Difficult Dialogues

THE 5 C'S OF DIFFICULT DIALOGUES

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The "Difficult Dialogues Project Paper Series" is a collection of working papers[1] and white papers[2] published by the Difficult Dialogues Project.

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[1] Working papers are pre-publication scientific or technical papers used to share ideas on a topic in a timely manner. They are works in progress, under submission, in press, or forthcoming. Once the paper is published, it is preferable that you cite it in its final published version.

[2] White papers are research-driven reports that inform the public about a specific complex problem in concise and accessible ways. They often propose specific solutions and frameworks for change, with the goal of helping with decision-making and policy changes.

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About the Difficult Dialogues Project:

Founded in 2016 at Texas A&M University by Dr. Srividya "Srivi" Ramasubramanian, these interactive facilitated discussions on campus racism have been described as "eye-opening", "informative," "affirming," and "empowering." The workshops use a conversation café format to facilitate small group discussions on difficult topics and to collectively brainstorm ideas to make the campus more welcoming for all. The project helps participants grow in active listening, build empathy, and appreciate multiple perspectives.

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THE 5 C'S OF DIFFICULT DIALOGUES

By Dr. Srividya "Srivi" Ramasubramanian, Ph.D.
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Abstract: This working paper outlines the 5 key principles of the 5 C's of the Difficult Dialogues Project – compassion, compromise, courage, collaboration, and commitment.

As a Communication professor specializing in bias and diversity for over two decades, I have experienced first-hand the transformative power of language. This is what motivated me to start the Difficult Dialogues Project on my campus in 2016, which continues to grow each year. Participants routinely report how they cherish the opportunity to share honestly, listen actively, and have meaningful conversations with strangers who also care about the topic.

What makes a dialogue difficult changes according to person, context, place, and time. According to one's life experiences, background, and identities, what is a difficult topic for one person might not be for another. What is regarded as a difficult topic in one context, such as within the family, may not be so in another context, such as the workplace. The same could hold true across different regions, countries, and cultures. What was considered a difficult topic by our parent's generation isn't what we might see as difficult in today's world. Also, some topics may become more or less difficult to talk about at various stages of our life as we grow and mature. Regardless of what exactly the difficult dialogues are about, they all require 5Cs: ***courage***, ***compassion***, ***collaboration***, ***compromise***, and ***commitment***.

COURAGE

Difficult dialogues require **courage**. To be sure, speaking about topics such as racism, religion, and politics can be difficult, and sometimes even dangerous. But meaningful dialogues can also liberate, transform, and heal us and others around us. It can feel vulnerable to engage in conversations both as a member of a dominant and marginalized group to share honest feelings and thoughts on such topics. It is okay if we don't know exactly what to say and precisely how to say it. However, staying in one's comfort zone and working from a space of fear has never helped anyone grow or bring about positive changes. Being silent and avoiding the reality of a divided nation around us only makes us complicit in the systems that should be working to change.

COMPASSION

Difficult dialogues require **compassion**. As someone who has been teaching about empathy and inclusion for more than two decades, I can say with authority that compassionate communication is an overlooked area in our education. Our kids learn how to read, write, and do math. They may even learn how to debate on various topics, be an engaging public

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speaker, and be savvy at creating YouTube videos, Instagram posts, and complex media technology. But this is not the same as learning to communicate compassionately, which requires listening actively, open-mindedness, and acceptance of self and others even while disagreeing.

COLLABORATION

Difficult dialogues require **collaboration**. The success of a dialogue is not in winning arguments and persuading others. We live in a highly competitive world of winners and losers, vanquished and the victor, where kids are focused more on the *outcomes* rather than the *process*. They have to learn that even if every outcome is not in their favor, it is the process that matters most. The focus of collaboration is not so much on *what* you want but on *how* to make it work for all and *why* it matters to include everyone. By sharing and listening to various perspectives, positions, and preferences through dialogue, we generate new solutions and fresh possibilities for action.

COMPROMISE

Difficult dialogues require **compromise**. When we hear the word "compromise," it feels like selling out, giving in, and being a loser. But compromise is an essential aspect of everyday social life. It means everyone *gives up a little* of what they want but everyone also gets to *keep a little bit* of what they want. While dealing

with complex issues such as discrimination, privilege, and inequities that involve multiple perspectives and stakeholders (the so-called "wicked problems"), the solutions are going to be messy and imperfect. The point of compromise is to move forward through dialogue and negotiation to reach some shared workable solutions.

COMMITMENT

Difficult dialogues require **commitment**. Inclusion and diversity aren't just about compliance, online training, and certifications. It is about taking personal and social responsibility by being committed to act on good ideas. Organizations should ask themselves how they would commit to creating inclusive dialogue spaces as part of their culture so that feedback, conversation, listening, and working through differences become a natural part of the DNA of the organization. These are some questions that we need to ask ourselves continuously to hold one another accountable at the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

By engaging in difficult dialogues that center on *courage*, *compassion*, *collaboration*, *compromise*, and *commitment,* I believe we can build trust, solidarity, and meaningful coalitions. Dialogues can pave the way for more inclusive policies, collective responsibility, social transformation, and community healing.

Brief bio: Dr. Srividya "Srivi" Ramasubramanian is Newhouse Professor & Endowed Chair at the S. I Newhouse School of Public Communication. She is the Founding Director of the Difficult Dialogues Project. An award-winning scholar-educator, she has over 20 years of experience in DEI, community-engaged scholarship, media literacy, inclusive communication, and social justice initiatives. She offers facilitated workshops, training, consultations, and keynote speeches for universities, nonprofits, and other organizations. For more information, please visit her website.

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