

## Courageous Conversations about Sensitive Issues

*A courageous conversation occurs when participants have the courage to make themselves vulnerable about a sensitive issue. This is usually done by sharing one's personal feelings and experiences about the issue with others, and by listening to and seeking to understand the feelings and experiences of others.*

*It is important that the conversation be conducted in a manner intended to foster trust, honesty, dignity, and respect; and by which all parties can feel honored. It is best not to approach it with a predetermined outcome in mind; instead, be open to common ground that might arise from a deeper understanding of each other.*

*Be aware that issues of power, position, and privilege related to gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, gender identification, or perspective can influence such a conversation. In other words, such factors may contribute to greater emotional risks or personal pain for some people than others in a courageous conversation. Acknowledgement of this can provide a powerful place to start.*

### Some Guidelines for a Courageous Conversation

**We all “see” an issue through our own “filters.”** Our filters include our personal assumptions, beliefs, values, experiences, and upbringing. What we “see” through our filters becomes our perception of reality.

**Our filters can limit our ability to understand an issue.** Understanding each other's perceptions of an issue can help us more fully understand each other and the issue at hand. Perceptions shared honestly have value, though they can also contribute to someone else's pain or unsafe environment.

**Encourage dialogue rather than debate.**

**Dialogue** involves taking ownership of our own perceptions and feelings. It also involves seeking to understand other's perceptions, rather than judging them -- e.g., “What experiences or beliefs have influenced your perception and feelings about this issue?” The underlying goal of a dialogue is to reach mutual understanding, and if possible, common ground.

**Debate** involves trying to persuade or change the other person's perception, often through argument. The underlying goal is to “win,” often at another person's expense.

**Words matter.** Encourage participants to try to avoid generalizations or labels or stereotypes about entire groups of people. References to “we” or “us” when everyone involved in the conversation may not be or feel part of “us” can contribute to a sense of isolation and exclusion, especially if the speaker is part of a majority or insider group with power or privilege. References to “them” can also reinforce this sense of being an outsider. If you find yourself about to use one of these group references, remember that one of the purposes of the courageous conversation is to begin to remove the sense of separateness that these words reinforce.