

spark*

Your guide to facilitating tough conversations during difficult times.

introduction

ion's spark series is designed to help you plan and facilitate enlightening and respectful dialogues — not debates — that center polarizing issues within the frame of our unique experiences and perspectives. Whether at work, at home, or online, tough conversations come up often these days. This guide will equip you with a framework to effectively navigate divisive discussions by creating psychologically safe spaces where participants can learn from one another, practice humility and open-mindedness, and cultivate compassion through human connection.

preparation

Set aside at least 15 minutes to carefully review the S.H.O.W L.O.V.E discussion guidelines and SPARK discussion questions. Choose up to 3 people you would like to have this conversation with, and invite them to the discussion ahead of time.

format

Begin your conversation with a brief check-in. Be sure to greet each person by name. If virtual, encourage others to turn on their webcams to help cultivate trust, safety, and human connection. As the facilitator, you should answer each question first.

S.H.O.W. L.O.V.E.

S space matters

When you take space, create space. Be mindful that when you begin a discussion by sharing your story or comments, you're consuming time that will be shared as equally as possible among your peers.

H help everyone listen to each other

You might ask: "Does anyone have any questions for Jacob?" "Who else resonates with Tanesha's comments?" Make space for quiet members of the group. While keeping a structured go-around approach generally motivates everyone to speak, a person might sink into the background during lively discussions.

O open minds open hearts

Speaking vulnerably takes courage. Encourage the group to keep an open mind so that everyone feels invited to safely and authentically express themselves. Urge your peers to take ownership of their ideas and opinions.

Framing the use of "I" and "my" statements as an aspect of accountability emboldens those who genuinely want to live with integrity & fosters a personal growth mindset. Moreover, suggesting that they personalize their experiences will help them understand and appreciate the power of creating deeper human connections with their peers and cultivating more trust with them.

W widen the lens

Broaden the discussion to include perspectives not expressed by the group. When you notice that everyone shares the same viewpoint on a subject, consider that someone might not feel safe expressing a less popular position. A gentle nudge like this might encourage that person to speak up: "Can anyone offer an alternative perspective to help us think more critically about where we stand?"

L legitimize differences

People care about their opinions, but conflicting viewpoints present opportunities for others to open their minds. By recognizing that each party is making legitimate points, you can demonstrate that everyone's views are being respected. Create a moment for everyone to step back, take a breath, and acknowledge that their own perspectives are not the only valid ones.

- Show your intention of demonstrating neutrality: *"You're both making good points here. Let me try summarizing them."*
- Summarize their views: *"Josh, if I'm understanding you, you're emphasizing the need for [doing XYZ] because not doing so could lead to serious consequences. Correct?"*
- Explicitly legitimize comments and invite others to respond: *"Both arguments sound quite compelling despite their opposing conclusions. Would anyone like to comment?"*

O overarching themes

At the end of the meeting, a restatement of the main points helps your peers internalize the discussion, reinforce their memory of individual stories, and consider ways to create common ground with others in the future.

V validate opinions, even the controversial ones

Adopt an approach of curiosity by looking for the gold in what they're saying. By legitimizing and accepting everyone's arguments and feelings – without agreeing that an opinion is "correct" – you foster an inclusive environment that recognizes divergent perspectives. You might respond by saying, "I see what you're saying" or "Now I see where you're coming from."

E empathize when people share their personal stories

Imagine what the person might be feeling (and why), then try to relay your insight through a statement that shows acceptance and support. You might say, "I can imagine it might be hard to talk about this topic in this group" or "I can see how your experience might conflict with your other commitments. How are you feeling right now?"

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Club Q: Violence in LGBTQIA+ Safe Spaces

about this issue

In 1999, transgender advocate Gwendolyn Ann Smith started a vigil in memory of Rita Hester, a transgender woman who was killed in 1998. Since then, November 20 has been recognized as the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance, a day that commemorates all transgender people lost to violence. On that day of this year, Andersen Lee Aldrich carried out a mass shooting at an LGBTQIA+ nightclub in Colorado Springs, CO, killing five people and injuring 19.

Once again, a public safe space has been invaded and violated by hate-driven violence. While many associate schools and churches as places where people gather without fear of danger, marginalized groups have always had to find or create public spaces where they can feel safe being their authentic selves and enjoy being accepted for who they are. For the LGBTQIA+ community, bars and clubs have served as places of refuge—not only for social gatherings, but as birthplaces for social-political movements that succeeded in winning rights and protecting their freedoms. So, when a well-known safe haven like Club Q in Colorado Springs becomes the scene of a murderous hate crime, it sends a frightening signal to members of the LGBTQIA+ community everywhere. And, whether you're an ally or not, violence against innocent people communing in a safe space should give you reason to pause and think about what most of us take for granted.

introduction (10 minutes)

- 1 Take 1-2 minutes each and share your name, where you live, what drew you here, and if this is your first spark conversation.
- 2 One participant volunteers to read the paragraph above about the issue.
- 3 Review the S.H.O.W L.O.V.E. discussion guidelines together. Remember to step back to reset if the conversation becomes too polarized. We are here to learn and share – not fight.
- 4 Use the questions below to facilitate a discussion on the issue. The facilitator who set up this spark conversation should go first. Not everyone needs to answer each question.

discussion questions (40 minutes)

Review each question below. After everyone has an opportunity to respond, the group may take a few minutes for clarifying or follow up questions/responses.

- 1 What does it mean to be in a safe space? Where or with whom do you feel safe?
- 2 Have you ever had a safe space violated?
- 3 Have you lost someone in your community? If so, how did that loss feel? How did the community respond and recover?
- 4 What is the role of an ally when a loved one is mourning or grieving?
- 5 How do you hear people talk about LGBTQ+ issues at home? With friends? At work? In the news?
- 6 What experiences have shaped your understanding of the LGBTQ+ community?

reflection (8 minutes)

- 1 What was most meaningful / valuable to you in this spark conversation?
- 2 What learning, new understanding, or common ground was found on the topic?
- 3 Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

wrap-up (2 minutes)

After everyone has had an opportunity to respond, the group may take a few minutes for clarifying or follow-up responses. Be sure to thank everyone for participating, for being present, and for cultivating a safe space.

Attribution: The spark conversation series is created by the team at ion Learning. During its development, we were introduced to LivingRoomConversations.org and embedded some of their inspiring material as well. They do great work, too, so check them out.