

Tips for Discussion Facilitators

The role of the discussion facilitator is critical in creating productive conversations.

Set the Context

Audiences should be given enough background information to have an informed discussion. We recommend that the facilitator take a few minutes either before or after the performance to introduce some or all of the following topics:

- what we mean by *faculty bullying*, with a few definitions and examples;
- why this issue matters, including costs to individuals and institutions;
- unique features of academia that tend to protect or even promote bullying;
- existing policies and procedures at their institution;
- institutional resources to support individuals currently in active bullying situations;
- sample policies, procedures, and resources from other institutions or sources; and
- possible steps their institution might take.

With the exception of institution-specific materials, these topics are all covered throughout this book.

Orient the Audience to Unique Features of Interactive Theater

Our discussion facilitator always included some version of the following advice:

- Most of us are used to looking at theater as entertainment, catharsis, or a glimpse into the human condition. Interactive theater is a bit more charged. The performance is deliberately dramatic, and the plot is left intentionally unresolved. The idea is to stimulate conversation on a sensitive subject. Please do not judge it on the basis of the kind of theater you may see in a playhouse.
- This performance portrays only one out of many possible scenarios. There are many different types of bullying and many different departmental cultures. The video focuses on a single, albeit common, scenario. We recognize that you may have a very different experience, and we encourage you to talk about that during the discussion that follows the performance.
- This performance also involves a specific cast. Please consider how the dynamics might differ with a different cast (i.e., with the roles played by actors of different genders, racial/ethnic identities, countries of origin, ages, and so on).

- The precise behaviors highlighted in this performance may not occur in your department, or you may identify with only a single element of them. We know they are common because they came up in interviews with faculty members from three different universities. Even if you are fortunate enough never to have experienced any of them, we ask you to please keep an open mind. These behaviors may occur in other departments in your institution, and one or more of your colleagues may have experienced—or be experiencing—them.
- *Toxic Friday* is designed to demonstrate and highlight problems related to bullying throughout the university system (deans, chairs, departmental colleagues, unions, human resource offices, etc.). Please don't take any of the portrayals personally (unless the shoe fits!).
- If viewing *Toxic Friday* and/or participating in the discussion is distressing in any way, the following university resources are available to support you. (At this point, the facilitator should provide a list of support services ranging from counseling services to designated university personnel responsible for assisting those targeted by bullying.)

Expect the Discussion to be Charged

In addition to providing background and context information, facilitators should anticipate that the conversations following the performance or video may become charged. UAA has an internationally recognized Difficult Dialogues program for engaging campuses in controversial topics and has produced a handbook called *Start Talking* (available free of charge online at www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org or for purchase from your favorite bookseller). Facilitators can borrow from the classroom techniques described in *Start Talking* and adapt them for faculty discussions on bullying. Helpful techniques include:

Code of conduct (p. 12). Invite audience members to establish their own expectations for how they will respectfully interact with one another during the discussion.

Quick/reflective writing (p. 28). Invite audience members to take a few minutes to respond in writing before engaging with the question(s) in open discussion. You can provide a prompt—such as one of the Discussion Questions included in this chapter—or simply ask people to reflect on their responses to the performance or video.

Encircled circle (p. 84). Invite your audience to break into small groups and discuss the deliberately open-ended question, “What is at stake here?” Then have the large group come back together and invite one or two people from each small group to form a small inner circle, with the remaining participants arrayed in a larger circle around them. Each member of the inner circle is invited to sum up the issues and themes discussed in their small group while those in the outer circle listen quietly. You can also invite anyone from the larger group to occupy the inner circle and share their own responses to the question. When they are finished, they can exit the inner circle and someone else from the

larger group can take their place. Alternatively, you can simply ask people to join the inner circle and speak directly from the heart.

Listening pairs (not covered in *Start Talking*). Divide audience members into groups of two; one member of the pair shares aloud while the other listens attentively without interruption. After a set amount of time (for example, two minutes), the second person speaks and the first person listens for the same amount of time. You can employ the listening pairs once (for example, immediately after viewing the performance) or multiple times to better ensure that the discussion remains civil and inclusive.

This technique has many benefits for group discussions, including:

- allowing shy people (or people who don't like to compete for airspace in large groups) to voice their thoughts in a safer setting before speaking in the larger group;
- permitting people to vent some of their more charged emotional reactions to the material before engaging in discussion;
- giving everyone in the room a chance to be heard;
- allowing people time to process new information they've encountered;
- modeling the practice of giving everyone equal time to speak, as opposed to allowing some speakers to dominate; and
- giving the discussion leader a few minutes to reflect on where things need to go next.

Be Prepared for Special Cases

We recommend that discussion facilitators recognize two special cases and share the following response strategies:

Violence

Any threat of violence to self or others demands a specialized response. Identify the individuals or units at your university who are responsible for providing that response and keep their phone numbers handy. Examples include campus police, human resources personnel, a designated dean or director, or a care team if one exists. Know when to call 911. It might be helpful to invite professionals to address department meetings, detailing the steps that should be taken when there are concerns about violence. We strongly suggest you take proactive steps to identify these strategies and resources before you need them.

Severe emotional distress

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects individuals in the workplace who are suffering from trauma or from severe emotional and mental challenges. It is important to avoid diagnosing or otherwise labeling an individual's behavior and to follow your institutions protocols for ADA compliance. Check with your human resources department or other designated authority for specific steps that will help you honor both the law and the individual(s) involved. We also recommend reading "Working Effectively with Psychologically Impaired Faculty" by Oxenford and Kuhlenschmidt (2011).