

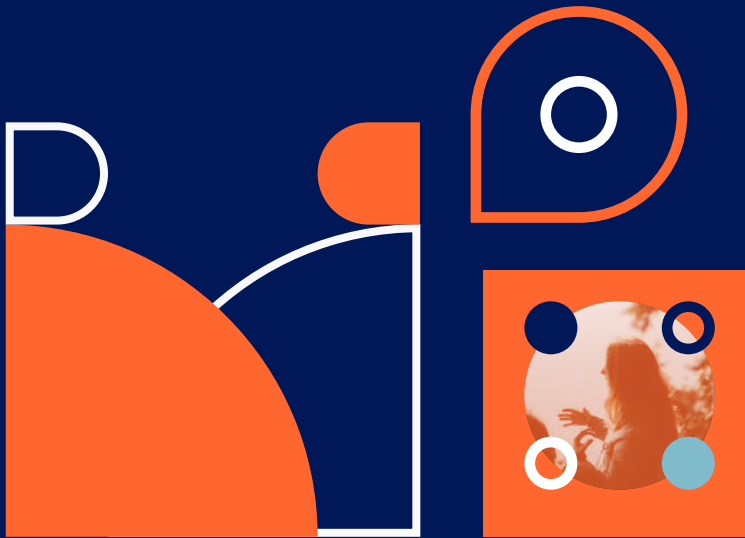
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How to moderate difficult conversations

A practical guide on the facilitation of offline
and online discussions





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Introduction

Constructive conversations are the lifeline of our communities. They help us find relevant and tangible solutions, learn from new perspectives, and empathize with each other. But often, these are also the most difficult conversations to have.

Only by sitting down at the (virtual) table together and fostering interpersonal and intercommunal connections can we ever truly act for the good of the whole. But while these hard conversations are a prerequisite for progress, simply sitting down together and having them isn't always as easy as it sounds.

People don't always see eye to eye on polarizing or high-stake topics. Some conversations require a lot of work to reach a point of mutual understanding, especially if they start out riddled with deep-seated biases or preconceived notions about each other's opinions and beliefs. Even if the participants are trying to engage respectfully, it can be difficult for everyone involved to get what they want out of the discussion. Conversations can get heated, and people often disagree. **This is why moderation is so crucial.**

Whether online or offline, moderating a conversation is about creating a safe space for constructive debate to take root.



This can mean preventing hate speech or abuse, ensuring that all participants feel safe and comfortable, and **setting up a structure that allows all points of view to be heard.**

This role isn't an easy one—it requires empathy, the ability to read a room, and the confidence to take back the steering wheel if a conversation gets derailed. But it's an essential role, as it guarantees everyone engages in the discussion on equal footing and feels empowered to speak up without fear of harassment, intimidation, or dismissal.

In this guide, we'll take a closer look at **the core responsibilities and skills** of a conversation moderator, as well as **some insights on the best ways to approach these challenging tasks** for both online and offline conversations. Let's jump right in, shall we?



Tip: tell them what's in it for them

Be sure to communicate what's in it for your residents. How much influence can they have on the decision to be made? What has already been decided on, and what can still be influenced? Make it clear to participants what they can get out of participating.



Solid preparation

As a moderator, your primary responsibility is to **create the best possible environment to cultivate constructive dialogue**. If you're moderating a conversation, debate, or online workshop that was planned in advance, proper preparation makes things considerably more manageable.

Think about **the scope and objectives of the conversation** you're setting up. What's the goal of this conversation? When has it achieved its purpose? And when is a good time to have it? It's important to consider that **the timeslot you select directly impacts the audience you'll reach**. Consider things like office hours, baby bedtimes, or different time zones, depending on the people you're trying to engage.

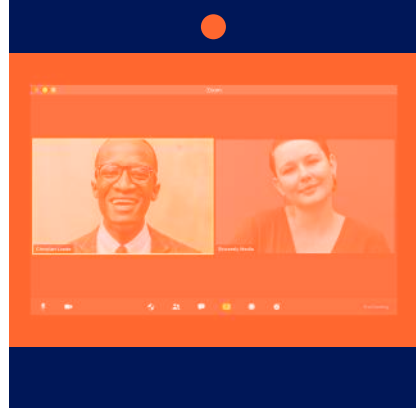




When facilitating an online conversation,

make sure to get comfortable with the tech. Will you be hosting a plenary session, or will you be splitting into breakout rooms? And what about the video configurations? Should participants' webcam and microphone be on when they enter the room? Can they raise their virtual hand or share their screen?

Preparing these settings in advance can help you streamline the discussion.



Tip: when in doubt, overshare

Some of your community members may be hesitant to share their opinions in a public setting, or could be wary of the way information about them will be stored and used. Be clear about consent. Do your residents understand what they are joining? Are they okay with their insights get shared as data points? Will those points be anonymous or attributed? Will meetings be recorded, and if so how will recordings be used? Providing this information upfront will help you build trust.



Break the ice

The first few minutes of a new conversation can feel somewhat awkward. Whether you're moderating a large-scale open debate or facilitating an online group discussion, **it's crucial to set the mood right from the start.**

Welcome your participants and introduce the topic of the conversation. To ease into things, you could ask the group to **introduce themselves with clear guidelines on what information to include**, for example asking them to share their name, where they live, and why they are interested in the discussion. This can be a great way to connect from the get-go and gauge people's expectations for the rest of the conversation.



In an online conversation,

when interlocutors are not in a physical room together, these ice breakers are even more critical. The online format omits much of the natural small talk or pre-convo chatter that would otherwise naturally flow when people get together.

Need some inspiration? [This article](#) suggests **a few stimulating energizers that are sure to break the ice.**



Tip: focus on similarities, rather than differences

As [this article](#) states, your conversation will (and should) attract people from all walks of life. As an opening question, **try to avoid focusing on differences in power**, for example by asking about people's jobs. Instead, focus on something that'll strengthen connections, e.g. by asking people to state their name and something they're grateful for/something they like to do/their favourite food...



Set the rules of the game

As a moderator, you'll want to **establish ground rules early on**. When are people allowed to speak? How much time do they get? Are there restrictions on content, behavior, or topics? And what does "respectful engagement" mean?

The rules you establish will help everyone understand the limits of the conversation. Of course, keep in mind that each exchange will have its own unique dynamics, and as such, the rules may need to be tweaked for maximum effectiveness.

In a virtual scenario,

the technology itself can provide valuable tools for structuring the conversation. For example, ask your participants to mute their microphone when they're not talking, raise a virtual hand before taking the word, or leave technical questions in a chatbox.





Manage time

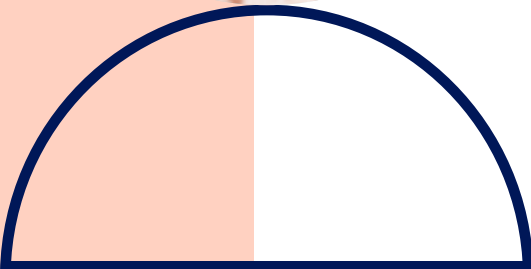
As a moderator, you'll need to keep an eye on the clock or appoint a time-keeper to do it for you. [Studies show](#) that **people's concentration tends to wane after about 52 minutes** in meetings or conversations. If you want participants to stay engaged, it's wise to **set a time limit of about 60-90 minutes or organize a short break**. It can also be helpful to break up the conversation into different stages or formats, such as a plenary style presentation with breakout sessions for more interaction.

When it comes to the conversation at hand, you'll need to **balance covering your agenda items and also letting the conversation run its natural course** as much as possible. It can be a good idea to establish a timeline upfront and dedicate specific time blocks to the topics on the agenda. Communicate the time limits upfront, set a timer, and move the conversation forward when the timer buzzes.



Tip: create a “parking” for topics you want to re-address

Sometimes the discussion about a certain topic is still in full swing when the clock dictates you to move on. It can be a good idea to temporarily “park” these topics on a list of items to come back to another time, either at the end of the conversation or in a next get-together.





Make everyone feel heard

The importance of time-keeping effortlessly brings us to the topic of **balanced dialogue**. As mentioned earlier, everyone involved must get the opportunity to contribute.

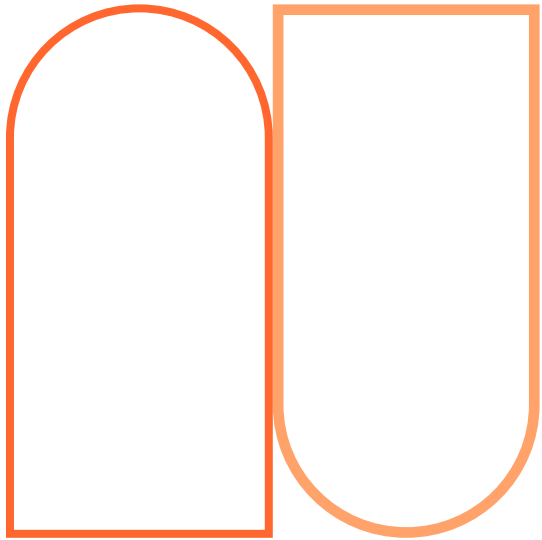
Organic conversations sometimes give way to **hijackers**—people who, consciously or unconsciously, take over the conversation and monopolize the floor. If you've set a time limit for each speaker, **politely remind the hijacker it's time to pass the word to someone else**. You can also offer this person the opportunity to share their thoughts after the workshop.





If someone hasn't spoken yet, **you could ask them if there's anything they'd like to add.**

This article recommends honoring people as listeners by asking them, "What are you hearing in this conversation?" This can both bring valuable insights to the conversation and offer these people a direct prompt to speak up. **If they don't feel comfortable sharing, though, don't push it.** Listeners are a valuable part of any conversation.



In an online conversation,

it's possible to mute or unmute participants. While muting may seem like an excellent way to deal with hijackers, it'll **make these people feel their contributions aren't valued or like they're being silenced**, which can be detrimental to the conversation as a whole. If you're setting rules about muting or unmuting, make sure to communicate these to your speakers beforehand.



Keep the conversation on track

As a moderator, it's your responsibility to keep the conversation going. If the conversation dies down, **restate the initial question or topic**. If a speaker's answer branches off into multiple tangents, **backtrack to the initial topic and summarize what you've heard so far**. Remind people of the time and move those tangents to a later point in the conversation (or to another meeting altogether). Don't hesitate to remind participants of the desired outcome of the conversation or ask them to stick to specific topics or questions.



Tip: don't force it

A conversation is fluid in nature. You might've gathered people to talk about traffic and public infrastructure, only to realize they are much more interested in discussing bike lanes or public transportation. **Try to read the room and determine where people's priorities lie**—after all, community members are experts by experience. Forcing a conversation in a certain direction, simply because that's how you planned it to go, won't yield productive results.

In an online scenario,

you can **use the chat box as an open space to share ideas, questions, or comments**. That way, you can carefully consider which contributions can be woven into the conversation, which can be addressed at the end, and which aren't relevant to the overarching theme. If possible, **assign someone from your team to respond to chats to maintain responsive engagement**.



Wrap up the conversation

When the conversation is coming to an end, take the time to **sum up the main points, reach consensus about main conversation takeaways, and make note of any clear next steps**. If there are any lingering questions or loose ends, now's the time to address them.

Thank your participants for their contributions, and **allow them to add a final comment**. If relevant, formulate tangible action points or schedule the next event or meeting. If you plan on sharing any notes or recordings of the conversation, let your participants know where they can find them.

As a moderator, it's always a good idea to **take some time to reflect** after the session. Evaluate the conclusions, the process, and your role as a moderator. What will you do differently next time?





What if it gets really difficult?

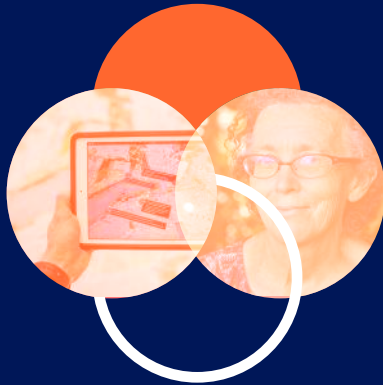
What if, despite your efforts as a moderator, conflict arises? What if someone is rude, aggressive, or offensive? What if someone is violating the rules you all agreed on? While a certain degree of tension can make for a more stimulating debate, **certain things, such as hate speech, harassment, or other kinds of aggression, should never be tolerated.**

When you find yourself in this situation as a moderator, don't fight fire with fire. **Maintain your composure, remain polite, and make it clear that this behavior isn't acceptable.** If necessary, speak to the offending party privately. If you find yourself dealing with an explosive situation, **try to break the discussion down into smaller groups.** This may help to ease tensions, prevent further escalation, and re-establish a sense of safety and comfort. **In an online scenario, you can organize this by moving the conversation into breakout rooms.**



Organizing high-stake conversations may seem daunting, but these heart-to-hearts are **integral to the evolution and growth of our communities**. Tackling delicate topics in a safe space can help us untangle sticky situations, build bridges, and collaborate on solving the challenges we face.

Communities are living, evolving entities, and the best way to ensure they thrive is by supporting and nurturing them.



Ready to bring your community together?

CitizenLab has worked with over **300 local governments** around the world to support participatory democracy and community engagement. Our experts can guide you through the entire process. [Get in touch with us today!](#)

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