

How to Hold Space in Conversations

In this resource we teach leaders how to hold space in a conversation, so their teams feel truly heard, understood and appreciated. This is possibly the single most important skill for leaders when it comes to connecting with their team – especially in times of crisis such as COVID-19.



What It Means To Hold Space In Conversations

Holding space means to come to a conversation with an open mind, without pointing the finger, solving a problem, or giving your opinion. Holding space is done without passing judgment and practised using empathy and compassion, putting your needs aside and allowing someone to just be themselves.

Why It's Important To Hold Space

The uncertainty, isolation and level of change that has been thrust upon us during COVID-19 is resulting in most people having difficult experiences and struggling with complex emotional reactions to what is happening around them. In this challenging time, it is more important than ever to ensure we are holding space in conversation with our teams, friends and loved ones.



Holding space for someone else in a conversation requires us to completely set aside our own needs and expectations. It's about taking your focus off what is happening for you and engaging in an act of service that has the ability to redefine a friendship or professional relationship for the better.

When someone holds space for us in a conversation, we feel accepted, heard, valued, acknowledged, understood and important. And most of all, we feel CONNECTED. This is exactly what we ALL need right now as we manage isolation during COVID-19.

When someone doesn't know how to hold space for us in a conversation, we feel dismissed, insignificant, brushed off, overlooked, not important and not cared for. It may feel like they are not respecting our experience and are rushing to find a solution, making it about themselves or moving on to another topic that they feel more comfortable with.

How To Hold Space

Holding space in a conversation takes practice. We have put together some do's and don'ts as a guide to learning this important communication skill.

The Do's:

1. Set aside any expectations or needs you have for the conversation

Remember this is not about you. Go into the conversation with your opinions in neutral and mind open to understanding whatever experience the person may be having.

2. Ask open ended questions

Ask questions that encourage the person to explain their concern more deeply. We have provided some examples of open-ended questions further on in this resource.

3. Acknowledge and name the emotions you see / hear

Acknowledge the emotion by labelling it and accepting whatever comes. You don't need to sympathise or encourage negative emotion but rather stand in their shoes and empathise with what that feels like. By trying to understand these emotions we are acknowledging their whole experience. We have included some examples of how to acknowledge emotions further on in this resource.

4. Be curious

Extend the open questions to allow the fullness of the story or experience to be expressed. Approach the conversation with childlike curiosity to their story. What are the impacts of the challenges they are facing? What are the opportunities they see?

The Don'ts:



1. Be judgemental

Instead, be accepting of the person and their experience. If it feels that way to them, then it is real for them. Each person has their own life history and view of the world that impacts their experience.

2. Connect it back to your own experience or story

The minute you do this, the conversation is about YOU not the person you intend to serve or help. Telling your own story brings the focus back to you and really, this should be a conversation of service to the other person. It can also lead to a competition about whose story is worse, which is unhelpful for the person you are trying to serve.

3. Offer unsolicited advice, suggestions, direction or tell the person what to do unless we are explicitly invited to do so

It is not necessarily our role to solve the problem. Trust in the other person's ability to find their own solution.

4. Go into problem solving mode unless explicitly asked

Often the person simply needs to feel heard and acknowledged, and they also want to be responsible for creating their own solutions.

5. Change the subject as soon as you feel uncomfortable

It's not about you! Learn to sit with the discomfort. If you don't allow the fullness of their experience to be expressed, they will feel dismissed and not understood by you.

6. Dismiss emotions or tell the person how they should / shouldn't feel

When people are coming to us to share their experience, they are clearly hurting. If you tell them they shouldn't feel a certain

Helpful Phrases to Encourage Conversation

What is happening in your world?

What is happening for you right now?

What is coming up for you today?

What are you feeling at the moment?

What is occupying most of your thinking time?

What is the one thing that is sitting there at the back of your mind?

Helpful Responses to Emotion

That must be a difficult place to be in right now

I can see you are really concerned

It sounds like this is really troubling you

That must have really hurt

You sound like you are frustrated. Is that true for you?

Need Help?

We encourage you to spend a little time and practice stretching your comfort zone so you are able to sit longer with uncomfortable emotions, and provide a safe space for you staff, friends, family and spouses to really connect with you at a deeper level.

However, if you don't feel prepared, qualified or able to hold space for someone right now, there are avenues of referral if you are not able to deal with those conversations yourself. You could refer them to a counsellor, a coach (Equenti offers one-on-one and group coaching programs) or your company's Employee Assistance Provider.



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LEADERSHIP & LEARNING



Congratulations on completing the How to Hold Space in Conversations coaching tool. We encourage you to share this resource with your team so they can also learn how to hold space for others. If your organisation wants help with improving team communication, reach out for a conversation.

Lead yourself well and everything else falls into place.

- Angela Koning -

Let's Connect!



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