

Safe Space and Conflict

Safe spaces are not always free from conflict or pain. Sometimes people will say or do things that hurt others in a safe space. A safe space is determined by how conflict is managed.

Safe spaces ask that people bring vulnerability to express parts of themselves that they may not feel comfortable revealing in other places. This often involves sharing things that we're not totally comfortable with or asking about something we don't fully understand—as we work through this process, hurtful things can happen. A safe space recognizes when mistakes and harm have occurred, and responds by educating the person who did the harm to make sure that doesn't happen again. A safe space *also* creates room for people who are hurt to voice their pain, be heard, and be supported.

Here are tips for facilitating a safe space:

- **Assume that people have good intentions.** You cannot effectively educate someone while also doubting their desire to learn and be a more respectful person. People will usually recognize when they're being talked down to and will stop listening. Investing in another person's education also means believing in their will to learn and be better.
- **Recognize vulnerability.** If someone asks for help to clarify misconceptions or stereotypes they're unsure about, recognize and thank them for taking that risk. It is better to ask for help than to silently continue acting on misconceptions and stereotypes out of fear for being called ignorant.
- **If something is problematic, explain why.** If your organization establishes a safe space, then the leaders must take responsibility to patiently educate others on how to be respectful. Yes, it can be exhausting to give '101' talks and the information is probably available online, but it's better to give an explanation on-the-spot instead of allowing a person to feel uncomfortable throughout an entire event until they're able to take the time to learn. Talk about *why* the *content* of what the person said is an issue and avoid making judgments about the person's intentions or general character.
- **Create space for pain to be voiced.** If someone is harmed by another person in the space, allow them to explain why they are hurt. Thank them for sharing and doing the work to explain why what was said or done was hurtful. If the people most affected by something harmful wish to remain silent, then another space facilitator or leader should address the issue.

- **People don't have to agree on everything.** There is no perfect politics. When people disagree on issues that are very close to them, a room can quickly become uncomfortable and tense. Growth and learning is frequently an uncomfortable process and that's okay. As a facilitator, all you need to do is acknowledge tension and keep the conversation moving.
- **Deescalate situations by summarizing points of view and moving forward.** Tension, discomfort, passion, and anger can all be healthy and necessary parts of a discussion! However, if folks start verbally attacking each other, the facilitator needs to deescalate the situation. One way to deescalate the conversation is to briefly summarize the arguments that have been shared, and why each person disagrees and/or feels hurt by others. Then, announce that the room is going to move onto another topic. This strategy affirms that everyone in the room was heard but does not require the room to come to a consensus.
- **Follow-up with anyone who felt harmed.** The facilitators or leaders of the safe space should check-in with anyone expressing hurt or alienation during a discussion or event. Be sure to follow-up within 24 hours. Start by saying you noticed that they did not feel listened to, supported, or protected, and ask how they are doing. Ask what support they think might be helpful to them. You might not always be the best person to provide the support they need and that's okay! Brainstorm with them about who the best person might be to offer this support. As the facilitator, ask how you can better support and make spaces safer for them in the future.
- **Still, not everybody will feel comfortable in the safe space.** Even if you skillfully provide space for many viewpoints and support folks when they need it, some people will still decide that they would rather not attend events or discussions. Student organizations can still support folks who do not actively participate. Ask if they need any help, advice, or resources to start their own group. Offer support in promoting their events, sharing resources, or hosting joint fundraisers.
- **Practice self-care.** Facilitating safe spaces requires a lot of emotional energy. Even after putting in all the work and energy you can, people will still occasionally feel angry and hurt. That's okay, you're doing your best and no safe space is perfect. Be sure to take time and space for yourself to recharge. Find a mentor, advisor, or friend to talk about how you're doing. You may want to specifically find a confidential resource like a chaplain or school counselor to talk about the group without compromising confidentiality. See the "Self-Care and Coping" resource for more suggestions.