cultures, loud communication is viewed as rude or inconsiderate; conversely, some cultures view whispering or low speech volume as secretive and excluding others from conversations (Think Cultural Health, n.d.). Facilitators should be aware of how both cultural and individual differences may influence speech volume. For example, a facilitator could mistake loud conversations as indicating anger when they may instead be an indicator of passion or high, positive emotionality.
- **Facial Expressiveness:** Significant differences have been observed in facial expressions from culture to culture and situation to situation (Barrett et al., 2019). In some cultures, remaining stoic and expressionless is most preferred, while others are highly expressive. Facilitators may misinterpret a stoic expression as an indicator of disengagement.
- **Smiling:** Intentions and frequency of smiling vary widely by culture (e.g., Talhelm et al., 2019). Some members may smile to communicate positive regard and friendliness, while others reserve smiling to indicate joy, demonstrate respect, or express embarrassment. Moreover, the context of the situation plays a significant role in smiling and interpreting smiles (Mui et al., 2020). Facilitators may misinterpret a member smiling during a

difficult discussion as disrespectful, flippant, or immature, when, in fact, they are expressing emotions such as embarrassment or agreement.

- **Silence:** In some cultures, silence may signify respect, disdain, thoughtfulness, or seriousness, while others may be uncomfortable with silence in conversations (for a review on the functions of silence and the potential for miscommunication in conversations, see Lemak, 2012). Facilitators should be patient with and even encourage silence as it allows for deeper reflection. Silence is utilized in the pause strategy to promote self-control and introspection during effective conversations.
- **Agreement:** In positive conflict, open discussion is emphasized, and the belief that interpersonal relationships can be constructively managed is reinforced (Alper et al., 2000). According to several studies, encouraging open discussion and the free exchange of ideas helps teams solve problems more effectively (Alper et al., 2000; Deutsch, 2006). The goal of effective conversations should not be simply agreement; it should be working to acknowledge the diverse viewpoints of members and how these views may impact unit cohesion and mission readiness.

In addition to cultural differences in communication, social identities also play a role in group dynamics. These identities may include minority status, rank, generational differences, and gender. For example, facilitators should be aware of how gender perceptions may impact communication. Historically, leadership has been held by men and so is often associated with so-called “male” communication characteristics, although recent studies show little differences in actual behaviors (Ladegaard, 2011; Sdeeq et al., 2021). A recent study shows that men and women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century tend to communicate using a style that is “facilitative, indirect, collaborative, person- and process-oriented” (Ladegaard, 2011, p. 16). The difference, however,

is how men and women are perceived; men in the study had no issues leading meetings or spaces, whereas the women were sometimes challenged in their abilities to do so (Ladegaard, 2011). Facilitators must be aware of differences in communication styles and active in addressing potential miscommunications within the group. The three components of active listening (paraphrase, clarify, and support) should be used within the group to avoid and correct miscommunications within the group.

**Group Dynamics.** Individuals may conform to a group and hesitate to express unpopular opinions in order to avoid social rejection or because they may doubt their own beliefs or experiences (Asch, 1956). But it is important to note that minority dissent can have a powerful influence on group dynamics. Particularly in situations in which consensus is a main goal, individuals who speak up to express minority viewpoints are taken more seriously and enable deeper processing within the group for making decisions (Walker, 1998). Group members who have social identities that intersect in ways that are commonly stigmatized may have an especially difficult time expressing diverse opinions and experiences. For example, women of color face challenges particularly in speaking up in the workplace (Tulshyan, 2015). Stereotypes such as “Angry Black Women” are used to devalue and dismiss those who speak up; these stereotypes continue to be barriers to effective conversations. A related challenge, groupthink, occurs when a group is motivated more by reaching consensus than exploring an issue or problem using diverse, sound, analytical approaches (Janis, 1971). Groupthink is a challenge in a wide range of organizations and institutions when vocal leaders and members make irrational decisions or dismiss alternative viewpoints in order to preserve group solidarity. Groupthink is most likely to happen in situations with a persuasive group leader, external pressures, and a high need for group cohesion – all of which are likely to occur in military

environments. To prevent groupthink, leaders should affirm the utility of diverse experiences, emphasize that multiple perspectives do not negate underlying unified military core values, validate contributions from each member, and establish guidelines at the onset that address respectful discourse (e.g., avoiding interrupting or talking over others, acknowledging strongly held beliefs, valuing each member of the group's contributions).

Facilitators should consistently model appropriate and respectful group behavior and appreciation for diverse, inclusive conversation. Using the Pause Strategy can mitigate miscommunications and incivilities within the group and encourage deeper reflection and consideration of diverse viewpoints. Facilitators should lead the group by encouraging diverse perspectives and explaining how they strengthen the unit through shared military values and objectives.

### *Addressing Challenges*

The effective conversations model aims to mitigate negative outcomes. Facilitator training in effective communications increases skills for perspective taking and for promoting members' psychological safety. Facilitators should acknowledge their own biases, understand cultural differences in communication, and recognize the potential to misinterpret verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Facilitators should raise awareness of these at the onset of effective conversations, and establish the conversation as a safe space. Finally, facilitators should model behaviors including active listening, paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues, providing members ample opportunities to speak, and resisting the tendency to stereotype or draw conclusions based on false assumptions. Facilitators should aim to guide objective-focused, respectful conversation among diverse members while working to alleviate miscommunication and incivilities. Furthermore, facilitators should follow established procedures for managing

escalated incivilities. The effective conversations operational framework builds on these skills and incorporates best practices, by specifying steps for thorough planning and preparation around clear, specific, and immediate objectives.

### ***Organizational Culture***

**Enhanced Operational Performance.** In military and law enforcement contexts, enhanced interpersonal communication skills, combined with the ability to objectively take different perspectives, increases tactical competencies related to cross-cultural conflict, de-escalation, investigation, and intelligence activities (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Damari et al., 2015; Klein et al., 2014; Sands, 2013).

**Improved Communication, Safety, and Resilience.** Increasing a unit's capacity to participate in effective, relevant, and candid discussions contributes to transferable skills that can improve communication in high-stress environments (Bradley et al., 2014). Crucially, training and encouraging employees to speak up about their concerns improves safety outcomes, including in life-or-death scenarios (Maxfield et al., 2005; Moss & Maxfield, 2007). Controlled studies of verbal conflict within small social units show links between effective verbal conflict resolution behaviors and increased mental and physical health (Afifi et al., 2016; Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999).

**Increased Unit Cohesion.** Relevant, candid, and effective conversations reinforce superordinate goals related to unit cohesion by providing mechanisms for diffusing conflict, building trust, and establishing common ground around shared military values and the mission (Itzhakov et al., 2022; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009; Logan-Terry, 2013; Weger et al., 2014).

**Improved Engagement and Morale.** Relevant, candid, and effective conversations can enhance member morale because they create contexts in which leaders communicate with

members, seek their feedback, and actively listen to member concerns. Employees' positive perceptions of workplace communication is a significant determinant of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and employee engagement (Johnston et al., 2007; Miller, 2015; Pettit et al., 1997; Pincus, 1986; Putti et al., 1990; Turner, 2020; Varona, 1996). Leaders' empathetic listening can relieve employee tension and anxiety (Young & Cates, 2010) and increase team members' positive attitudes about the organization itself (Grenny et al., 2007).

**Increased Diversity Inclusion.** Relevant, candid, and effective conversations support diversity and inclusion across organizations because they encourage teams to establish common ground while respectfully sharing their individual views with one another. Management research shows that employees experience the highest degree of group belonging when they are treated as group insiders but are also encouraged to retain their sense of unique identity within the work group (Shore et al., 2011). This is especially impactful for low-ranking individuals from demographic minority groups. Studies of gender and racial diversity in the workplace reveal a pattern in which such individuals experience much higher pressure than their non-minority colleagues to self-monitor, assimilate, and socially conform as prerequisites for professional advancement (Anderson, 1999; Ely, 1995; Hewlin, 2009; Phillips et al., 2009).

**Steps Being Taken in the Military.** Training in facilitating effective conversations supports many other DoD transformation programs, initiatives, plans, and efforts, such as the following:

- CJCSI 1800.01F, Joint Professional Military Education (JPME), PME Outcomes (4e)
- Army Master Resilience Training and the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2)
- U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) Team Leader Facilitator Course

- Department of the Navy Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Courses
- The 21st Century Sailor's My Navy HR
- Headquarters Marine Corps Talent Management 2030
- Air Force Personnel Center's Talent Marketplace
- U.S. Air Force (USAF) Profession of Arms Center of Excellence (PACE) *Workshop for Facilitator Skills*
- USAF PACE, *Professionalism, Trust, Loyalty, and Commitment*
- Department of the Air Force (DAF) Coach Culture and Facilitator's Course (CCFC)

### ***Recommendations***

- Effective conversations should be used to establish common ground, improve communication, and foster an inclusive environment that promotes morale, cohesion, and effectiveness within the unit. Leaders should reserve effective conversations for situations in which an external issue is clearly and persistently dividing units or potentially threatening cohesion.
- Leaders should consider whether addressing an issue individually might be more effective, given that group discussions may trigger emotions such as embarrassment or fear of retaliation.
- Effective conversations should not be used to identify, report, track, or remediate members for problems they are causing in a unit. However, this program does not supersede established procedures for reporting violations, investigatory processes, or disciplinary actions, nor does it replace private conversations with members in need of individual guidance. Facilitators shall immediately suspend the effective conversations if a member

discloses a violation of Uniform Code of Military Justice or civil law and assure the group that the conversation will continue at a future time.

- The effective conversations model acknowledges that Service members hold diverse political and social attitudes based on their personal histories, and it respects this diversity as a core strength of the Force. Facilitators should emphasize that the effective conversations model is not a method of achieving ideological compliance with a particular point of view.
- Effective conversations require active participation and are best conducted face-to-face in non-distracting environments. In situations that necessitate conducting effective conversations virtually, all members should use video in non-distracting environments to promote full engagement.

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**Appendix A**

**Facilitator’s Effective Conversations Worksheet**

<b>Facilitator’s Effective Conversations Worksheet</b>
<p>Answer the following questions in writing for your own reference; avoid writing down members’ personally identifying information.</p>
<p><b>Scope of Issue(s) and Problem(s)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the specific external issue that is causing a reaction?</li> <li>• Does this issue directly relate to the mission?</li> <li>• What specifically about this issue is causing a reaction?</li> <li>• What is the specific problem(s) that this reaction is causing in the unit?</li> <li>• Which unit(s) is affected?</li> <li>• Which members are reacting to or affected by the problem?</li> <li>• Are the problem(s) or reaction(s) of the type that necessitate discipline or reporting?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mental Preparation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your purpose for having an effective conversation, and what do you hope to accomplish?</li> <li>• Does this external issue trigger your emotions or push your buttons?</li> <li>• How will you remain neutral, objective, and honest?</li> <li>• What would happen if you did not have the conversation?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Identify Key Personnel</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who can provide subject matter expertise?</li> <li>• Who can put this external issue into context?</li> <li>• Who has facilitation/meditation experience or superior listening skills?</li> <li>• Whom do members trust?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental Assessment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the units and commands’ norms and values support effective conversations?</li> <li>• Does the physical layout of the space allow for relevant, candid, and effective conversations?</li> <li>• Do members of the affected unit experience a high level of psychological safety?</li> <li>• Will members fear retaliation for participating in effective conversations?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Perspective Taking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What specifically about this issue is causing a reaction for your members?</li> <li>• What is the relationship of these members? (Do they share a work detail or sleeping space?)</li> <li>• What, if any, is your prior opinion of these members? (Are they like you? Are they not like you?)</li> <li>• How would you feel if you shared these individuals’ histories or circumstances?</li> <li>• What fears or frustrations might the external issue trigger for them?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Share Your Perspective</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What insights can you offer junior leaders or members about your thought process?</li> <li>• What insights can you share about your feelings on this external issue?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Conducting the Conversation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When is the best time in the work/training schedule to hold the conversation?</li> <li>• How will you convey your expected outcomes to participants?</li> <li>• What are your ideal norms/ground rules?</li> <li>• What strategies will you use to ensure that the discussion is solution-focused?</li> <li>• What strategies will you use to maximize participant engagement?</li> <li>• What can you do if the conversation is becoming unproductive or combative?</li> <li>• How will you determine if the conversation was effective?</li> </ul>

## Appendix B

### Facilitation Guide

#### Step 1: Plan and Prepare

After facilitators have recognized that a specific external (e.g., social, cultural, political) issue is adversely impacting the unit, identified any incident(s) triggered by the issue, and determined that formal reporting or other disciplinary actions are not necessary, facilitators should follow steps to plan and prepare to conduct an effective conversation.

- Identify key personnel.
- Determine which member(s) will participate and whether the conversation should occur individually or in a group.
- Complete the Facilitator's Effective Conversation Worksheet.
- Collect and review Service-specific resources for discussion facilitation best practices. (These will most likely be available through leader/facilitator training courses, discussion facilitation guides, and alternative dispute resolution programs.)
- Select the date, time, and location for the conversation, understanding that these logistical factors are primary determinants of the quality of the conversation and its outcome.

#### Facilitator's Effective Conversation Worksheet

After identifying the appropriate level at which to conduct the effective conversation (group or individual), facilitators should complete the Facilitator's Effective Conversation Worksheet.

This worksheet will prompt facilitators to clarify expectations, identify resources, and help them to outline specific strategies for conducting an effective, candid, and relevant conversation with member(s) about a specific external issue(s).

While key personnel can assist in answering the Facilitator's Effective Conversation Worksheet, it is important that the facilitator personally reflects on the questions outlined in the worksheet. By taking ownership of the process and responses, facilitators will be better prepared to conduct effective conversations and monitor the future need for intervention.

If facilitators find themselves becoming impatient, frustrated, or emotional, they should pause and ask themselves the following questions:

- What kind of leader do I want to be?
- How do I want others to perceive me?

## **Logistics**

After having completed the Leaders' Effective Conversations Worksheet, facilitators should work with key personnel to identify a time, date, and location to hold the Effective Conversation, keeping in mind that the timing and physical location of the conversation are primary determinants of its efficacy and outcome.

## **Logistical Goals**

Facilitators should do the following:

- Reduce distractions. External factors, such as loud noises or busy hallways, can disrupt the flow of the conversations and impair candidness.
- Promote dialogue. Whenever possible, effective conversations should occur in physical locations that allow and encourage participants to maintain eye contact with one another for the duration of the conversation. (For example, in a classroom, chairs should be arranged in a circle so that each chair faces the others. In a virtual environment, all participants should be instructed to turn on their cameras).
- Maximize privacy and minimize anxiety. Facilitators should select a location where members will have the best chance of feeling safe and comfortable. Whenever possible, they should select a space with adequate acoustics, lighting, ventilation, and seating, away from mission critical tasks, where members will not be distracted or overheard, and where interruptions are least likely to occur. Facilitators must consider that an individual effective conversation inside the facilitator's office reinforces the power imbalance; a subordinate may be less willing to share underlying feelings and emotions about an external issue if they feel they have been called before their Commander.
- Prioritize timing. While the training/work schedule will be a major factor in scheduling an effective conversation, it will be less effective if it occurs near the end of the workday. Therefore, facilitators should carefully consider both the time and the location when planning the effective conversation.

## **Logistical Considerations for Group Conversations**

Conversations can take place in person or virtually through DoD-approved online platforms. Group size and demographics are important and may determine the level and quality of the participation. Groups should be small (about 15-20 people) and representative. When possible and appropriate, facilitators should select a diverse range of individuals. It can be beneficial for junior and senior members to engage together in a setting where they set their rank aside.

### *Physical Site Preparation*

Having identified the location, facilitators should create a discussion-friendly environment to enhance participants' receptivity.

- Whenever possible, facilitators should adjust room temperature to a comfortable level and ensure that seating is comfortable.
- Facilitators should arrange seating so that all participants maintain eye contact with one another and can clearly view audiovisual aids (if applicable).
- If appropriate, facilitators should ensure that writing materials (pens, pencils, paper) are available for participants to take notes.
- To promote psychological safety and to reduce fear of attribution, if the group designates an official note taker, that individual should avoid writing down personally identifying information. If using notes to help prepare a brief or after-action report, it is best practice to destroy those notes after completing the official report.
- If applicable, facilitators should allocate space for discussion aids and arrange any handout materials in a sequential, orderly, accessible fashion, with enough for all participants.
- Facilitators should ensure that relevant multimedia visual aids are working.
- Facilitators should check in advance to ensure proper arrangement of the setup.
- When applicable, facilitators should create signature forms to record members' attendance.

### *Virtual Site Preparation*

If the conversation will occur through a virtual platform or online chat system, facilitators should consider the following:

- Will members have access to an online camera so that other participants can see them?
- How will the facilitator manage the group/process in an online system?
- Are all participants familiar with online chat features and the available controls?

## **Step 2: Introductions**

Facilitators should arrive at the location early on the day of the event, if possible, and check that the physical site is prepared as expected. The next step is to initiate and guide the conversation.

### **Welcome Participants**

Facilitators should promote a respectful and relaxed atmosphere by acknowledging participants as they arrive.

### **Introduce Key Personnel**

Facilitators should introduce themselves and any other support staff who have been instructed to assist with the process, such as an Equal Opportunity Advisor, Chaplain, Family Advocacy Program personnel, or other member with facilitation skills. Facilitators should explain that these individuals have been briefed and prepared, and they are available to answer questions now and in the future.

### **Introduce Participants**

Facilitators should ask members to introduce themselves. As needed, and whenever possible, facilitators should arrange seating so that all participants can maintain eye contact with one another during introductions and for the duration of the conversation. (For example, facilitators may arrange chairs in a circle.)

### **Step 3: Validate**

After having welcomed participants, identified key personnel, and facilitated member introductions, the next step is for facilitators to validate the conversation.

#### **Introduce Topic**

Facilitators should inform participants that they are facilitating a discussion with them about the specific external issue.

#### **Explain Need**

Facilitators should clarify that this is not a disciplinary matter and should explain any specific incident(s) or reason(s) that leadership has identified conflict or disagreement about this external issue as being a threat to the mission.

#### **Emphasize Member Value**

Facilitators should use this as an opportunity to reiterate the mission, convey the importance of unit cohesion in achieving that mission, and emphasize the value of each member and the importance of individual contributions. They should remind members that their open and honest participation is important for the discussion to be productive.

#### **Communicate Goals**

Facilitators should explain what leadership hopes to achieve through this conversation.

#### **Validate the Process**

Facilitators should explain that this discussion process is strategic. As needed, they should describe the benefits of this process for individuals and organizations. If appropriate, facilitators may emphasize that research shows that the ability to participate in conversations like this can

increase people's physical and mental health, operational effectiveness, and their objective and subjective performance assessments in other industries.

#### **Step 4: Set Expectations**

After having explained why this conversation is important to leadership and how it supports the mission, facilitators should set expectations for participants.

##### **Identify Clear Purpose**

Having a clearly articulated purpose, and communicating that purpose to participants, is essential for holding an effective, relevant, and candid discussion. Starting a discussion with clearly articulated goals can help shape the nature of the discussion and link it to the mission. Having clear and specific objectives for achieving those goals improves participation by reducing performance anxiety. It also gives the group a way to determine if the conversation was successful.

Facilitators should use this as an opportunity to reiterate what leadership hopes to achieve through this activity and to solicit insight from members about what they personally hope to accomplish. Whenever possible, facilitators should link goals and objectives to military values/norms to establish common ground, secure commitment to the process, and hold individuals accountable to the group and to themselves. Facilitators should emphasize that the purpose of the activity is not to belittle members or force them to change their points of view.

Facilitators should post the goals and objectives prominently in view of participants. As needed, facilitators may refer to these goals and objectives during the activity if the conversation is veering off track.

##### *Examples of Goals and Objectives*

- Facilitators should deal with a conflict. They should reduce intra-unit conflict by isolating personal disagreements.
- Facilitators should talk through a problem. They should aim to improve communication among members and between members and facilitators. They should also understand principles of self-awareness as features of situational awareness in the military context. Facilitators should increase capacity to experience personal discomfort.
- Facilitators should find common ground and increase trust among members and trust in leadership. Through dialogue, facilitators should aim to understand members' different backgrounds and life experiences. They should seek out and emphasize common values, shared experiences, and similar goals.
- Facilitators should understand how members are thinking/feeling. They should convey the value of each member and their professional contributions. They should further acknowledge members' different points of view. They should practice differentiating

individuals from opinions by conveying respect for individuals in the absence of agreement about external issue(s).

- Facilitators should increase skills. They should improve communication skills by learning and applying best practices for self-awareness and listening. They should increase ability to mediate personal disagreements by learning and applying best practices for facilitation and conflict resolution.

### **Set Ground Rules**

Facilitators should utilize ground rules to provide order to the discussion and to model professional norms, while allowing each participant the opportunity to speak and feel heard. They should explain what the ground rules are, that they are nonnegotiable, and how they apply in the current setting. They should ask the group if they would like to add to the list of ground rules. If additional suggestions are made, they should be added if appropriate.

Facilitators should post the goals and ground rules prominently in view of participants. As needed, facilitators can refer to them during the activity if the conversation is veering off track or if anyone violates the rules. Whenever possible, facilitators should link ground rules to military values/norms to establish common ground, secure commitment to the process, and to hold individuals accountable to the group and to themselves.

#### *Example of Ground Rules*

Facilitators should provide a set of ground rules to participants, such as the ones below:

- Participate fully. Agree to share your thoughts and opinions openly and honestly. If something offends you, agree to provide specific feedback during the conversation about what caused you offense.
- Participate equally. Each participant receives equal opportunity to speak and share views. One person speaks at a time. No interrupting. No crosstalk. Allow others to complete their comments before speaking. (It can be helpful to wait five seconds before responding.)
- Focus on the issue. Link all comments and questions to the specific external issue(s) and related incidents (if any). Limit talk about other conflicts or disagreements. (If members do so, acknowledge it, redirect the conversation, and, as appropriate, set a plan to follow up later.)
- Listen attentively. When someone else is speaking, focus on what they are saying; wait until they show that they are done speaking before planning your response. No interrupting, and no crosstalk. Each participant shall devote more time, energy, and effort to listening to others, rather than to speaking themselves.

- Be accountable. Take personal responsibility for monitoring and managing your internals, such as your emotions, negative attitudes, or counterproductive motives. Take personal responsibility for monitoring and managing your own external reactions, such as tone, body language, and other non-verbal cues. (As needed, discuss and utilize strategies for self-awareness.)
- Use tact and professionalism. Acknowledging that leadership cannot ensure confidentiality, agree to use discretion after the event as an extension of the expectations for treating fellow members with respect.
- Be curious. Seek to understand others. Do not try to intimidate or persuade others to your point of view. Ask questions and do so in good faith; use questions to learn, not to make others feel uncomfortable, to insult them, or to assert your own opinion.
- Avoid generalizations. Encourage members to speak for themselves. Refrain from assigning norms to specific groups. Do not pressure individuals to speak on behalf of racial, religious, political, or other groups with which they affiliate.
- Be courteous. This process allows for personal disagreements, but not personal attacks or insults.
- Avoid bringing up legal violations. Set and use guidelines for handling self-disclosures with the understanding that this is not the place to report violations of UCMJ or civil law. Clarify to members that if someone reports such a legal violation, you will have to end the conversation immediately but will follow up with members to set a time to continue.
- Handle disruptions appropriately. Set and use guidelines for extraneous diversions, such as external interruptions or breaks.

### **Step 5: Group Conversation**

Having established group expectations and ground rules, facilitators should guide the group through the discussion in a systematic and structured way that encourages maximum participation, validates participants' relevant contributions, ensures that all members have an equal opportunity to share their views, and refrains from trying to convince participants to change their view(s).

#### **Facilitation Best Practices**

- Facilitators should establish rapport with their group and build their trust and confidence in the facilitator by projecting warmth and genuine interest, listening to their contributions with interest and focus, and demonstrating empathy and understanding without taking sides.
- Facilitators should ask specific questions that are relevant to the external issue; ask pre-determined questions, but also tailor the discussion to integrate participants' ideas and emergent concerns.

- When appropriate, to establish credibility, facilitators should use expert knowledge/experience from other participants and encourage participation and discussion by sharing control of the discussion.
- Additional best practices include learning and using group members' names, acknowledging speakers verbally or non-verbally when they make a relevant contribution, and applying best practices for active listening, such as paraphrasing members' statements to clarify their points (as needed).

### *Key Points for Facilitator*

- Facilitators should not talk after each comment or answer every question. They should allow participants to respond directly to each other. During the most effective discussions, facilitators often say little but are constantly thinking about how to move the group toward its goal.
- Facilitators should not fear silence but use it to their advantage. They should allow participants time to reflect so they can formulate thoughtful comments.
- Facilitators should prevent anyone from dominating the conversation and try to include everyone. They should draw out the quieter, reticent members.
- Facilitators should be sure to acknowledge each comment made to the group in some way, even if non-verbally.
- When trying to decide when to intervene, facilitators should err on the side of non-intervention. They should not allow the group to make them the “answer person.”
- Facilitators should help participants identify common ground, but should not try to force consensus.
- Facilitators should pay attention to participants' physical indicators and non-verbal cues.

### **Virtual Effective Conversations**

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented situation that has limited facilitators' ability to gather members in-person. However, effective conversations require that all members participate fully. The ability to read non-verbal cues like facial expressions is also key to effective conversations success. Therefore, we strongly recommend that facilitators reserve effective conversations for situations when members can gather in-person to speak face-to-face. Should a facilitator select to conduct effective conversations remotely, we recommend the following best practices:

- Facilitators should ensure that all participants have access to high-speed internet connections and that their devices can handle high quality audio and video.

- Facilitators should enable video; at a minimum, participants should turn on the video function for their devices.
- Facilitators should use gallery view, not speaker view, and instruct participants to use the option that allows them to see all other participants at all times.
- Facilitators should participate from a private, distraction-free location or, if necessary, use a headset to ensure that other conversation comments stay within the group and are not overheard.
- Facilitators who elect to use the chat feature should prohibit private chats (disable the feature if possible) and add a ground rule that instructs members to direct all comments to everyone in the group.
- Facilitators should monitor the chat; if the facilitator chooses to use the group chat function, a second individual (not the facilitator) should monitor that chat and alert the facilitator to questions or comments that members raise in the chat.
- Facilitators should consider using group notes; the facilitator who guides the discussion can also take notes about members' comments in a word processing program or idea mapping software, which they project to the group in real time by sharing the screen.

### **Question Types**

During the discussion, the facilitator should ask questions that are relevant to the external issue, give members time to reflect, and should ensure that all members have had the opportunity to respond before moving on.

Throughout this process, facilitators should speak emphatically and with conviction. They can accomplish this by asking open-ended questions, seeking specific clarification, and providing examples that demonstrate understanding. Speaking emphatically and with conviction helps to establish an environment that fosters greater participation. The following are different types of questions that facilitators can ask.

#### *Open-ended questions*

Facilitators should use open-ended questions to elicit a more complete response and more effective participation, since these questions require more than a yes-or-no answer. Most leadoff questions should be open-ended questions that can begin with “how” or “what” to stimulate as many responses as possible.

#### *Direct questions*

Facilitators should ask explicitly for a reply on a specified topic. They should use who, what, when, where, why, and how questions. They should be aware that these questions will likely address a specific person. Facilitators should not pressure a member to self-incriminate.

### *Paraphrased Questions*

Facilitators paraphrase the participant's last response, then follow with a question seeking additional, related information.

### *Narrow Questions*

Facilitators should select the subject matter to discuss and refine the question to acquire specific information.

### *Polling Questions*

An uninvolved group member is a challenge. For example, a participant might be quiet or displaying body language that signals a lack of interest or an unwillingness to participate. To encourage quiet or withdrawn group members, it is helpful to use a polling technique to elicit each participant's feelings about a particular issue. Facilitators should avoid serial questioning. They should avoid asking each participant to respond in the same order to every question.

### *Conversation Structures*

Facilitators may find it helpful to structure effective conversations in a manner that manages the discussion effectively and maximizes participation. Generally, the facilitator always begins by asking an open-ended question about the external issue or the incident(s) it triggered.

### *The Round*

Facilitators should give each participant an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. They should also provide participants with the option to pass. After the round, facilitators should discuss the responses.

### *Pairs*

Facilitators should give participants a few minutes to respond to a question individually in writing or, if that is not possible, through a minute or two of silent reflection. They should divide the group into pairs. Facilitators should instruct participants to share their responses within the pair. They should provide explicit instructions, such as "Tell each other why you wrote/thought what you did." After 5-10 minutes, facilitators should reconvene the group. The facilitator can ask for comments on how much participants' views coincided with or differed from those of their partner, or ask what questions remain after their paired discussion.

### *Pair-Paraphrase*

For a more structured version of pair sharing, facilitators should instruct the listener to paraphrase the speakers' response back to the speaker as accurately as possible. Once the speaker is satisfied that the listener has accurately paraphrased their statement(s), facilitators

should switch roles. The facilitator can instruct participants to ask clarifying questions of one another but only once each has spoken and paraphrased. Facilitators should give each pair 5-10 minutes to discuss and then reconvene the group.

### *Sharing Comparisons*

Facilitators should invite each member to share one observation about the external issue. After two people speak, the facilitator invites a third member to identify one difference or commonality between the previous two speakers and then share that comparative observation with the group. The process continues until all participants have an opportunity to share one personal observation and at least one comparative observation based on what others said.

### *Written Sharing*

When possible, it may be preferable to have participants write down their thoughts. This approach can be useful for an especially large or an especially reticent group. Facilitators should provide writing materials to participants. Three colors of sticky notes would be ideal; one color for positive, one for negative, and one for solutions. First, facilitators instruct participants to write down terms, phrases, ideas, or memories that they positively associate with the unit or the military. (For example, this might include things that make them feel proud or patriotic or that describe a specific positive memory.) Facilitators should post these and discuss them as a group; they should point out trends to identify common ground. Next, facilitators instruct participants to write down their “hot button” political words or phrases that the external issue triggers for them. These words are posted and discussed as a group with guidance and questions from the facilitator. The final step is to solicit, post, and discuss solutions. Facilitators should ask members to write down what they think can be done going forward to prevent this from becoming a threat to the unit or to the mission.

## **Step 6: Summary and Solutions**

- Facilitators should summarize the conversation for the group. They should reference the initial group expectations and ground rules, and discuss what the group accomplished. They should thank the members for their participation and candid remarks.
- If there were any areas not fully explained or defined, facilitators should use the closing as an opportunity to provide additional information and to encourage members to conduct additional research on that topic.
- If there were areas where members might have been offended, facilitators should explain why this may have happened, and discuss the consequences of offending someone.
- Facilitators should explain the importance of communicating and discussing concerns to better understand situations from others’ point of view; they should identify some strategies or examples for the conversation that show how to inform someone appropriately that they have offended others or treated others unfairly.

- Facilitators should explain the positive results of an organization whose members work together, look after others, and trust each other.
- Facilitators should respect others' opinions and concerns; with the understanding that confidentiality cannot be ensured, they should ask members to agree to avoid sharing what the group discussed.
- Facilitators should reinforce that the environment in which the conversation occurred was non-attributional and non-retributive.
- Facilitators should conclude the session with a sense of completion by tying together some of the comments from the conversation.
- If applicable, facilitators should reiterate organizational policy related to the discussion, issue, or incident.
- Facilitators should leave the group on a positive footing and provide the group's envisioned way forward.

### **Generating Collaborative Solutions**

The goal of effective conversations is to generate action-focused solutions that foster a respectful environment that is free of fear and anger. Action-focused solutions are agreements, not expectations. Facilitators should not dictate the solution, which could create greater conflict; generating solutions requires collaboration.

All participants should be able to ask and answer these questions:

- What are reasonable expectations?
- What are we agreeing to do next?
- What support are/is the facilitator/group committed to provide?
- What obstacles might prevent change?
- What is the plan to overcome the obstacles? How will the facilitator/group evaluate progress?

While action-focused solutions represent the preferred outcome, facilitators should be aware that complex issues may not have any immediate solutions.

### **Step 7: Conduct After-Action Review (AAR)**

The final aspect of the Effective Conversations Framework is to reassess the impact of the external issue after the effective conversation has occurred. This final step is essential because it

enables facilitators to identify course(s) of action to address unit problem(s) and to do so in a way that takes members' perspective into consideration.

Facilitators are encouraged to utilize the Effective Conversations After-Action Report (AAR) Worksheet. This worksheet focuses on individual, leadership, and unit performance with goal of synthesizing immediate feedback about how to improve future actions. This worksheet will help facilitators assess the specific impact(s) of the conversation that they conducted. It will also help them to examine the process of conducting such conversations for the future. By examining the process and assessing its impact, facilitators will have a better understanding of what worked and what did not. While at times the AAR might focus on negative aspects of the event, the facilitators should approach it constructively. For example, facilitators should not use the AAR to assign blame, embarrass others, or compare individuals. Rather, it is most effective when used as a tool to improve performance, increase proficiency, and enhance confidence. If the effective conversations process and impact produced the intended outcomes, facilitators can be confident in employing the process for future effective conversations. If the process and effect did not produce the intended outcomes, facilitators need to identify areas where this failure may have occurred and consider a different approach in the future.

**Appendix C**

**After-Action Review (AAR) Worksheet**

<p><b><u>Leaders’ After-Action Review (AAR) Worksheet</u></b></p> <p>Review the Leaders’ Effective Conversations Worksheet, which you prepared prior to conducting conversation. Answer the following questions in writing for your own reference. Note: Avoid writing down members’ personally identifying information.</p>
<p><b>General Assessment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you achieve your initial purpose for having the effective conversation?</li> <li>• How did the outcome differ from your ideal?</li> <li>• If the conversation became unproductive or combative, what were specific factors that contributed to that negative outcome?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assessing Impact of External Issue</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the external issue you initially identified the actual issue that is/was affecting the unit?</li> <li>• What, if any, additional external issues are/were affecting the unit?</li> <li>• Was the problem you initially identified the actual problem that is/was affecting the unit?</li> <li>• What, if any, additional problems are/were these issue(s) causing in the unit?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Members’ Perspective(s)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What specifically about the external issue was causing a reaction in your unit?</li> <li>• Which members were reacting? Why?</li> <li>• What prevented members from participating fully in the effective conversation?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Personnel</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could the facilitator or previously identified key personnel benefit from additional training?</li> <li>• Did you identify any additional personnel who could support future effective conversations?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-Evaluation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you remain neutral, objective, and honest?</li> <li>• How, if at all, has your personal thinking about the issue changed?</li> <li>• How can you better clarify expected outcomes to effective conversation participants?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Solutions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What, if any, course(s) of action did the members suggest to address the problem(s)?</li> <li>• How will you incorporate their suggestions when deciding the course of action?</li> </ul>
<p><b>For Future Conversations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will you improve the logistics, structure, ground rules, and expectations for future effective conversations?</li> <li>• What additional strategies will you use to ensure that future effective conversations are effective?</li> </ul>

## Appendix D – Learning Activities

### Scenario-Based Learning Experiences

This section provides example scenarios that can be incorporated directly into an Effective Conversations Course or used as a reference to create new scenarios. The scenarios are presented in different formats including open-ended discussions, role plays, and highly structured discussions, including the following:

- Exercise 1: “Fishbowl Discussion Activity” – Open Discussion on Controversial Topics with Evaluation/Feedback Opportunities
- Exercise 2: “Hot Buttons:” – Highly Structured Unscripted Effective Conversations
- Exercise 3: “Making Sense” – Structured Unscripted Effective Conversations

### *FISHBOWL DISCUSSION ACTIVITY*

Smart and Featheringham (2006) propose a fishbowl discussion activity to foster effective interpersonal communication and discussion skills. Participants either are actively participating in a discussion or evaluating a discussion.

Participants are broken down into groups of 5 to 6 and provided a discussion topic, which can be adapted to the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) space. The topic should involve an element of controversy and be somewhat complex. Smart and Featheringham (2006) provide the following topic suggestions:

- Women and the glass ceiling
- Affirmative actions
- Ethical decision making and cooperate responsibility
- Discrimination in the workplace

Once topics have been selected, participants conduct research on the topic, preparing about 8-10 key points about the topic to include any areas of controversy related to the topic. Before the discussion, the facilitator reviews effective communication skills and behaviors that can either facilitate or hinder effective conversations. Once these behaviors are listed, participants may be given an opportunity to rate the relative harm or merit of those behaviors. The facilitator’s effective conversations worksheet could be utilized for this activity.

The small groups then hold a discussion about their topic, arguing differing perspectives. The remaining participants will evaluate the conversation and provide feedback on what they perceived to be effective or non-helpful. This exercise provides a real-life opportunity to utilize strategies for effective conversation, obtain feedback, and engage in self-reflection.



*Figure 10. Seating Arrangement for Fishbowl Exercise (Inner/Outer Circles)*

## ***HOT BUTTONS***

### **Exercise 2: “Hot Buttons” - Highly Structured Unscripted Effective Conversations**

In the case of extremely sensitive issues that elicit strong emotions, adhering to a rigid discussion structure can help minimize potential conflicts while moving the conversation forward. The purpose of this learning exercise is to implement best practices while guiding students through a structured discussion about an extremely sensitive external issue in which they practice skills for active listening and personal management.

#### **Materials Needed**

- Writing paper
- Writing utensils
- Copies of Leaders’ Effective Conversations Worksheet (one for each student)

#### **The Scenario**

##### **External Issue:**

In August 2017, right-wing militias, members of the KKK, and armed marchers displaying neo-Nazi symbols and slogans convened to demonstrate in Charlottesville, Virginia. According to event organizers, the purpose of the Unite Right Rally was to unify the white nationalist movement around shared opposition to the removal of a statue of confederal General Robert E. Lee from a public park in the city. Conflicts with counter-protesters resulted in widespread injury and the killing of Heather Heyer when a self-avowed white nationalist drove his car into a crowd. The event generated significant public controversy and resulted in multiple arrests,

including multiple convictions of the driver who was convicted of murder and federal hate crimes.

Note: Alternative external issues that could be discussed for this exercise include civil unrest following the killing of George Floyd (May and June 2020), the final U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (August 2021), or the US Capitol Attack (January 2021).

### **The Conversation**

- Facilitators should begin by explaining that the purpose of this exercise is to simulate an effective conversation based on the scenario and to practice strategies learned in training.
- After conveying the purpose of the exercise, facilitators should present the scenario to the class.
- Facilitators should ask students to complete the Leaders' Effective Conversations Worksheet.
- Next, facilitators should lead the group through the process of establishing ground rules. Facilitators should write down the ground rules and display them in a location where all students can see them.
- Once the ground rules have been established, facilitators should invite students to share their observations using the "Share Comparisons" procedure.
- Share Comparisons: Facilitators should ask students to share one observation about the Unite the Right Rally. Facilitators instruct them to take turns. After two people have shared, facilitators should ask a third member to describe one difference or commonality between what the previous two speakers said. Once that person has spoken, facilitators repeat the process. Facilitators should invite a fourth and fifth member to speak and ask another individual to describe one difference or commonality between what the previous two speakers said. They should continue following this pattern until each member has an opportunity to share their observations and compare the observations of others. The facilitator will take notes that highlight commonalities and points of agreement.
- After all students have had an opportunity to share one of their own observations and one comparison, the facilitator then describes the primary points of agreement back to the group.
- Next, the facilitator invites students to identify another member of the group who holds a different perspective than their own or who said something that made them curious. Facilitators should ask students to break into pairs and sit together to engage in the "Pair-Paraphrase" activity.
- Pair-Paraphrase: Seated in pairs, the partners take turns acting as speakers and listeners. The first speaker shares their observation. Next, the second partner paraphrases the response back to the speaker as accurately as possible. Once the speaker is satisfied that the listener has accurately paraphrased their statement(s), the partners switch roles. The facilitator can

instruct students to ask clarifying questions of one another, but only once each has spoken and paraphrased. Facilitators should give each pair 5-10 minutes to discuss then reconvene the group to debrief.

### **Unstructured Group Discussion**

- Facilitators should ask participants to re-convene as a group and ask each student to share something new that they learned.
- Once all students have shared something that they learned, facilitators should ask if anyone has additional questions.
- Facilitators should ask students to imagine how this would play out in their own unit. They should invite students to share their answers to these questions with the class:
  - What external issue(s) would cause problems in your own unit(s)?
  - Why or why not would you use utilize this approach?
  - What special challenges would you face?

## ***MAKING SENSE***

### **Exercise 3: “Making Sense” – Structured Unscripted Effective Conversations**

The purpose of this scenario is for leaders to implement best facilitation practices, to make sense of a scenario, and to plan how they would use effective conversations to approach the situation. The resources in Figure 11 provide background information about the external issue in the scenario.

### **Materials Needed**

- Writing paper
- Writing utensils
- Copies of Leaders’ Effective Conversations Worksheet (one for each student)
- Large writing surface for facilitator (white board, chalkboard, flip chart, or easel pad)

### **The Scenario**

External Issue: On October 27, 2018, an outside gunman opened fire during religious services at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In what is often described as the largest single attack on American Jews in US history, the shooter wounded six individuals, including four police officers, and killed eleven others. Among the dead were two US veterans. Authorities charged the shooter with multiple counts, including federal hate crimes. Prior to the event, the shooter made anti-Semitic comments on social media. He also made explicitly anti-Semitic statements during and after the event itself, which were recorded by law enforcement.

News Coverage	Press Release
<p>"11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged With 29 Counts" C. Robertson, C. Mele, and S. Tavernise (27 October 2018) New York Times <b>Article:</b> <a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html</a></p> <p>"Who Is Robert Bowers, the Suspect in the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting?" J. Tukewitz and K. Roose (27 October 2018) New York Times <b>Article:</b> <a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooter.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooter.html</a></p>	<p>"Hate-crime charges added against accused synagogue gunman Robert Bowers" M. Guza (29 January 2019) Tribune-Review <b>Article:</b> <a href="https://triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-allegheeny/more-federal-charges-added-against-accused-tree-of-life-gunman-robert-bowers/">https://triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-allegheeny/more-federal-charges-added-against-accused-tree-of-life-gunman-robert-bowers/</a></p> <p>"JWV responds to the Attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA" Jewish War Veterans (JWV) (30 October 2018) <b>Press Release:</b> <a href="https://www.jwv.org/jwv-responds-to-the-attack-at-the-tree-of-life-synagogue-in-pittsburgh-pa/">https://www.jwv.org/jwv-responds-to-the-attack-at-the-tree-of-life-synagogue-in-pittsburgh-pa/</a></p>

*Figure 11.* Tree of Life Articles and Press Release

### What Happened in the Unit:

In this hypothetical scenario, a member of your unit was complaining about how law enforcement monitors people's social media posts and they used the Tree of Life shooting as an example. This led to a heated discussion during which one member accused another of being a "Nazi sympathizer." Complicating matters, your unit has two Jewish members who overheard the argument, but only the tail end of it. Other members have complained. Due to the sensitivity and social complexity of this situation, your Commander has requested that the unit have an EC.

### **The Conversation**

- Facilitators should present the scenario to students. They should explain to the students that they will participate in a collaborative class discussion in which they will plan a candid, relevant, and effective conversation with members of the unit in the scenario.
- Facilitators should instruct students to complete the Leaders' Effective Conversations Worksheet based on this scenario.
- Pairs: Facilitators should divide the students into pairs and instruct them to sit with partners. They should ask students to discuss their responses to the Leaders' Effective Conversations Worksheet with their partners. They should provide explicit instructions, such as "Tell each other why you wrote what you did."
- After 5-10 minutes, facilitators should reconvene the group to debrief.

### **Group Discussion**

- Facilitators should ask pairs to report how their views coincided or differed.
- Once all pairs have reported, facilitators should ask if students have any additional questions or comments based on their paired discussion.
- Next, facilitators should lead the class discussion to plan an effective conversation for this unit. They should take notes on board for the class. In this conversation, the class should work as a group to do the following:
  - Identify key support personnel.
  - Decide which members should be involved.

- Set objectives for the conversation and decide on ground rules.
- Identify potential negative outcomes and what steps can be taken before, during, and after the conversation to reduce potential negative outcomes.
- List outstanding questions or other information that would need to be addressed to help the leader(s) plan the conversation.
- Facilitators should ask students to imagine how this would play out in their own unit.
  - What external issue(s) would cause problems in your own unit(s)?
  - Why or why not would you use utilize this approach?
  - What special challenges would you face?

### **Perspective-Taking and Sensemaking**

Facilitators can prime students in the Effective Conversations Course to engage in deliberative perspective taking and sensemaking by asking to them reflect on their own relevant experiences and to discuss them with the class. For example, facilitators could prime students in the following ways:

- Imagine a time when someone misjudged your opinion about a controversial issue or when they attributed a false belief or attitude to you. What happened? Identify a frustrating, humorous, or otherwise remarkable anecdote that resulted from their misjudgment. Reflect on what led that person(s) to believe this about you. What did they miss or incorrectly assume about your personal history, your social circumstances, or your cultural values?
- Identify a specific individual in your life whom you believe to hold—or whom you know to hold—a different opinion about a specific controversial issue(s) than you. What specifically about that individual’s personal history, social circumstances, or cultural beliefs might lead them to hold that belief? Identify a problematic, humorous, or otherwise remarkable anecdote about your disagreement with this person. Alternatively, reflect on how that individual might react to discussing the issue(s) with you. In training, and in compliance with disclosure norms and regulations, talk about your (real or hypothetical) disagreement with this person. Invite your fellow leaders to give you feedback on your assessment or predictions.

### **Pause Strategy**

#### **Pause Strategy for Self-Management and Self-Control**

- Step 1: Become Self-Aware of physical indicators of strong emotions.
- Step 2: Self-Acknowledge counterproductive motives.
- Step 3: Ask Self-Specific complex how/what questions to trigger System 2 thinking.

With practice, these steps can become habit. When Pausing, an individual maintains emotional awareness (Step 1) by monitoring physical and external indicators of heightened emotional

states, such as heart rate, skin temperature, speech tone and volume. Next, the individual self-acknowledges any counterproductive motives (Step 2) by silently asking themselves questions such as: “What is motivating me right now?” “Do I want agreement?” “Do I want to be right?” “Do I want to embarrass someone?” “Do I want them to feel bad?” Finally (Step 3), the individual asks themselves complex “how” or “what” questions to redirect their thinking toward collaborative goals. Suggested complex how/what questions include the following: “What kind of leader do I want to be?” “What kind of teammate do I want to be?” “What kind of warfighter do I want to be?” “How do I want to be perceived by my peers?” “How do I want to be perceived by those under my command?”

### **Independent Learning Exercises**

Students can increase their skills for active listening through independent practice.

**Exercise #1:** Leaders are encouraged to practice active and empathetic listening in all their daily interpersonal encounters for a set timeframe and then critically reflect on the experience.

**Exercise #2:** A more formal approach involves enlisting the help of a trusted partner or friend. With permission, the leader records a conversation in which they listen to this trusted person actively and ask them questions, like a mock interview. Later, the leader listens to the recording alone and reflects on the experience (ideally in writing) to conduct an informal self-assessment.

### **Optional Reading**

Leaders who are students in the Effective Conversations Course might find the following popular publications helpful to improve their skills. Note: This does not constitute an endorsement of any author, book, or program.

Written for leaders, these readings describe how effective conversations can be used as a strategy to improve performance and morale within organizations.

- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (2022) by Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, and Emily Gregory.
- *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior* (2004) by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler.
- *How Project Leaders Can Overcome the Crisis of Silence* (2007) by Joseph Grenny.
- Grenny, J., Maxfield, D. Shimbirt, A. Published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review*. 48(4), 46-52.

Aimed at a broader audience, these books describe verbal discussion strategies that people can use to resolve conflict and improve communication in professional and personal relationships.

- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (2000) by Douglas Stone and Bruce Patton.
- *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* (2014) by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen.

These books describe how cognitive bias and strong emotions are rooted in biological and cognitive factors, and they describe strategies for how to mitigate the negative impacts of these factors on decision making.

- *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) by Daniel Kahneman.
- *The Hour between Dog and Wolf: Risk Taking, Gut Feelings, and the Biology of Boom and Bust* (2012) by John Coates.

Additionally, leaders are encouraged to review Service-specific approaches for discussion facilitation including facilitation guides and ADR programs.