



UCOP Learning and Development
UCOP Human Resources
University of California Office of the President

Holding Listening Conversations with your Teams

10 Tips for creating safe spaces for employees to process current events

*Ideas gathered from: 1. [Fostering Psychological Safety During Times of Crisis](#) in *Paradigm*. 2. [11 Ways to Facilitate Great Conversations](#) from *Coaching for Leaders*. 3. [How Managers Can Promote Healthy Discussions about Race](#) from *Harvard Business Review*.*

We are in the midst of unprecedented times as each of us experiences in unique ways the distress of the coronavirus pandemic and the protests and unrest in response to George Floyd's death. Now, more than ever, our teams need to connect and feel part of a community. At the same time, with most of the workforce unable to connect in person, sharing concerns, questions, and ideas has become more difficult. It is critical to cultivate an environment where employees feel safe to bring their authentic selves to work.

This guide is intended to support leaders to cultivate an inclusive, safe space for discussions to allow employees feel seen, heard, and valued in this time of crisis. Doing so also allows leaders to model vulnerability through transparency and honesty about their own experiences, while also cultivating empathy and trust among teammates—both of which are critical to building psychological safety. Because individual experiences and reactions will vary, and [grief](#) emotions may be heightened during this time, we recommend the following tips from experts in the field. These are intended as suggestions, not instructions.

1. Time

Create a meeting time to support employees to share their thoughts, concerns, feelings, and needs at this time.

2. Use norms

Prior to the discussion, have the group agree to norms. Here are suggested norms for this time:

- Speak from the "I" perspective and be authentic
- Be fully present
- Listen to understand, not to judge
- Lean into discomfort
- Disagreements and new perspectives are learning opportunities
- Expect and accept non-closure, this is a process, not a one-time event
- Honor confidentiality

3. Use prompts

Prompts and questions can help people to share their thoughts. Here are some to try:

- What does the current state of events bring up for you?
- What are you feeling right now based on these events?
- What one emotion you are feeling right now? (list in chat or use menti.com to create an instant word cloud)
- How you and your family coping at this time? How have you been explaining what is happening to your younger family members?
- What are you finding challenging about working during these unprecedented times?
- What strategies are you finding helpful to build resilience?
- What's one thing you can do for yourself or your family members to support your emotion health?
- What do you need from this team to feel supported at this time?

4. Ask open ended-questions

Encourage conversation and relationship-building through open-ended questions. For example, ask, "How so?" or "Tell me more." If possible, avoid asking questions than can be answered with a simple yes/no or other one-word response.

5. Invite (but don't force) participation

Communicate that answering these questions is optional. Let people know they can turn video off if they prefer. These options provide flexibility while honoring that not everyone will feel comfortable participating.

It's common for a few people to speak more often than others in the group. Avoid statements like, "Let's hear from someone else other than Rick" or "Lisa, you've been really quiet." Instead, make invitations for volunteers and let people engage when they are ready, so they don't feel put on the spot.

6. Allow for silence and pauses in the conversation

It is common for some people to talk right away and others to need time to think. Allow for silence so that people can take the time they need to get their thought together.

7. Use break out rooms

Some people will feel reticent to share in a large group, but will share in small groups. For large meetings, try using the Zoom break out room feature. This will allow small groups to discuss and share together. After the "break out" room discussion is over, ask people to volunteer to share anything that resonated or might be important for the group. Emphasize the confidentiality norm at this point. They should share their own idea or keep it general.

8. **Normalize differences and disagreement**

Differences in experiences and reactions are normal. So is disagreement. Conflict can arise if disagreements aren't handled respectfully. If this happens, revisiting the group norms is often helpful. It's also helpful to establish a group norm that disagreement is welcome for the purpose of understanding, but not for convincing.

9. **Facilitate difficult moments in the conversation**

When comments lead to emotions and reactions that potentially jeopardize the safety of the group, it is important for the facilitator to be ready to respond to maintain engagement. At these moments, the goal of the facilitator is to de-escalate the moment so the group can continue to do the work of listening and learning together. Try these tips:

- Acknowledge the emotion by saying, "I appreciate your honesty and sharing your emotions at this time. This is a very emotional topic."
- Restate goal of conversation: "The goal today is to have an opportunity to voice our perspective and experiences and listen to others to seek to understand. Let's remain focused on this goal."
- Restate norms and expectations: Refer back to norms and acknowledge they can be challenging to maintain during conversations on topics such as race. Then add, "We will have different perspectives, but it is important to not assume to understand people's intention nor perspective. We are here to listen."

10. **Close the meeting but not the discussion**

The conversation often is not completed at the end of a listening session. Let people know that it is normal to feel uncomfortable when items discussed have not come to a closure. Discomfort is our learning zone. The goal of these listening conversations is to create a safe space for people to share and learn. This conversation is just a first step. Be sure to state that follow up will be needed to continue the conversation and work ahead. Additionally, thank people for listening and sharing and invite them to share their thoughts at the end by using a prompt, such as:

- Share one thing you learned today
- Share one thing that you are grateful for in the discussion
- Share one thing that resonated with you that you would like to take forward