

## How to Have Supportive and Respectful Communication Among Co-Workers

To cope with the current world situation, many people have a need to talk and voice their views—whether personal, political, emotional or intellectual. Discussions can create an opportunity for constructive dialogue, and even help prevent and resolve potential conflict. It's important that we reach out to each other, to be able to talk with those around us. But discussion may be challenging because of the sensitivity of the issues. Given how deeply people can be affected, a conversation with co-workers can be anything from a wonderful learning experience to a very difficult debate. The following are some suggestions to help you have meaningful, yet supportive and respectful discussions.

**Treat each person as an individual.** A good place to begin discussions is to not make assumptions about where someone stands. Let individuals tell you their ideas.

**The same words or symbols may mean different things to different people.** Words such as “war,” “American,” “patriotism,” or “terrorism,” or symbols such as the American flag or the peace sign can evoke a variety of feelings and values. You may need to use specific language in expressing your thoughts and opinions and be aware that others may have reactions to words and symbols that you might not expect.

**Be Gentle** with yourself and with others. Gentleness includes respecting our differences. We each have our own unique history, memories, stresses, levels of support and ways of coping. Encourage people to slow down, to honor the differences that enable our own ideas to be genuinely considered.

**Consider the importance of organized discussions** to address the many issues that arise during challenging times. Such discussions offer a structured time for people to talk. If there is already conflict, or high risk for conflict, the meetings may not make things better, but they will rarely make things worse.

**Have ground rules, and enforce them.** Go over ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. Get verbal or non-verbal agreement from everyone (such as, people nodding “yes”). See if there are other ground rules people want to suggest. Post ground rules so everyone can see them. Here are some examples:

- *The discussion stays in the room.* What is shared in the room, stays in the room.
- Listen respectfully. Allow people to finish their thoughts, without interruption.
- *Speak from your own perspective.* Use “I” statements: “I think,” “I feel,” “I believe.”

**Agree to disagree.** In any group we expect different opinions, and it's no different on this occasion.

We all need to keep working together. What you say today may be remembered for a long time. Try to respect differences; you and others can agree to disagree or agree. And, we can have our discussions in ways that support all of us respected, contributing members of the group.

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