

Facilitating Difficult Conversations

A Guide Created by MSJC's Racial Justice Issue Team

Overview

This resource presents norms, practical tools, best practices, and potential frameworks to guide your work as a facilitator in Marianist spaces. Much of this information is drawn from the NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice Advocacy Handbook. Please read [these 6 pages](#) prior to your facilitation.

We want to note that this is not a fully comprehensive resource. This represents an overview of how one can be a facilitator of difficult conversations, especially through an antiracist lens. We know that there are many additional resources that can guide your work so don't stop here.

Additionally, our recommendation is for you to carefully read through this resource **AND** to contact the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative's (MSJC) Racial Justice Team to attend a virtual facilitator training. This resource is meant to be done in tandem with the facilitator training so that folks get some experiential learning and time to practice the recommendations and skills presented. [Fill out this form](#) to indicate your interest in the Facilitator's Training and someone will follow up with you!



Preparation Checklist

Complete this checklist before facilitating your first session.



- Read (or re-read) the [NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice Advocacy Handbook](#) pages and [this facilitation guide](#).
- Attend a Facilitator's Training hosted by MSJC's Racial Justice Team. [Sign up using this form](#).
- Name at least two facilitators and a safe space guardian.
- Review the suggested group norms and add or edit them to fit your group and session(s). Share these norms with the group before your session.
- Create an outline for your first session as a facilitator. You could reference group planning tools like [Liberating Structures](#) and [Promoting Dialogue Tools for Changing Times](#).

Important Practices in Facilitation

Some Group Norms for Difficult Conversations

These should be shared with participants. Best practice is to send these before the session and request everyone agree to the norms.

- Honor confidentiality. What's said here stays here.
- Speak and listen from your heart and with respect for yourself and others.
- Practice active listening. Listen with curiosity and patience.
- Practice open-mindedness and speak from personal experience (I-statements). Try to avoid saying "we should," "you should," etc.
- Be intentional about language. Tread lightly—"we" may not include all of us.
- Bring your honest and authentic self.
- Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.
- Everyone is responsible for helping to stay on topic.
- Consider WAIT during our dialogue - "Why Am I Talking" and/or "Why Aren't I Talking?"
- Be prepared and come ready to engage.
- Be respectful of the time we have and allow everyone to have an opportunity to share. Try not to speak again until at least three others in your group have shared.
- If a participant is not adhering to these norms, facilitators may remove them from the main group or from the session entirely. If this occurs, we invite the participant to have a follow-up discussion with our team leader(s).



Some Best Practices for Facilitators

The list below outlines some positive practices facilitators can use to lead conversations.

- Begin your session with a welcome, prayer, and both a verbal and visual reminder of the Norms.
- Consider ensuring two facilitators are present for every session.
- Be attentive to implicit bias at play in your participants and your own facilitation. Encourage time and space for voices historically less highlighted.
- Silence is ok and is never too long. Stirrings happen in the stillness. It does not have to be the role of the facilitator to break the anxiety of the silence.
- Use names, invite participants to share when they are ready, express gratitude for their contributions, and follow up when you can after sessions to check-in.
- If virtual, invite participants to edit their username to reflect their name choice and pronouns. If in-person, begin the session with sharing names and pronouns (as desired) in the welcome. Model what you invite others to share.
- Articulate your approach in facilitating the session, be attentive to time and energy during the session, and invite feedback following the session.

If Things go Awry

Sometimes, things do not go as planned when facilitating difficult conversations. Below are some tools that facilitators can use to plan for and respond to moments of crisis.

- Invite participants to use the chat option or pop off the video (if virtual) and take time to breathe if content becomes personally heavy during the session. For in-person, identify private spaces nearby the gathering area for any necessary respite. Make this option known from the beginning of the very first session or gathering.
- Identify a person present in the session as a safe space guardian before the start. Should a concern arise mid-experience, invite participants to connect directly with the guardian to navigate the support of the participant and any necessary response with the large group. Consider providing a cell phone number or email address for the identified guardian or encourage them to chat using the feature in Zoom.
- If a participant is being especially disruptive and not adhering to agreed upon group norms, consider removing them from the Zoom meeting or room and then follow up to discuss with them personally what happened and what can be done moving forward.

These are just some beginning practices to consider when entering into spaces of challenging discussion and we mention this not to induce fear for facilitators but to name potential realities so we can be as prepared as possible if something comes up. We will discuss this more at the facilitator's meeting before your session begins. Do not hesitate to reach out to MSJC leadership, at info@marianistsjc.net, if you have questions or comments.

Antiracist Values

We believe that implementing antiracist values within our facilitating can have profound positive effects. Become familiar with these values below and brainstorm ways you can touch into these values more, both personally and in your facilitation.

ANTIRACISM TRANSFORMING VALUES

- Interrupt binary thinking
- Use **"and"** instead of "but"
- Note that things are rarely black and white; "Gray area" is okay and more so when we name it
- See the full picture
- Affirm subjectivity
- Avoid hierarchy.
- Value every person's story.

- Realize rushing decisions slows down the process
- Identify, clearly, a path for decision making
- Think based on assets, not deficits
 - Invest in people
 - Be intentional about inviting more voices to the table
 - See gifts first

Both/And
Thinking

Abundance

Collaboration
&
Cooperation

Transparency

- Recognize all contributions
- Develop a learning culture to counter fear of failure
- Practice critical thinking and feedback over criticism
- Value both capacity to do the work as well as ability to forge collaborations
- Recognize that role does not implicate power

- Speak truthfully about cultural conditioning
 - Show your work
- Fail forward fast. "Better mistakes than paralysis"
- Acknowledge your growing edges
- Create opportunities for many diverse voices to offer feedback on the process and results

*Adjusted for MSJC from Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training

Potential Frameworks for Facilitating Difficult Conversations

Contemplative Dialogue

- Often in our culture we are conditioned to listen to others so that we can respond. Contemplative dialogue challenges us to listen from a space of curiosity and be open to seeing in new ways.
- Contemplative dialogue also encourages leaving space for silence. Through deep listening and silence something transformative can emerge.
- Here is an example of how a contemplative dialogue session can be structured and led from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious: [Contemplative Dialogue Outline](#).

Circle Process

- Circle is a structured process for dialogue that creates opportunities for connection, empathy, and hearing every person's voice. The circle can hold all emotions: joy, delight, love--and pain, despair, anger. Circle is a process that is guided by a circle keeper.
- It uses the following elements: Seating all participants in a circle (with no tables); The circle always opens with an opening ceremony and closes with a closing ceremony; There is a centerpiece in the center of the circle; A talking piece is used throughout the circle; Values and guidelines are established by all participants of the circle; The keeper will prepare and pose guiding questions related to the theme of the circle (Kay Pranis).
- Here is a guide that outlines what circle is, how to prepare, and provides an outline for planning a circle: [Circle Keeper's Handbook](#) by Kay Pranis.
- *MSJC does encourage facilitators to be very familiar with, or trained in, circle process. We are currently sponsoring interested members of the Marianist Family to become trained, so please reach out to us at info@marianistsjc.net if you want to learn more!

Want to access this guide digitally? Head to marianistsjc.net/racial-justice or use the QR code here.

Additionally, please **let MSJC know how you are using this resource** and where we might connect to you by completing this short survey: [Resource Engagement Form](#)

