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**THE ARTFUL
CONVERSATION**

COMPANION LEARNING GUIDE



**NATIONAL
CONFLICT
RESOLUTION
CENTER™**

Q: What Is a Companion Learning Guide?

Each of the workshops will have a companion learning guide (CLG) that will serve many purposes.

BEFORE THE SESSION

- You will watch the **pre-workshop burst video**, to stimulate your thinking before the session.
- There are questions for **reflection, journaling, and/or discussing** the burst video with trusted colleagues.
- If you are so inclined, you can **review the presentation** that we will use in the workshop to familiarize yourself with the content.

DURING THE SESSION

- Additional **instructions for breakouts** are included.

POST-SESSION

- The companion learning guide will have **further information and additional resources** to continue your learning.
- Additional **reflection, journaling, and chat** topics are also included.

ABOUT NCRC

Your facilitators today are from the **National Conflict Resolution Center**, a San Diego-based nonprofit that works with campuses, governments, businesses, and community groups around the world to find solutions to our most challenging conflicts.

This workshop is part of a series for leaders to support your work in managing the challenges of today's workplaces, particularly around divisive issues. We will build on the strengths that you already have.



BURST VIDEO:

Welcome!

WE ARE MORE THAN OUR DIFFERENCES

Johnny C. Taylor, CEO

Society for Human Resource Management

REFLECT:

What stood out for you in the video?

JOURNAL: *One comment Mr. Taylor made was, “We don’t have the right to be agreed with, but we do have the right to be heard respectfully.” What does that mean to you as a leader?*

DIALOGUE WITH A TRUSTED COLLEAGUE:

How can we support one another to manage conversations about politics in the workplace?



Overview of the Series



We will do all we can to create a [psychologically safe space](#) for you so that you can comfortably share your experiences and perspective.

We also ask that you consider the work of Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University in taking the approach of a [growth mindset](#) as you participate in the sessions. While each of you is an expert, there is always more to learn!

There will be a series of four sessions. NCRC takes a scaffolding approach that builds skills and expands mindsets. While a 4-workshop series may seem daunting, this time will be packed with skills, tools, and techniques that will assist you in tackling challenging situations. Each session is highly interactive, and you will be able to share your experience and knowledge with others.

- 1. The ARTful Conversation:** You'll learn how to effectively handle challenging one-on-one conversations. This foundational course lays the groundwork for all subsequent sessions.
- 2. The Art of Inclusive Communication:** You'll explore strategies and techniques to embrace and promote inclusivity.
- 3. The Bystander Challenge:** You'll learn how to empower others at your workplace to become thoughtful upstanders as part of creating a sense of belonging in the workplace.
- 4. The Exchange:** You'll learn a conflict resolution process that helps you lead a problem-solving conversation focused on collaboration and future success.

Overall Learning Outcomes


Culture, Communication, and Conflict:
Overall Learning Outcomes



- Effectively handle challenging one-on-one conversations (The ARTful Conversation)
- Implement strategies and techniques to embrace and promote inclusivity (The ART of Inclusive Communication)
- Respond to microaggressions and empower others to become thoughtful upstanders while creating a sense of Belonging in the workplace (The Bystander Challenge)
- Lead collaborative conflict resolution processes (The Exchange)

The job of workplace leaders is to create a **healthy workplace culture**. Building a culture of respectful communication, inclusion, and productive teams depends upon the skills, values, and actions of leaders.

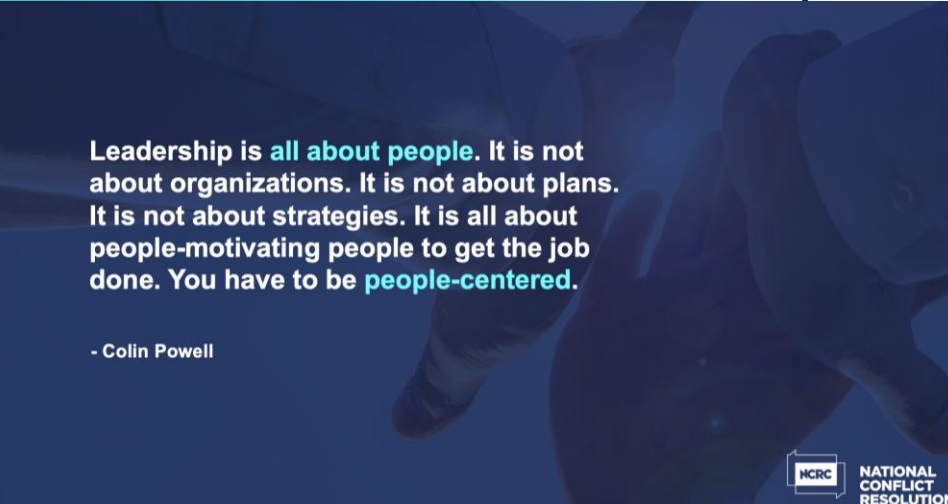
This series is intended to reinforce the skills and effective behavior of leaders. In our sessions, we will focus on your ability to step out of your comfort zone to both help employees navigate challenging conversations around divisive topics and help yourself if/when needed.



**"CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE, THE SOURCE OF ALL GROWTH, AND AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY IF ONE IS TO BE ALIVE...
...ENTER INTO IT WITH INTEGRITY, RESPECT, AND SOME DEGREE OF CONFIDENCE AND HOPE."**

- Dr. Jean Baker Miller
Psychiatrist, Social Activist, Author

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Leadership is all about people. It is not about organizations. It is not about plans. It is not about strategies. It is all about people-motivating people to get the job done. You have to be people-centered.

- Colin Powell

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Conflict is ever-present in our lives and work, and yet few of us ever receive training in how to manage conflict. It is little wonder that most people are afraid of conflict and would rather ignore a problem than address it directly.

And yet, as Dr. Jean Baker Miller suggests, conflict is important for our growth, both personally and professionally. Out of differing opinions emerge new and better ways of doing things, new products, new processes.



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After completing the Culture, Communication, and Conflict Certificate Program, you'll be able to face conflict with "confidence and hope" to support the growth of you and the members of your team.

One of the core principles of this series is that for leaders to be effective in building and maintaining productive, inclusive teams where everyone feels a sense of belonging, they must take a human-centered approach. Leadership is, at the end of the day, "all about people," and we'll be stressing a human-centered approach throughout all four sessions.

"We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory...will yet swell...when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."
- **Abraham Lincoln**

There is little doubt that Americans are **increasingly divided** by their political views, as well as by other areas of their identity and values-based issues.

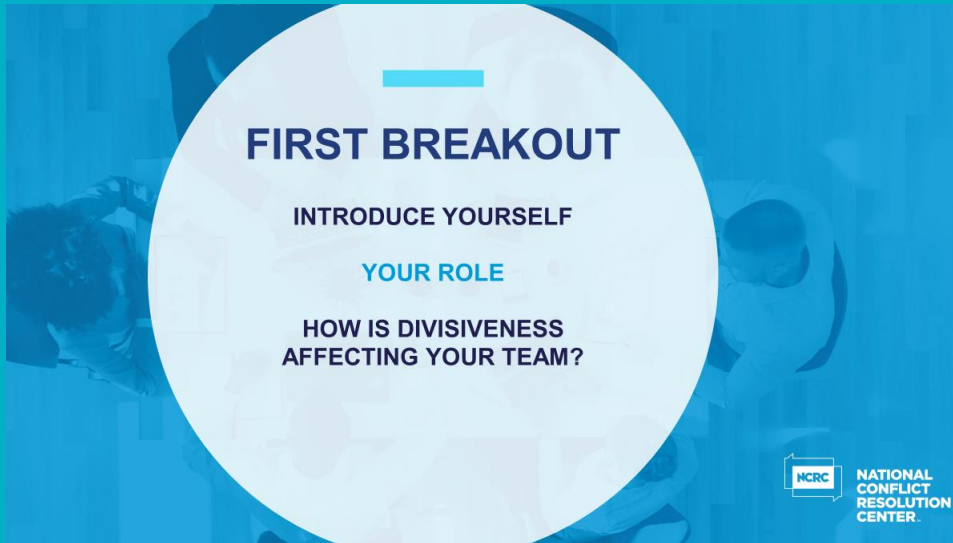
Despite this, we still need to work together. How can leaders help employees find a sense of common ground and purpose to strengthen their sense of belonging?

According to an article in the **Harvard Business Review**, there are three strategies to address polarization and divisiveness in the workplace to strengthen belonging:

1. Build an environment of cooperation, not competition.
2. Encourage meaningful contact between groups.
3. Create safe environments for people to share their views.

We will look at these strategies and more as we continue our journey as workplace leaders managing a diverse workforce.

First Breakout

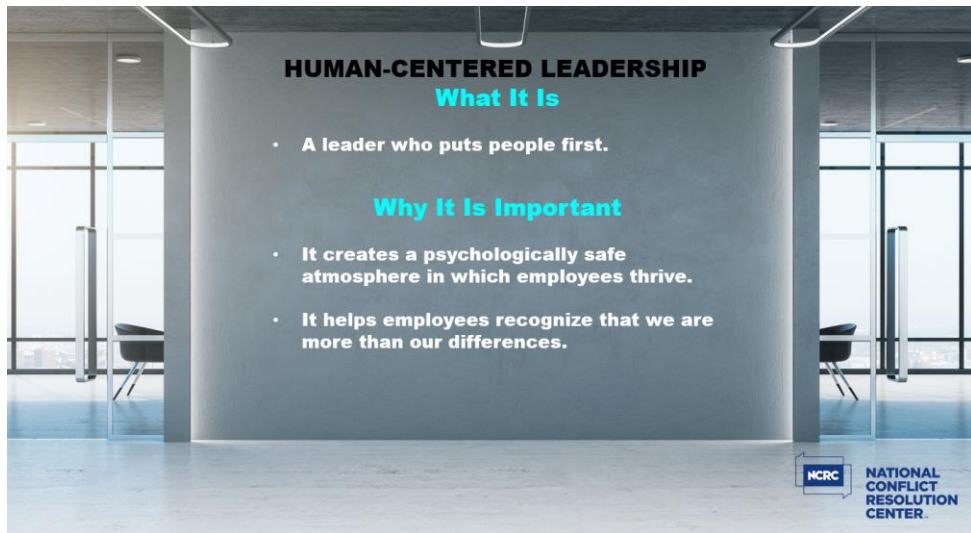


This will be your first opportunity to connect with others in the cohort.

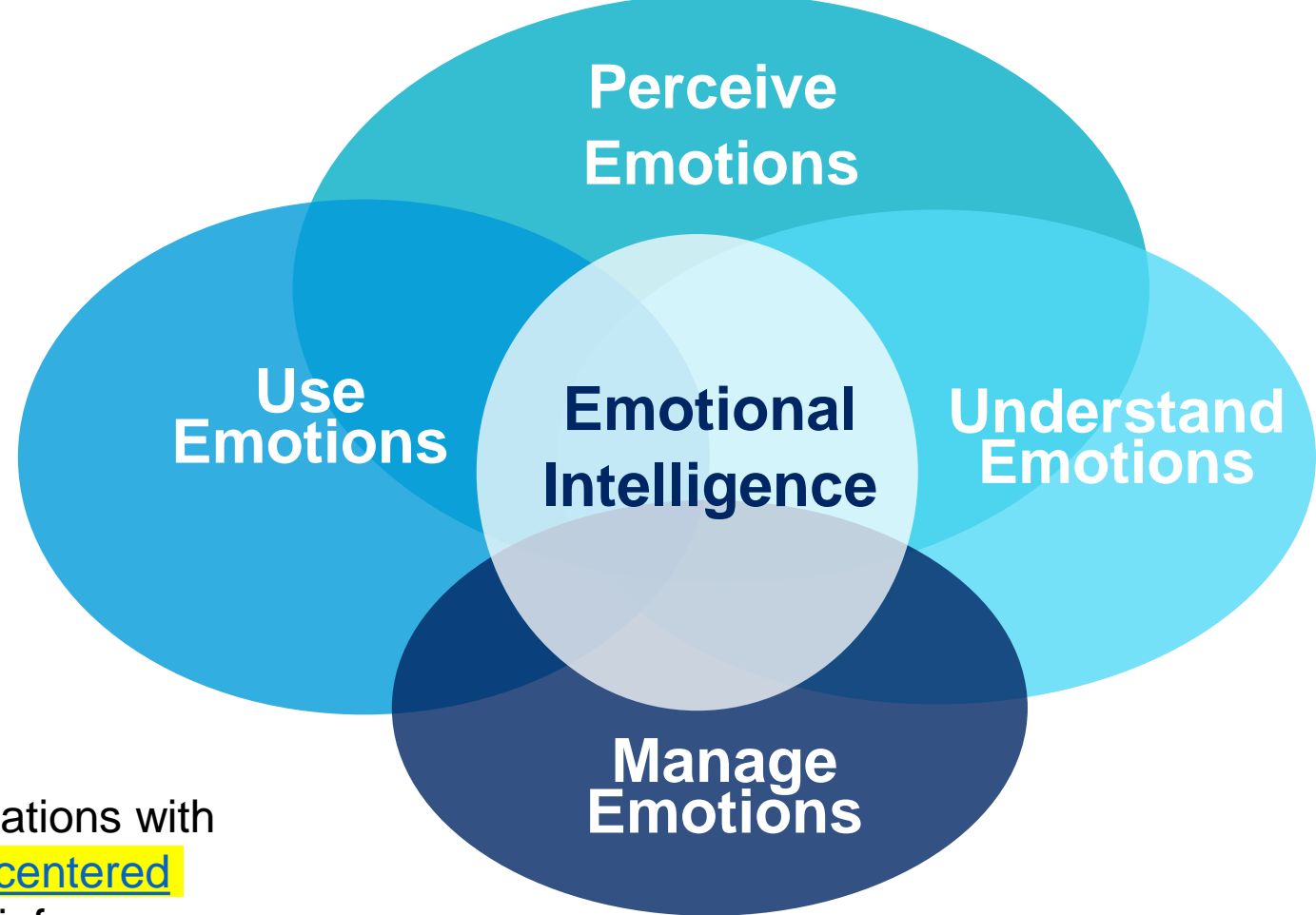
You will have an opportunity to **share** a bit **about yourself** and your **role** in your organization.

What kinds of **challenges** around collaboration, communication, culture, and connection do you face? How is divisiveness affecting your team?

Human-Centered Leadership



All our sessions of managing challenging conversations with employees come from our preference for human-centered leadership. The practical approaches we teach reinforce creating a work environment in which employees thrive. This requires the leader to actively listen, be present, and empathize with the employee's experience. Improving their emotional intelligence aids leaders in developing their human-centered leadership approach.



FURTHER LEARNING

Emotional intelligence is key to inclusive leadership. [Learn more here.](#)



NCRC THE ARTFUL CONVERSATION

Learning Outcomes

This workshop will provide a useful framework for **active listening** that will set the philosophy and skills to create a **psychologically safe environment**.

- Listen **actively** and **empathetically**
- Treat all stakeholders with **respect** and **dignity**
- Demonstrate **approachability** and **openness**

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ACTIVE AWARENESS
RESPOND RESPECTFULLY
TROUBLESHOOT TOGETHER

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The ARTful Conversation workshop officially begins! This first workshop lays the foundation for all the subsequent sessions. The content and skills established are necessary for understanding future sessions and building upon them with your colleagues.

Active Awareness

Being mindful of all factors that may play a role in our communication.

Respond Respectfully

Making others feel fully heard and acknowledged.

Troubleshoot Together

Expressing ourselves in a productive way to find shared solutions.

Active Awareness



Recognize Style Differences
Check Your Bias and Your Ego
Process Your Perceptions



For the first part of our session together, we will focus on increasing our awareness.

Having **Active Awareness** not only means being aware of our style differences, but it also asks us to **check our biases** and **ego**. Not checking our ego may prevent us from being able to effectively collaborate and consider the ideas of others, particularly those with whom we have opposing political views and/or identities. Approaching challenges in an ego-based way results in seeing issues **ONLY** from our perspective and addressing solutions that **ONLY** meet our own interests instead of working on solutions that benefit the diverse employees with whom we work. Our **cultural ego**, including a sense of **superiority about our political beliefs**, also gets in the way of embracing an inclusive approach.

Processing these perceptions will help us to understand the situation more fully and consider others' perspectives more effectively.

Further Learning on Active Awareness

REFLECT

What do you do to ground yourself? How do you ensure that you balance self-care needs with the work that you do?

Active Awareness is about maintaining mindfulness when you are actively checking in with your own thoughts and reactions. When we are exhausted or overworked, it can be difficult to reflect thoughtfully. Grounding ourselves helps us to approach situations with more Active Awareness and reduces the chances of misunderstanding and negative assumptions.

This is particularly important when we are highly charged over divisive issues. This piece on **How to Manage If You're Feeling Highly Triggered by Politics** reinforces the need for grounding in times of stress, or, as the subtitle states, *While Caring for Your Country, Don't Forget to Care for Yourself*.

Further Learning on Active Awareness

Most of the time, adults are expected to self-regulate their emotions in their autonomic nervous system. Stanford University's Dr. Shirzad Chamine's research and work on enhancing [positive intelligence](#) through self-care and grounding exercises helps us to understand how to regulate ourselves better. You may want to look at the nonscientific article [Cultivating Co-Regulation in Yourself](#) for ideas.

Survivor Brain	PQ Brain
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activates fight/flight response• Emotions are strong and uncontrolled• Fear and aggression dominate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-aware• Centered• Manages negative emotions• Is empathetic

Here is a [free quiz](#) to check your positive intelligence. A person can't have Active Awareness if they are operating from the survivor brain.

Neuroception: How It Impacts Communication

FURTHER LEARNING

Increasing our emotional intelligence also means growing our ability to read body language and being actively aware of the messages that we are sending through our body language. For further investigation about the impact of body language, we examine here the concept of **microexpressions** and **microgestures**.

You may want to consider what might lead you to demonstrate any microexpressions and microgestures that you commonly show. Perhaps it's too many tasks on your to-do list. This is understandable, but when others share personal experiences or their deeply felt beliefs with you, do what you can to take a human-centered approach, being present with the other person. It can make a tremendous difference in how you are perceived.

It could be that the microexpressions and microgestures you demonstrate are connected to your self-development. Stanford's Dr. Shirzad Chamine examines *inner saboteurs* (Chamine's term) in his work, including in this [TEDx Stanford](#) presentation for workplace leaders.

MICRO-EXPRESSIONS	MICRO-GESTURES
These facial expressions occur within a fraction of a second. This involuntary emotional leakage expresses a person's true emotions.	Small movements in the face and body. The gestures that send negative messages, such as distracted eye movements that demonstrate impatience and create mistrust.



REFLECT

What are the needs of an employee when they are sharing their point of view about a “hot topic”?

For the listener, what are their needs when they hear someone express their point of view on a “hot topic”?

You will have a chance to explore this in a breakout by considering the needs of Ximena and Catherine as they emerge in their conflict.

BREAKOUT

What are the needs of:

Ximena, the new employee?

Catherine, the experienced team member?

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COMMON UNDERLYING NEEDS

Employees have conflicts over a multitude of issues, not just hot topics. It is helpful to be aware of workplace needs.

Employees' Needs

- **Being heard:** The sense that their concerns are being taken seriously
- **Respect:** Being treated in a respectful manner
- **Acceptance** by co-workers and supervisors
- **Fairness:** Being treated in an equitable manner
- **Psychological safety:** Sense that they can trust you
- **Being valued** by their manager and leadership

Leaders' Needs

In addition to the same needs as employees, leaders typically need:

- **Productivity**
- **Collaboration**
- **Fairness and objectivity**
- **Efficiency**
- **Problem-solving**

**"People will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you
made them feel."**

- Maya Angelou

A blurred photograph of several people walking in a hallway, moving from left to right. The image is out of focus, emphasizing movement and the transient nature of the scene.
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As we move into the "R" of the ARTful Conversation, we will be looking at how we **RESPOND RESPECTFULLY** to help create a culture of respect and inclusion in our workplaces. A successful workplace leader will model this behavior.

This quote from Maya Angelou speaks to the importance of responding respectfully.



How we **ask questions** to understand better is important as well. As much as possible, try to **maintain a curious stance** about the other person's perspective. In this way, your questions will reflect a genuine desire to **gain an understanding** of their perspective rather than you asking a series of questions that antagonize the other person. Watching your tone of voice to remain respectful also makes a difference.

Taking responsibility for your part of the breakdown in communication means being able to say that you made a mistake, assumed something incorrectly, or are sorry for something that you did. Rather than making you look weaker or more vulnerable, it does more to set a tone of honesty and understanding. This will help the other person feel safe enough in looking at their responsibility and, often, to apologize for any missteps they may have taken as well. In the end, your ability to acknowledge your responsibility tends to **strengthen the relationship**.

We will practice the skills of demonstrating understanding, acknowledging, and identifying needs, as those are key to clear, respectful communication when things matter to people.

Tips for Dialogue



We offer "Tips for Dialoguing and Managing Conflict" to help people reflect more deeply about certain aspects of communication when discussing hot topics. NCRC's [Tips for Managing Conflict](#) has proven to be a useful tool to support this reflection.

These tips help us take a curious approach to learning about the ideas of others, particularly when they are very different than our own. Workplace leaders have used these tips to coach employees through challenging workplace relationships.

FURTHER LEARNING

This article on [Practical Ideas on Managing Polarization at Work](#) reinforces the second tip and calls for a "receptive mindset," described here from the article: *"The authors thus urge people engaged in a conflict to view information the other person is presenting through the eyes of that person, to 'learn why a colleague sees things differently.' One conflict resolution coach has people, when arguing, 'focus on what they might learn from their colleague and to think of questions that could help them understand their colleague's perspective.'"*



REFLECT

What are some ways that you can create safety through your body language, eye contact, and safety signals when working with others?

FURTHER LEARNING

Body language and tone influence communication much more than many understand. Some people are naturally inclined toward reading that body language and tone, while others, especially those who have experienced trauma (in their childhood or in their current situation, or repeated [microaggressions](#)), are sometimes triggered by body language and tone. **Neuroreception** is how neural circuits in our brain distinguish whether situations or people are safe, among other things.

When we looked at Active Awareness, we reflected on how adults are responsible for **self-regulation**. However, there are times that **any adult can become out of regulation** (such as when they have experienced a challenging life situation). That person will benefit from interactions in which the other person is able to **co-regulate** with them. Our warm and responsive interaction connects on an unconscious level and models regulation.

In addition to eye contact and other safe signals, [mirror neurons](#) play an important role. A calm, compassionate face can positively impact a person who is out of regulation. **Being mindful of how our body language and tone may be playing a role in our communication helps create psychological safety for others.**

Co-Regulation

THE CO-REGULATION EFFECT

Co-Regulation

The way in which one person's autonomic nervous system sensitively interacts with another person's autonomic nervous system that **facilitates greater emotional balance and physical health.**

Why it Matters

When someone comes to a leader with a concern, they are often out of regulation in their nervous system. As social beings, humans co-regulate each other to ground themselves. It is done primarily by **body language, eye contact, and sending signals of safety.** When that doesn't happen, the person becomes more agitated and feels unsafe.

Co-regulation is a valuable consideration when managing sensitive conversations with employees. Though much of the literature focuses on the needed co-regulation that children have with loving adults or between adult partners, it is a factor for all helping professionals. You may want to look at the nonscientific article [Cultivating Co-regulation in Yourself](#) for ideas about how to co-regulate.

Most of the time, adults are expected to self-regulate their emotions in their autonomic nervous system. However, there are times that any adult can become dysregulated, so they will benefit from interactions in which the other person is able to co-regulate with them. Our warm and responsive interaction connects on an unconscious level and models regulation.

In addition to the eye contact and other safe signals, mirror neurons play an important role. A calm, compassionate face can positively impact a person who is dysregulated. Their mirror neurons react positively to your positive energy.

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FURTHER EXPLORATION

Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran researched mirror neurons and provides this [TED Talk](#) on the meaning and importance of mirror neurons.

REFLECT

What are some ways that you can create safety through your body language, eye contact, and safety signals when working with employees?
What impact does wearing a mask have in this?

Respond Respectfully Practice

RESPOND RESPECTFULLY

DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING

Recap speaker's main points in your own words

ACKNOWLEDGE IMPACT

Reflect the person's feelings

IDENTIFY NEEDS AND VALUES

Say what you think their needs and values are



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BREAKOUT

Please share a topic that you care deeply about (political topic or a cause).

DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING

Recap speaker's main points in your own words

ACKNOWLEDGE IMPACT

Reflect the feelings the person has

IDENTIFY NEEDS AND VALUES

Say what you think their needs and values are

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You will now have an opportunity to practice the Respond Respectfully skills. Some of the skills may be familiar to you, but we find that most people need additional practice with identifying needs and values. Spend more time with this if the other skills are central to how you listen and speak.

In this practice, you are going to share a topic that is important to you. The purpose of this is for each leader to practice these skills. This will equip leaders to listen actively when employees bring concerns to them.

The listener is to **listen without judgment, without agreeing or disagreeing, and without sharing their opinion** at all. This is critical in the work environment, especially when employees are expressing political views. Deep listening in this way will help the speaker feel heard and valued.

Respond Respectfully

RESPOND RESPECTFULLY

DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING
Recap speaker's main points in your own words

ACKNOWLEDGE IMPACT
Reflect the person's feelings

IDENTIFY NEEDS AND VALUES
Say what you think their needs and values are



The infographic features a central blue circle with a white question mark. Surrounding it are various icons: a speech bubble, a document, a magnifying glass, a gear, a person's head, a question mark, a checkmark, and a person standing. Dashed arrows connect these elements in a circular path. The National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) logo is at the bottom right.

Respond Respectfully is a framework for active listening that invites effective dialogue. These techniques can significantly improve communication, provide clarity on both ends, encourage collaboration, and help employees feel deeply heard and understood.

FURTHER LEARNING

RESPOND RESPECTFULLY EXAMPLE

These skills are important ANY time an employee comes to you with a concern. We offer an **example** here to demonstrate how these skills can be used.

An employee complains to you that as a Mexican-American, she is the only **BIPOC** individual in her work group. Anytime there is any diversity training, everyone spotlights her to ask not only how she feels, but also how *Black people* feel. She is extremely uncomfortable when this happens and is unsure what to do.

You may be tempted to react by giving the employee information about how to solve the problem, but effective leaders **Respond Respectfully** before problem-solving so the person feels heard. It will also help to clarify the employee's underlying needs.

Respond Respectfully

RESPOND RESPECTFULLY

DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING
Recap speaker's main points in your own words

ACKNOWLEDGE IMPACT
Reflect the person's feelings

IDENTIFY NEEDS AND VALUES
Say what you think their needs and values are



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- **Demonstrate understanding** - It sounds like your team members expect you to represent the views of all BIPOC individuals when there are discussions about diversity. Is that correct?
- **Acknowledge impact** - I am hearing that you are extremely uncomfortable with this, and that you can't speak for how other groups or individuals feel. Does the assumption that you could also speak for others upset you?
- **Identify needs** - Being treated with respect by team members and being acknowledged for your individuality seem to be the most important workplace needs that you have. Is that correct? Are you also looking for ways to approach the situation?



REFLECT

How does this approach to discussing sensitive topics invite a more respectful dialogue?

Troubleshoot Together is the third and final component of the ART. It's your opportunity to explain your perspective in a nonconfrontational way, to provide clarity on considerations the other person may not be aware of, and to focus on a common goal. You will have an opportunity to discuss your approach in a breakout discussion.

Though not all demands can be met, making sure **everyone's needs are addressed** is much more possible when we take this approach rather than an adversarial one.

Lastly, **ending on a positive note** allows you to maintain a healthy relationship with the other person and positions you to more productively return to the topic in the future if needed.

Troubleshoot Together

TROUBLESHOOT TOGETHER

TELL YOUR PERSPECTIVE IN A NONCONFRONTATIONAL WAY

State how the situation is affecting you or the others without attacking the other person.

State your interests: "One thing that is important to me/our company is ..."

Use "WE" statements: "I'd like it if we could figure out a way to ..."

State organizational values: "We value ... and for this reason, I need to ..."



BREAKOUT

How does *Telling Your Perspective in a Non-confrontational Way* and encouraging employees to do the same help create a more inclusive environment?



Telling Your Perspective in a Nonconfrontational Way

You will have an opportunity to discuss your thoughts with others about this important topic of telling your perspective in a nonconfrontational way.

We would like to draw attention to the last tip: sharing organizational (or personal) values. What is the benefit of sharing your or the company's values when discussing challenging topics? We believe that it humanizes your perspective, it recognizes the moral standing of your position, and it helps us understand the other person in positive terms.

In political discussions, it helps employees to see the other person's priorities even if they are different from their own. [Research](#) has shown that for progressives, equity, fairness, tolerance, and compromise are the moral underpinning of their political decisions. For conservatives, religion, patriotism, tradition, and morality drive their priorities. Though they are different, it is important to note that both have a set of values, which can humanize the interaction away from us/them thinking.



TROUBLESHOOT

TOGETHER

Tell your perspective in a nonconfrontational way

Make sure everyone's needs are addressed

End on a positive note



TALKING ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Demonstrating Conversational Receptiveness



WORDS OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

HEDGING
Indicating some uncertainty about the claim you are about to make

USE POSITIVE TERMS

It is helpful to consider your colleagues' viewpoints.

AVOID ARGUMENTATIVE TONE



FURTHER LEARNING

For a deeper look at discussing divisive issues, there are some ways to coach employees to "Tell their perspective in a non-confrontational way" that shows further receptiveness to the perspective of others. This article, [The Right Way to Talk Across Divides](#), explores how to show conversational receptiveness: *"Conversational receptiveness involves using language that signals a person is truly interested in another's perspective."*

Words and phrases that show receptiveness:

- **Words of acknowledgment:** "What seems important to you is..."
- **Hedging**—indicating some uncertainty about the claim you are about to make—is also a sign of receptiveness. For example, "You might want to consider..." expresses more uncertainty, sounds less dogmatic, and is thus better received.
- The use of **positive** rather than negative **terms**. "It is helpful to think about your colleagues' point of view" seems more receptive than "You can't force your political views on everyone else."
- Words such as "**because**" and "**therefore**" can set an **argumentative** or condescending tone in conversation. Individuals **signal receptiveness** when they **avoid them**.

Troubleshoot Together

FURTHER LEARNING

When discussing any issues with employees, we offer further learning by suggesting that you consider the goals of the conversation. Assuring others that you are on the same page as them will help you troubleshoot together more effectively.

Additionally, many leaders have indicated that they would like to learn a methodical approach to sort through challenging conversations to more successfully troubleshoot together.

The checklist provided here provides an approach that we borrow from our Exchange methodology. Leaders can use this framework to sort through tough issues when decisions need to be made collectively.

The topics of concern are disaggregated to their smallest parts (rather than large, overwhelming topics), then the five-step method is used, one issue at a time: DEFINE, DEVELOP, DETERMINE, DECIDE, DOCUMENT.



ACTIVE AWARENESS

- Recognize style differences
- Check your bias and your ego
- Process your perceptions

RESPOND RESPECTFULLY

- Demonstrate understanding
- Acknowledge and identify needs
- Ask open-ended questions
- Acknowledge your responsibility

TROUBLESHOOT TOGETHER

- Tell your perspective in a nonconfrontational way
- Make sure everyone's needs are met
- End on a positive note



The ART, in its entirety, is very effective in showing respect and inviting inclusive dialogue. It is not necessary to memorize it. Instead, think of it as a tool for creating a culture of equity, respect, and clear communication in your work.

Practicing the ART every chance you get can give you a solid foundation on which to build your skills. In a sense, these skills are like a new language and a philosophy of communication and negotiation.

The philosophical basis for this human-centered approach we promote was originally based on the work from The Harvard Negotiation Project (particularly the book *Getting Past No*), though we have continued to expand our thinking and theoretical understanding.

Conclusion



ACTIVE AWARENESS
RESPOND RESPECTFULLY
TROUBLESHOOT TOGETHER

What is one takeaway for you from today's session?

WHAT'S NEXT

- Read about Humble Inquiry
- Next week: The ART of Inclusive Communication

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Thank you for your participation in the ARTful Conversation. We look forward to seeing you in the ART of Inclusive Communication.



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