Navigating Difficult Conversations

Membership in Delta Chi and shared brotherhood calls all members and Associate Members of each chapter to hold themselves to a higher standard. To live by the values of the Fraternity and to uphold the Eleven Basic Expectations requires each member to approach difficult conversations with respect for the dignity and worth of all humans and to extend compassion and understanding throughout the conversation. This resource is designed to help members and Associate Members successfully navigate difficult conversations. While the lens for this resource is conversations around DEI topics, these ideas also apply to any difficult conversation that might come up in other areas.

GROUND RULES AND COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

When engaging in difficult conversations, it is incredibly important to set ground rules and/or community agreements. It is a best practice for any group of people needing to discuss difficult issues to have a set of community agreements that detail how members will approach and receive communication. The basic premise is that ground rules and community agreements allow everyone to engage in dialogue in a way that respects and honors everyone's humanity.

It is a best practice for the group to establish norms for themselves. If the members of the group work together to develop their own ground rules, then they are more likely to abide by them and to encourage other group members to do the same. A facilitator can help move the group through a norms-setting process using the following process:

1. Ask members to either reflect or write down answers to some or all of the following questions.
   a. What do you need from group members to feel like your ideas are being heard?
   b. How do you show others you are listening to them?
   c. What do you need from everyone else to be able to fully engage in the conversation?
   d. What would make this a safe space for you to have difficult conversations?
   e. What does it look like to hold ourselves and each other accountable during a difficult conversation?
2. Ask members to pair up or get into small groups and discuss what they have come up with on their own. Pairs/groups should come up with a list of 3-5 things they need in order to have difficult conversations.
3. Have pairs/groups share with the larger group. One person should write down ideas on a board for everyone to see. If the same idea is said multiple times, note that.
4. After each group has shared their ideas, ask everyone to look over the list. Ask if anyone has additions, modifications, or needs an explanation.

When the group has agreed the list is final, ask each member to commit to these ground rules and to commit to holding each other accountable.

Some common community agreements, provided by the National Conference for Community and Justice of Metropolitan Saint Louis (NCCJ - Saint Louis), are listed below. If you see major areas missing from the norms developed by the group or members are not sure how to get started, consider asking the group about the norms from this list.

Another option is to display the community agreements from NCCJ - Saint Louis and ask members to look them over and then discuss what to use, not use, and/or modify and then add their own ideas.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS
Adapted from the NCCJ - Saint Louis
1. We invite full participation.
2. We encourage everyone to demonstrate respect for differences.
3. We encourage ourselves to listen for understanding.
4. We encourage honesty.
5. We invite everyone to speak in the "I" perspective.
6. We ask everyone to keep what is shared confidential.
7. We encourage everyone to make space for all voices to be heard.
8. We acknowledge and embrace dissent and conflict.
9. If we disagree, remember to work the issue, not the person.
10. We invite everyone to trust the process.
11. We invite everyone to lean into discomfort.
12. We invite everyone to take care of themselves, as they see fit.
13. We embrace the idea of non-closure.

Notes on the NCCJ - Saint Louis agreements:
- Notice the use of "we." This is to make it clear that the agreements came from and upheld by the group. Using "we" gives ownership to the whole group.
- Often, groups will try to focus on coming to an agreement or some type of compromise. In DEI work, it is important to accept and embrace the idea that there will not always be an agreement at the end of a conversation. When big conversations about difficult topics are taking place, there is not always a good point of agreement in every conversation. The work is ongoing and one conversation will not resolve things.
- People may feel discomfort and that is okay in this work. We never want anyone to feel unsafe—but discomfort and a lack of safety are two different things. Group members may need to talk through this idea and get an understanding of comfort versus safety.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Despite best efforts, conflict may—and is likely to—emerge when navigating difficult conversations. Conflict is NOT inherently bad, despite the connotation it has in modern society. In fact, avoiding conflict at all costs is where the true harm is located. Conflict can feel messy and be uncomfortable—and just like it is not inherently bad, it is not inherently good. However, good can come out of conflict. Working through conflict can help a group solve problems, develop new approaches, brainstorm new ideas, and—most importantly—build stronger relationships. The good things that can develop out of conflict can ONLY come if conflict is managed effectively.

Best practices for managing conflict:
- Identify and pursue a common goal—not individual goals.
- Communicate openly and honestly with everyone involved.
- Create and cultivate an environment in which differences are respected and encouraged.
- Do not allow the fear of the negatives of conflict to hold a team back—allow people to come in and facilitate a conversation, if needed, to ensure the conflict is addressed and managed.

Avoiding conflict or seeing it as a win/lose opportunity is unhealthy and leads to low morale, trust issues between group members, and increased tension within the organization.

UNDERSTANDING STYLES OF CONFLICT

The *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI) assesses an individual's behavior in conflict situations—that is, situations in which the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible. In conflict situations, we can describe a person's behavior along two basic dimensions: (1) assertiveness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns. These two dimensions of behavior can be used to define five methods of dealing with conflict.

These five conflict-handling modes are shown below:
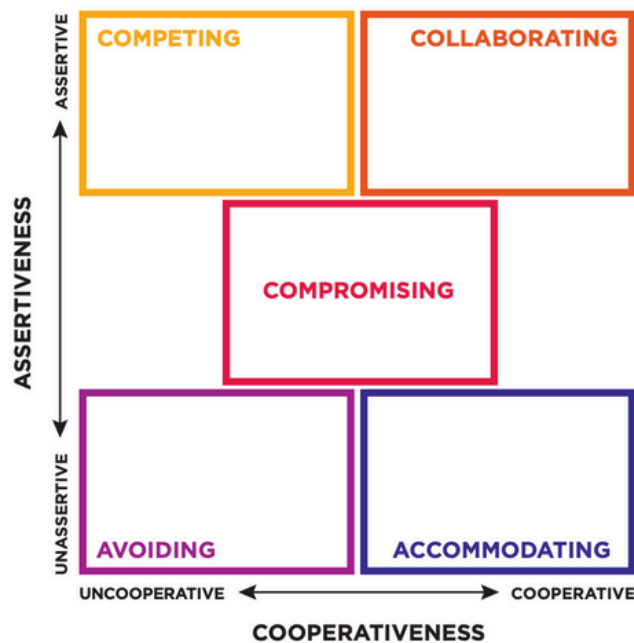
The more assertive and less cooperative an individual is, the more likely they are to approach conflict from a competing style; whereas, the more cooperative and less assertive an individual is, the more likely they are to use an accommodating style.

Different conflicts may benefit from different styles of conflict management. For example, if an issue develops in a public space and someone is scared for their safety or wellbeing, then an avoiding approach may be best. Alternatively, if your chapter is looking to rewrite its bylaws and members are disagreeing about changes, then a collaborating approach would be best.

There is nothing inherently wrong or bad about any style of conflict; however, it is important for each of us to understand how we approach conflict and know when our " go to" approach will not meet the moment. A good way for members to practice understanding when and how to approach conflict using different styles is to ask members to describe a conflict they have experienced, share how they approached the conflict, and if they would approach it the same way today. If so, why would they stick with the same approach? If not, what style would they use instead and why?

Developing a deeper understanding of approaches to conflict BEFORE conflict enters a group is the best way to start learning about conflict management. Therefore, members should receive some type of education in conflict management and navigating difficult conversations so they are prepared when the situation arises - training on the TKI is covered specifically for those participating in the Fraternity's Mentor Program.

RESOURCES

As your chapter explores the idea of navigating difficult conversations and how to engage in healthy conflict, explore the resources below. Often the best way to engage in this work is to take part in learning as a group.

VIDEOS

We Need Difficult Conversations (3 minutes, 23 seconds)
How to Have Difficult Conversations (10 minutes and 30 seconds)
Why I Have Coffee with People Who Send Me Hate Mail (15 minutes and 11 seconds)
A Fresh Approach to Resolving Conflicts (8 minutes and 58 seconds)
Addressing Conflict with Care (3 minutes, 14 seconds)

MATERIALS

The Art and Act of Developing Empathy
Let's Talk!: Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students (easily adaptable for a group setting)
Crucial Conversations Scenarios
14 Conflict Resolution Activities for Workplace Team Building
7 of Our Favorite Conflict Resolution Games and Activities