

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS NAVIGATING DIFFERENCES

Who is on your board, who is on your staff? Where is diversity reflected – is it age, gender, ethnic diversity, economic status, life experience, political opinions? Diversity of every kind brings variety in ideas and perspectives which can result in more robust, resilient and innovative organizations.

I recently read a [great article](#) describing how some of the biggest philanthropic organizations in the US – the Ford Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation – have launched a new fund dedicated to promoting diversity within the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. Chris Cardona, a program officer at the Ford Foundation said, “For us, diversity and representation are critical because they lead to better decisions, greater impact and more legitimacy.”

Anyone who has conscientiously worked to create a diverse organizational culture knows what Cardona said is true. And it is also true that by inviting diverse people in, we also invite diverse opinions. It is important that leaders who develop the ability to foster honest and fruitful conversations so that difference does not devolve into acrimony and negativity.

Here are some tips to create open and honest dialog:

1. **Focus on learning.** Frame the conversation as an opportunity to learn from and understand (not attack!) each other.
2. **Ask permission.** Before diving into a potentially contentious topic, ask for permission to share your perspective.
3. **Listen.** Ask open-ended questions. Instead of formulating your argument, listen to the other person.
4. **Be respectful.** Express how much you value their opinion throughout the conversation.
5. **Search for common ground from the beginning.** If the conversation gets heated, bring the focus back to shared values and points of agreement.

When recruiting board or staff members, be mindful whether you are looking for a mirror image of yourself, or are open to someone who brings additional value to your organization. And once they have joined, be ready to apply some of the above techniques to ensure your new arrival’s ideas can be heard in a spirit of openness and respect.

Need help finding commonalities rather than differences?

WE CAN HELP!



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