

Engaging in Difficult Conversations in the Workplace

Participant Guide



Engaging in Difficult Conversations in the Workplace

Have you ever been in an emotionally charged conversation that made you want to fight, flight, or freeze? Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many of us have been part of uncomfortable conversations around social justice, but we don't have the tools or confidence to navigate these discussions. In our ever-evolving world, we are being called to have more direct, compassionate, and transparent conversations in our personal and professional lives—not just equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) related, but in general.

In this 90-minute virtual workshop, you will learn strategies on how to navigate challenging situations when discussing complex topics at work. Along with EDI related topics, we will focus on navigating the nuances of the workplace day-to-day conversations between co-workers, managers, clients, and direct reports.

After completing this training, participants will...

- Grow their awareness around what a difficult conversation is.
- Gain confidence and learn strategies when engaging in courageous discourse.
- Have stronger interpersonal skills personally and professionally.
- Be empowered to lead challenging discussions.
- Understand the importance of accountability and action.

Quotes

"A person's success in life can be measured by the number of uncomfortable conversations he or she is willing to have." Tim Ferriss

"I am convinced that courage is the most important of all the virtues. Because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently." Maya Angelou

"Integrity is choosing courage over comfort." Brené Brown

"Being quiet is comfortable. Keeping things the way they've been is comfortable. And all comfort has done is maintain the status quo." Luvvie Ajayi Jones

"A courageous conversation requires that we grow accustomed to the discomfort of abandoning old habits." Glenn Singleton

Meet the Team



Facilitator: Jenna Shellman (she/her) | Senior IDEAL Consultant

Jenna Shellman is the Senior IDEAL (inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and leadership) Consultant at Archbright and the main facilitator for Engaging in Difficult Conversations. Jenna has over 15 years of experience in the workplace, with a master's degree in Education and Bachelor of Science in Psychology. Her background prior to becoming a DEI Specialist is in education, recruiting, sales, and corporate management. Jenna is passionate about DEI work because she wants to be a voice for those who are often underrepresented and a coach for those who are ready to learn, engage, and transform. Jenna's vision is to help organizations create workplace environments that are inclusive and equitable of all social identity groups.

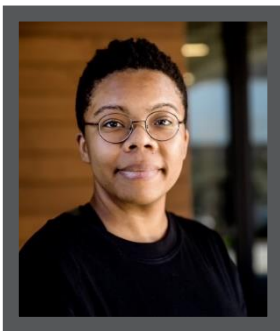
Her approach to DEI is to lead with compassion, build perspective, focus on progress over perfection, and support transformation.



Co-facilitator: Joseph Marth (he/him), Ph.D. | Director, IDEAL

Dr. Joseph Marth is the Director of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, & Leadership (IDEAL) at Archbright. He currently serves as a member of Archbright's executive leadership team. Joseph began his management consulting career with Ernst & Young and he has 20+ years of professional experience in both small and Fortune 500 organizations. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Akron, with doctoral concentration in Industrial-Organizational Psychology. Joseph, a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, has been active in DEI (Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion) since the late 1990s. He had the honor of leading a major US telecom's first initiatives in Diversity & Inclusion, and later leading the Northwest Diversity Learning Series (NWDLS) in Seattle, WA for four years. Joseph consults with organizations

to achieve inclusive cultures, increase employee engagement, and execute on strategic initiatives. He is a member of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology (SIOP). Dr. Marth will be co-facilitating with Jenna during the breakout sessions.



Producer: Jalisa Jones (she/her), Member Services Coordinator

JaLisa is an Archbright Member Services Coordinator and Producer of Archbright University Classes. She attended the Art Institute of Atlanta, studying Illustration and Design, and has over 15 years of customer service experience ranging from food service to the tech industry. Her role at Archbright allows her to exercise her creative and interpersonal skills daily with Archbright members and coworkers alike. Her favorite things to do are taking care of plants, learning new things and being creative.

About Archbright & IDEAL

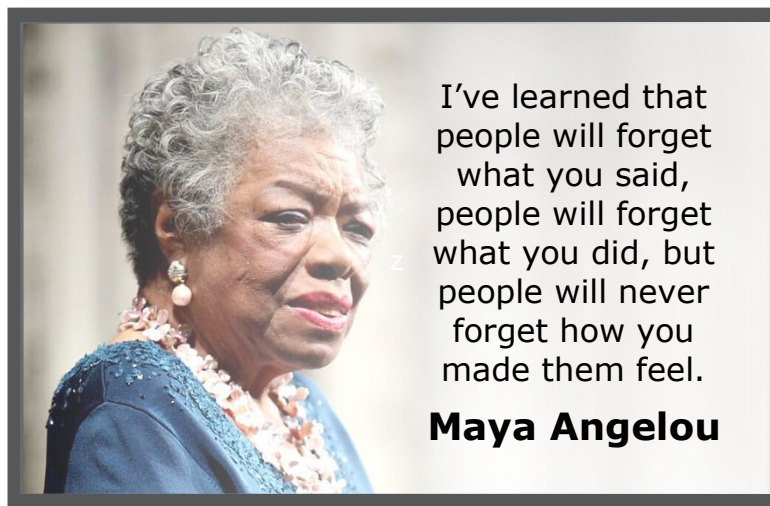
Archbright is the go-to resource for Pacific Northwest employers. At our core, we offer easy access to expert HR, DEI, safety, and legal advice through an affordable annual membership. Our focus is helping companies elevate workplace performance—by helping them be compliant with hundreds of employment laws and build more engaged workforces.

With three membership levels to choose from, employers can align our services with their needs and budget. Benefits may include access to our HR and Safety Hotlines, employment law and labor law advice, compensation survey data, and mozzo, our new online platform designed to connect members to our expert HR and safety resources. Members can also purchase additional services that span every stage of the employer-employee relationship, including HR Consulting, Employee and Leadership Training, IDEAL services, Retirement Programs, Safety Consulting, Retrospective Rating Programs, Claims Management, and Labor Relations. And all at a price and quality unmatched in the marketplace. We treat every employer engagement like it is the most important issue we have, because it is. It's yours, and that makes it ours. Read more about Archbright here.

IDEAL at Archbright stands for inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and leadership. Currently, IDEAL services include organizational surveying, professional development training, speaking events, and consulting. IDEAL is being offered for both members and non-members of Archbright.

Guidelines For This Training

- This is a brave space to learn and engage.
- Please be open to teachable moments.
- Own your intentions and your impact.
- Challenge yourself.



I've learned that
people will forget
what you said,
people will forget
what you did, but
people will never
forget how you
made them feel.

Maya Angelou

The Four Agreements to Having a Courageous Conversation

I agree to...

Stay engaged: Staying engaged means remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved during the training.

Experience discomfort: This agreement acknowledges that discomfort might arise during the training. It is through courageous dialogue, even when uncomfortable, that healing and transformation begin.

Speak your truth: This means to be open and honest when speaking and reflecting. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work can be messy and the journey is the opposite of striving toward perfection, or just trying to say the right thing.

Expect and accept non closure: This agreement asks participants to “hang out in uncertainty” and not to rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to equity work which requires ongoing dialogue. This agreement also acknowledges that people are at different levels of their EDI journey and do not expect everyone to be on the same page.



Objectives

- The importance of courage.
- Grow our awareness around what a difficult conversation is.
- Understand accountability and action.
- Gain confidence and learn strategies when engaging in courageous dialogue.

Ultimately...

- Have stronger interpersonal skills, personally and professionally.
- Feel empowered to lead and engage in challenging conversations.

Get Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable



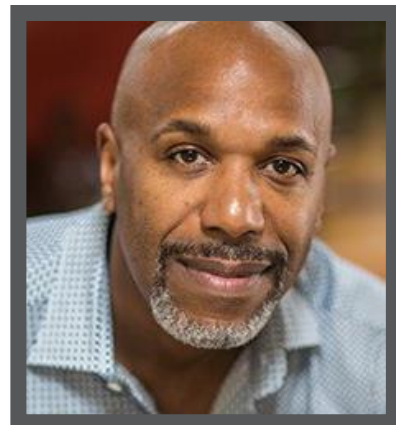
Let's Talk About Courage



Luvvie Ajayi
Jones



Brené Brown



Glenn Singleton

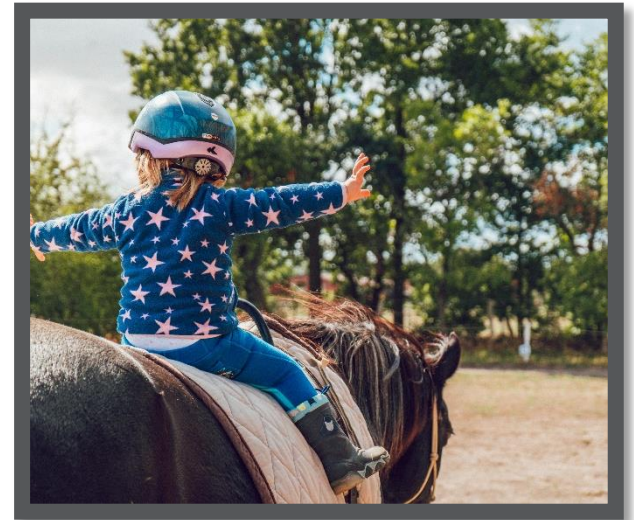
Safe Space

- A conversation with limited risk.
- Unlikely to produce controversy or contradiction.
- Embraces people-pleasing tendencies.
- Not an authentic or vulnerable conversation; real issues may not be addressed.
- In EDI work, “safe spaces” can often protect those with dominate identities, and harm those with marginalized identities.
- Free from discomfort and difficulty.



Brave Space

- Embraces a courageous and vulnerable conversation.
- Welcomes controversy, contradiction, and truth-telling.
- Uncomfortable dialogue = personal and professional growth.
- In EDI work, brave conversations focus on the impact, not the intent.
- Fosters accountability.
- Can build trust with the other person or party.
- Form of self-respect; creates boundaries.



Note: A brave space may not be the best option all the time. If the risk involves losing a job, physical, or psychological harm this may not be the best approach. Also, important to note that marginalized people should not feel expected, or required to educate, or call out discrimination that is against them. This is the role and responsibility for people with more privilege to engage in.

Breakout Session #1

In groups, discuss one or both of the questions below. We will have about 10 minutes.

Share an example of a conversation that you've been part of in the workplace where it felt too safe. What happened?

Share an example of a conversation that you've been part of in the workplace that required you to be brave. What happened?

What Is a Difficult Conversation?

- Any conversation where you are required to manage emotions in a sensitive way.
- Managing emotions can mean yours, someone else's, or both.
- Requires people involved to be brave.
- Risks could be high.



Difficult Conversations in The Workplace

Everyday Examples:

- Terminating or laying off an employee.
- Sharing a different perspective, idea, or negative feedback to the leadership team.
- Counseling an employee who is on a performance improvement plan.
- Saying, "I don't know" or "I don't get it" to a senior colleague.
- Engaging in any conversation with a power dynamic.
- HR investigating complaints or grievances.
- Asking for help.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Examples:

- Confronting a colleague about a microaggression that they committed.
- Educating, counseling, or coaching a colleague on their biases.
- Engaging in conversations where you sense perceived bias against you.
- Sharing a story of discrimination to your manager or HR.
- Speaking up publicly at work about institutional discrimination (ex: issues of racism, homophobia, ableism, etc.)
- Being on the receiving end of being called out.

Why Do We Avoid Difficult Conversations?

- Fear and uncertainty.
- Concern about perceived unconscious bias.
- Unsure how to navigate a conversation or the correct/inclusive language to use.
- The conversations require us to be vulnerable and experience discomfort.
- No one supports, protects, or defends us if we are sharing a story of discrimination.
- Power dynamic.
- We don't want to hurt someone's feelings.

Breakout Session #2

In groups, discuss one or both of the questions below. We will have about 10 minutes.

How can you (and other people involved) benefit from engaging in difficult conversations in the workplace?

What do you think the cost of your inaction could be if you choose to not engage in a difficult conversation, or choose to make conversations “safe?”

Accountability & Action

The Importance of Engaging:

- Cultivates authenticity, courage, and vulnerability.
- Can interrupt harm.
- Helps build perspective.
- Makes room for clear conversations.
- Allows healing to happen.
- Promotes healthy boundaries.
- Way to model to others.

The Cost of Inaction:

- Not being true to ourselves.
- Can create mistrust in a relationship.
- Lack of accountability, learning, growth, or justice.
- Allows harm to continue.
- Promotes people-pleasing, unhealthy spaces, and dialogue.
- Anger, resentment, and grief can manifest.
- Fosters silence.

Strategies To Engage



Assess the
situation



Choose your
strategy



Engage

Assess the Situation

- What just happened? What is happening? What is about to happen?
- How does my position or identity(ies) play a role in this conversation? Is there a power dynamic issue?
- How might the over person(s) feel when we engage in this conversation?
- If this is an EDI issue, am I in a safe place to respond or engage?
- Am I in the right mindset (courageous)to have this conversation now?
- How can I be aware of my potential biases and blind spots when engaging?
- Should the conversation even happen?



Strategy #1

Calling in approach:

- Promotes relationship building and trust.
- Fosters compassion, empathy, and practices non-violent communication.
- Focuses on coaching, counseling, mentorship, and empowerment.
- In EDI, models “allyship” and accountability indirectly.

Cons:

- Can be too soft of an approach (especially EDI related).

Scenario

One of your work colleagues mentions that they don't believe that equity, diversity, and inclusion are important in the workplace. What **can** a brave conversation sound like?

Engage

Get curious:

- "Can you tell me what you mean when you say?"
- "Is it possible for you to say more about your thoughts?"
- "Have the thoughts you shared been shaped by others, or is this your own personal perspective?"
- "Why do you think others might want to challenge your perspective?"

Build perspective:

- "Have you considered that...?"
- "Would you be open to hearing a different point of view?"
- "I disagree."

Focus on connection:

"There was a time when I thought similarly. Here is when my perspective started to change."

"We should continue this conversation. I'm interested in understanding your perspective more."

Tips

Delivering the message:

- Focus on courage and building a connection.
- Be short and direct; less is more.

The four agreements...

- Stay engaged.
- Experience discomfort.
- Speak your truth.
- Expect and accept non-closure.

Receiving the message:

- Recognize the courage and intentions of the other party.
- Be mindful of your reactions.

The four agreements...

- Stay engaged.
- Experience discomfort.
- Speak your truth.
- Expect and accept non-closure.

Scenario:

You've been working at your new place of employment for 6 months. You don't feel supported, heard, or valued from your supervisor. During staff meetings your supervisor talks over you and never credits your hard-earned work. You're starting to feel resentment and emotionally burnout. What **can** a brave conversation sound like?

Engage

Start with gratitude: "I appreciate you taking the time to be here."

Open the door to authenticity: "I have important feedback that I would like to share with you. Are you open to receiving this feedback?"

Share what is on your heart: "From my perspective, at times, I don't feel supported, valued, or heard by you." PAUSE. "Would you like for me to continue?"

Give specific examples: "During this project I didn't feel supported because X. When we were sharing our role out during the team meeting, I didn't feel valued when you Y. During our last 1:1 I explained what I needed, but you didn't Z." PAUSE.

I need: "Moving forward, I need more A, and I need less B"

Invite follow up: "It's important to me that we have a strong working relationship. When can we follow up about this?"

End with gratitude: "I appreciate you being here."

Tips

Delivering the Message

- Focus on courage.
- Be short and direct; less is more.
- Model the behavior that you would want others to see.
- Try to be compassionate and empathetic in the situation.
- Take a break after.
- Optional: Invite HR

Receiving the Message

- Recognize the courage it takes for someone to confront you.
- Be aware of the power dynamic.
- Actively listen.
- Own it and apologize.
- Make amends.
- Follow up.
- Forgive yourself.

Strategy #2

Calling out approach:

- Disrupts harm in the moment.
- Direct and to the point.
- In EDI, this approach protects, defends, and supports those in harm in the moment.

Cons:

- Can lead to shaming and distancing which prevents people from being moved in their thinking (especially EDI related).
- Can shut the person down emotionally.

Scenario

You're a people manager at your organization. There is a colleague with a similar position that makes staff uncomfortable, especially during staff meetings. This colleague makes crude "jokes," says inappropriate things, and crosses the line. During a staff meeting, this person said something inappropriate that was perceived to be a microaggression. What can a brave conversation sound like?

Engage

Pause: Am I in a position to defuse the situation and protect those at harm?

Clarify: "Excuse me colleague, did you just say X?"

Name: "I do not appreciate your comment because it felt Y."

Needs: "The language that you use it not acceptable here. Moving forward, I need you to refrain from making such comments."

Options afterward:

1. Report to HR.
2. Check in on those that could've been affected.
3. Have a follow up conversation with that individual.

Delivering the Message

- Focus on courage.
- Be short and direct; less is more. A volleying conversation can heighten the situation.
- Model the behavior that you would want others to see.
- Take a break after.
- Optional: Report to HR.

Receiving the Message

- Recognize the courage it takes for someone to confront you.
- Be mindful of your reactions.
- Actively listen.
- Own it.
- Apologize and make amends with those affected.
- Follow up with HR and person that called you out.
- Educate yourself.
- Forgive yourself.



Post-Training

It's recommended to focus on self-care post-training if possible. Self-care can include:

- Taking a break; walking away from your device.
- Journaling or reflecting upon your feelings.
- Working through the reflection questions in the participant guide.
- Engaging in some type of movement.
- Talking to a trusted individual about your experience.
- Continue to grow and expand your awareness and knowledge of EDI.



Reflection Questions:

Directions: Now that you've had some time to process *Engaging in Difficult Conversations in the Workplace*, please work through the below questions at your own pace. Feel free to work with another participant from the training.

1. What were your main take aways from this training? Did you have any "ah-ha" moments post-training?
2. What was (or still is) challenging for you to understand about the training? What questions still feel unanswered?
3. What does it mean to "own your intentions and your impact" when engaging in a difficult conversation?
4. Think back to a conversation that you've had in the last few months that was difficult. How did you handle it? Now, that you've had this training, how would handle the situation? The same, or try something different?
5. How can you (better) start to cultivate a culture of brave conversations at your organization? Related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), and unrelated.
6. **Scenario:** Your colleague does believe that EDI has a place in the workplace, but you believe it does. What recommendations from the training can you use to connect with this person?

Resources

Articles:

[From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice, by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens](#)

[Beginning Courageous Conversations About Race, by Glenn E. Singleton and Cyndie Hays](#)

[SCARF in 2012: Updating the Social Neuroscience of Collaborating With Others, by David Rock and Christine Cox, Ph.D](#)

Videos:

[Ted Talk: Get Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable, by Luvvie Ajayi Jones](#)

[Netflix: The Call to Courage by Brene Brown](#)

Books:

[Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well, by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen](#)

[Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, by Joseph Grenny and Ron McMillan](#)

[Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools, by Glenn E. Singleton](#)

[Professional Troublemaker: The Fear-Fighter Manual, by Luvvie Ajayi Jones](#)

[Daring Greatly, by Brene Brown](#)