Discussing the Undiscussable

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In an academic or professional environment, it’s important to be able to speak freely and learn from one another. However, some topics can be stressful to approach and may be more difficult to discuss without resulting in conflict. Today we’re going to talk generally about how to facilitate those conversations well and share our own tips and tricks to keep the conversation flowing, and the learning growing.
What makes things Undiscussable?

- Some topics are EXTREMELY uncomfortable because of their intrinsic nature. Others can be difficult because of our personal experiences or lack of knowledge. Despite our occasional assumptions of shared experiences and standards, those norms vary. Some factors that can impact them include: culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age groups. The important thing is that in human interactions these conversations can’t always be avoided and attempting to do so could lead to perpetuating oppressions, misunderstanding, unfair treatment, etc.

- Activity: Trigger Worksheet
Define the conversation

- Intent - Make sure that every participant is willing to be open-minded, and approach the conversation with the best intentions to be fair and considerate.

- Purpose/context - Make sure the purpose of the conversation is clear. Is this conversation aimed to persuade/debate, share information and learn, or allow someone to speak of their experiences?

- Focus - Define the topic, and restrict the dialogue to the topic at hand as much as possible.
Guidelines and Ground rules

- Set boundaries on the discussion and make sure everyone understands them.
- When discussing sensitive topics some people may have an emotional reaction, ground rules can help participants feel safe to engage and promote healthy dialogue.
  - Sometimes when this is done it is called a safe space.
- Ground rules must be enforced, and it is important for facilitators to be comfortable redirecting the flow of discussion or deescalating a tense conversation.
- Activity: Ground rules brainstorming
Communication 101

- One of the most important aspects of discussing the 'undiscussable' is striving for good communication. Communication isn't just a matter of making yourself understood but also (and sometimes more importantly!) making sure you understand.

- Activity: Active Listening Exercise
- Clear Communication Questions handout
What to do when it goes wrong?

- It's important to watch for verbal attacks, assumptions being made, and individuals shutting down and not participating.
- Does anyone want to share when a difficult discussion went wrong? What happened and what did you do to get it back on track?
Even if you do everything right, sometimes discussions will still get heated. That’s where deescalation comes into play.

4 Key Aspects of deescalation
- Modeling the behavior
- Active listening
- Clarify and seek understanding
- Find common ground

Role-play scenarios for deescalation
Your experiences and advice!

- Have you dealt with similar situations? What worked and what didn't?
Final thoughts...

- Don’t be afraid to enforce your rules and to shut down the conversation if it becomes unproductive!
- Clear communication is essential. We must be good listeners as well as good speakers to communicate well.
- Knowing your own limits is essential. Be ready to control your own responses to emotional topics as well as help others deescalate when needed.