

# GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING OPEN CONVERSATIONS

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## Introduction to Tanenbaum *Combating Extremism* Conversations

At Tanenbaum, we understand that extremism can feel insurmountable, in the U.S. and across the world. But fortunately, there are simple actions each of us can take to thwart radicalism and prevent individuals from feeling marginalized—a risk factor believed to increase some people’s susceptibility to extremist ideology.

These simple actions include being proactive in finding ways to meet people from religions and ideologies different than our own, as well as learning more about the important and timely religion-related topics that affect our world perspective.

Bearing in mind the power of complete, easy-to-digest, and objective information, Tanenbaum designed its [Combating Extremism](#) campaign. With our expertise in religious pluralism and inclusive education, we developed informational resources that counter misinformation and/or the lack of information about some of today’s most pressing and complex religion-related issues.

These *Combating Extremism* fact sheets, together with other materials that are part of the campaign, are intended to encourage and inform open conversations that can help people better understand a variety of issues regarding extremism, religion, stereotyping, and scrutinizing information for truth. Many issues addressed by Tanenbaum’s *Combating Extremism* campaign, such as diversity in Islam, white supremacy, terrorism, and the refugee crisis, affect how each of us sees the world, responds to global events, and interacts with others every single day.

After reviewing our materials, people reach their own conclusions about what they mean. To help you share and discuss what you learn with others in enriching and positive ways, Tanenbaum has created these Guidelines for Conducting Open Conversations. Open conversations provide an important opportunity for people with different beliefs and perspectives to come together and explore the hard questions that are so important for being an engaged, informed, and compassionate global citizen.

You can access Tanenbaum’s *Combating Extremism* fact sheets and their corresponding questions sheets here: <https://tanenbaum.org/combating-extremism/>. We add new topics regularly, free of charge.

Whether you convene a formal conversation, engage in an off-the-cuff discussion with friends, students or colleagues, or simply review and/or pass along Tanenbaum’s *Combating Extremism* resources on social media or in person, we welcome and encourage you to send an email to [combatingextremism@tanenbaum.org](mailto:combatingextremism@tanenbaum.org) and let us know how the conversation or other relevant action went. Please include stories that highlight how your ideas or behavior (or those of other participants) shifted, if available.

Based on Tanenbaum’s 25 years of work, we know that conversations are critical to bridging divides. Join us in our efforts in stopping hate and in *Combating Extremism*. Let’s get started!

## The Following Guidelines are Divided into 5 Sections:

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### **I. FIRST THINGS FIRST: PRELIMINARY PREPARATION**

Tanenbaum *Combating Extremism* materials often involve issues about which people have strong and differing perspectives. Often these perspectives are driven by deep beliefs rooted in personal experience, religious or another core identity, and preferred media sources. It is best when there is someone responsible for leading (or facilitating) the conversation and when the facilitator(s) and those organizing the conversation are prepared. Below are a few points that we encourage you to consider before your conversation takes place:

#### **1. IDENTIFY WHO WILL PARTICIPATE**

##### **Potential Audiences:**

*(Don't forget to consider how/whether group makeup will affect conversation openness.)*

- A. Students
- B. Faculty
- C. Campus groups
- D. Community members
- E. Faith leaders

#### **2. THE TEAM**

- A. Your team consists of all the people with whom you are working to produce the conversation. You may want to have a brief meeting to outline each person's responsibilities.
- B. If two of you are co-facilitating your conversation, you may want to schedule some time before the conversation to clarify your mutual objective(s) for the session and how the session relates to overall goals.
- C. If you are conducting a conversation where representatives from different communities or houses of worship will be present, consider having a facilitator from each group or tradition. You might also consider having a facilitator from a community or belief system not participating in the conversation.

#### **3. TIME**

- A. How long do you want your conversation to run? We recommend that you have at least one hour scheduled, though they can be planned for longer as well. If there's interest, you can *always* schedule another one!

#### 4. PREPARE AN AGENDA: SAMPLE AGENDA

Here is a suggested agenda for conducting your event:

- A. Welcome
- B. Prayer / Invocation / Acknowledgement of all traditions/personal belief systems present (and, if you like, those that are not included). If this will be a secular event, words of welcome from the communities present are a good way to start.
- C. Introductions/Icebreaker
- D. Create Ground Rules
- E. Review Selected Fact Sheet(s): We encourage you to share the fact sheet(s) with participants before the conversation convenes so that they have adequate time to consider the material thoroughly and thoughtfully.
- F. Offer First Question and Conduct the Conversation
- G. Debrief the Conversation/Evaluation:
  - Did participants have any insights into their beliefs about the chosen topic?  
Any insights into their own biases?
  - What actions will they take? Will they continue conversations with others?  
Will they share the resource reviewed on social media, via email or in-person?
  - What additional information do they want?
  - And remember, please send Tanenbaum your evaluations and/or notable stories about insights made or changes in behavior anticipated at [combatingextremism@tanenbaum.org](mailto:combatingextremism@tanenbaum.org).

#### 5. ASSESSING YOUR SUCCESS: OUTPUTS AND EVALUATIONS

If you would like to evaluate your session, before you conduct your event consider how you would like to do so. What do you want feedback on? What, if anything, is your measurement for success? We've included a sample evaluation form for your use on page 11.

## II. **GETTING YOUR CONTENT READY**

### 1. PLANNING FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

When planning, anticipate potential challenges. One way to do this is to think through some questions and challenging issues you may encounter, such as:

- A. Why am I/are we hosting this conversation?
- B. Have any incidents of bias, harassment or discrimination been reported in the community?
- C. Who might you expect to participate? (Age, background, number of attendees)?

- D. What are some challenges or particular issues that might come up in your conversation? (Especially those that relate to the specific climate in which it is being held.)
- E. How diverse is the participant group?

## 2. REVIEW YOUR RESOURCES

Make sure you've made time to personally review all of the resources you are planning to use (i.e., videos, fact sheets, and questions). And as previously mentioned, we encourage you to share them with participants ahead of time.

## 3. MATERIALS

Among the materials you may find useful for your conversation are:

- A. Fact Sheets
- B. Question Sheets
- C. Quotations from sacred texts that affirm community and/or understanding one another
- D. Name Tags
- E. An Agenda
- F. Different Colored Markers
- G. Flip Chart Paper and Easel
- H. Pens
- I. Note Paper
- J. Index Cards

## 4. PREPARING THE ICEBREAKER

To open an event, it is useful to start with an icebreaker to get people engaged. You can design one of your own. (After all, you know your community members best!)

## 5. SUGGESTED USES FOR FACT SHEETS

Tanenbaum's *Combating Extremism* fact sheets have been designed to provide facts and context about some of today's most pressing issues. They can be used in a variety of ways for your events and beyond, such as sharing them on social media, with professors and other colleagues, other extracurricular or community groups, local houses of worship, the campus newspaper and other student media, and more.

## 6. GROUND RULES FOR ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENT

No matter your level of experience as a trainer/facilitator, there are a few items that are important to remember about leading a conversation with members of different communities based on a particular identity, whether around faith, country of origin, socioeconomic group, gender or other core identifier. The topics you will engage in can be deeply personal for all those involved. For many people, talking about these various topics can be very challenging; depending on the person, it can even be painful. Creating and maintaining a safe space throughout the conversation allows each person to express his or her thoughts while respecting the thoughts of others. Everyone may not come to agreement at the end of the conversation. Your job as the facilitator of the conversation is to create and maintain an environment where everyone can talk about what's important to them on these topics – even if you strongly disagree with someone's perspective.

On the following page are a few steps to help you establish a safe environment for your event.

## Create Ground Rules

- A. It's important that the creation of the Ground Rules involve the participants. You can start by saying, "We're going to create Ground Rules for the conversation we're going to have about \_\_\_\_\_. We want everyone to feel comfortable/safe to share what's important to them about the topic. What are some of the actions or behaviors that let you know that it's safe to share your thoughts?"
- B. Solicit answers from the group and note them on chart paper. Ask questions about anything that seems unclear to you. Use reframing to make sure that each person is understood (i.e., What I hear you saying is \_\_\_\_\_?).
- C. We recommend that the following be included as part of your Ground Rules. If a participant does not offer one of the following, or another parameter that you think is important to the success of the conversation, offer it as a suggestion:
  1. Listen when others speak (i.e., not busy planning your response or on your phone)
  2. Participate fully
  3. Keep an open mind (i.e., assume you can learn from everyone in the room)
  4. Consider different points of view
  5. Allow room for silence
  6. Listen/Participate from what's important to you
  7. Use "I" language (we can only speak for ourselves, not for our group)
  8. "One mic" – One person speaks at a time
  9. Confidentiality – It may be very important for participants to know their opinions will not be shared broadly
  10. Everyone has a chance to speak
  11. Use positive language (no cursing, slurs, or accusatory language)
  12. Be respectful toward one another
    - a. Note to facilitator: We all have very different ideas of what conduct actually connotes respect. Keep in mind that the people participating in your conversation may have divergent ideas about respect. A tool that may be worthwhile is to ask participants to consider the following questions as you go through the conversation:
      1. What does respect look like?
      2. What does it sound like?
      3. What does it feel like?
- D. Ask for and make sure there is verbal agreement to the Ground Rules before you proceed with the conversation.

## 7. "THE THREE RULES OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING"

As your conversation may directly address religion, the religious beliefs of community members, and the religiosity of neighbors and friends, you may consider including these guidelines. At the very least, the facilitator(s) can familiarize themselves with these rules in preparing for the conversation.

At a press conference in 1985, Dr. Krister Stendahl, a Bishop of Stockholm, responded to vocal opposition to the building of a temple there by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He laid down three rules, which have been used across the globe to guide dialogues involving religion and topics that address faith. They can prove useful in creating and maintaining context for respectful conversations as part of your Ground Rules:

- A. When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion or ideology (and not its enemies).
  - 1. Note: No one can speak for an entire faith tradition or demographic (e.g. refugees, immigrants, etc.). It is important for each person to speak from his/her own perspective about the practices or beliefs of his/her tradition or community. Encourage participants to speak from the first person and use "I" language as described above.
- B. Don't compare your best to their worst.
- C. Leave room for "holy envy."
  - 1. By this, Stendahl meant that you should be willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and that you wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith. This also applies to groups not defined by their faith that are outside of your own identity (e.g. country of origin, socio-economic status, immigration status, political affiliation, etc.)

## III. **ANTICIPATE: ISSUES TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOUR CONVERSATION**

Conversations involving topics from Tanenbaum's *Combating Extremism* campaign may be difficult for some conversation participants for a host of reasons. Some include:

- A. Their own cultural and religious beliefs about others.
- B. The participant is a veteran or has a family member who is a veteran.
- C. The participant is misinformed about Muslims, Islam, Evangelicals, Christianity, Jews, Judaism, or other religious groups/religions.
- D. The participant's media diet.

### 1. **HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU MANAGE THE RANGE OF EMOTIONS THAT MAY ARISE ON ANY OF THE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:**

- A. Refer back to and remind everyone of the Ground Rules that they all accepted for interacting with each other and maintaining a safe space. If necessary, ask them to abide by them.

- B. Periodically remind the group of the objectives and hopes for the conversation (see the Introductions/Icebreaker section below in Conducting Your Conversations); ask everyone to offer ideas and comments toward meeting that goal/purpose.
- C. Acknowledge all expressions with “Thank you.” You don’t have to agree with everyone. Your role is to maintain the environment of respect.

## 2. NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

In our experience, these issues generate a lot of interest and people often have a lot to contribute. However, you want to have a focused conversation with your community members. We recommend that you choose three questions that you would really like to discuss. Of those three questions, choose the one that you feel would provide the most value as an initial conversation to your conversation participants. If you’re not able to get to the other two questions, you might consider conducting another conversation.

## 3. DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

It is important to maintain the safety of the experience for everyone participating (i.e., everyone should feel free to participate, even when they hold a minority or unpopular position and should be treated with the same respect as people who hold majority or popular positions). If a participant becomes unwilling to follow the Ground Rules and participate in the conversation in a constructive manner, consider the following actions:

- A. Directly ask the participant if s/he will follow the Ground Rules from that point forward. If the participant cannot or will not agree, ask the individual to stop participating. You can invite him/her to participate at another time.
- B. Ask the members of the group how they would like to handle the situation. Are there any requests the group can make of the person?
- C. Say to the participants, “We had an agreement of how this conversation was going to go. It does not seem to be going in that direction any longer. What would you like to do?”
- D. As a last resort, you can end the session. Here are some additional helpful tips:
  - 1. When someone shares an emotional and/or personal experience, quickly redirect his or her comments back to the shared ideas of the group, to information on fact sheets or to the established hopes and goals of the conversation.
  - 2. Respectfully redirect someone who is dominating the conversation. Ex: “I know a lot of people think about it the way you do. Does anyone see it differently?” OR “You’re contributing a lot to our discussion. There are a few people we haven’t yet heard from. What questions do others have? What do others make of [this question]?”
  - 3. Acknowledge and name the tension: if someone makes an offensive or aggressive comment, don’t ignore it. Acknowledge that the topic can be/is emotionally charged for many reasons and we each come to it with different perspectives — all the more reason to talk about it as a community.
  - 4. Be direct and genuine. When you ask a participant a question, be sure it reflects authentic curiosity and isn’t a challenge in disguise.

#### 4. RESPONDING TO HARD QUESTIONS AROUND RELIGION AND OTHER CORE IDENTITIES

The topics for the conversation may involve people talking about stereotypes and misconceptions about events and/or people. The fact sheets provide useful, vetted information on a range of topics. Familiarize yourself with the fact sheets you've chosen that are related to the question(s) for discussion. They will provide data for your responses. Below are some immediate answers you can use, if tensions arise around a conversation about religion or another core identity:

- A. "Here at (name of house of worship, university, community, school), our mission, core values and goals are clear around respecting all people."
- B. "There is diversity within many traditions and identities. Is there a particular sect or subgroup within (insert religion or identity being discussed) you are speaking about?"
- C. Name specific instances of current anti-religious sentiment (e.g. anti-Muslim, anti-Semitism, or otherwise) or other negative sentiments directed at a particular group based on its identity (political affiliation, race, gender, country of origin, immigration status, etc.) and its impact on individuals.
- D. Give examples of similar "hard" issues from your religious tradition (women not allowed to be ordained as clergy) or your comparable identifier (examples listed above).

### **IV. CONDUCTING YOUR EVENT**

#### 1. PHYSICAL SPACE

- A. It is preferable to conduct the conversation in a circle or around a table where everyone can see each other.
- B. Remind people to put their phones and pagers on vibrate or to turn them off.

#### 2. WELCOME

- A. Thank everyone for participating in this conversation.

#### 3. PRAYER / INVOCATION / ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONS OR OTHER IDENTITY-BASED GROUPS PRESENT

- A. There are a number of ways for people to share their religious tradition or culture with each other to set the environment for the conversation:
  - 1. Everyone can participate in one opening prayer or one opening remark/quote led by the conversation facilitator.
  - 2. You can ask volunteers to share words of greeting from each house of worship or other belief system (atheism, agnosticism, humanism, etc.) represented.

#### 4. INTRODUCTIONS / ICEBREAKER

While members of the same house of worship or other extracurricular/community group present, may know each other, it is useful for all the people participating in the conversation to share why they are participating in the conversation and/or why it is important to them. By taking the time to do this, you can create shared goals for participating in the event. This is a great time for an icebreaker (see above). You can also ask people to break into pairs or groups of no more than four people and answer one of the following questions:

- I think this conversation is important because...
- I'm glad that we are having this conversation because...
- My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my interest in participating in this conversation is...
- One thing I hope can happen as a result of this conversation is...
- My goal in participating in this conversation is...

After the small groups have discussed their answers, it can be useful to ask each group to share one or two of the things they heard (i.e., ask people to share what they heard someone else say: "In Group 1, can someone tell me something they heard from one of the other participants about being here today?").

## 5. GROUND RULES

After welcoming all participants, open the conversation by establishing agreed upon Ground Rules for the discussion (see above).

## 6. OFFER THE FIRST QUESTION

You can use the questions provided by Tanenbaum's *Combating Extremism* question sheets or derive your own questions from the Tanenbaum *Combating Extremism* fact sheet(s) you are using to start your conversation.

- A. Discussion Groups
  1. You may consider dividing the group into smaller groups to engage with the first question. Smaller groups can contribute to participants feeling safe to share their opinions.
- B. Distribute the fact sheet(s) you've chosen for this conversation and give participants a few minutes to review and reference in the conversation.
- C. Ask your first (or second) question.

## 7. ENGAGE YOUR GROUP

It is important that each person participating in the group have the experience of being included and heard. You can model this with Active Listening. The organization 20,000 Dialogues ([www.20000dialogues.org](http://www.20000dialogues.org)) offers the following helpful reminders for facilitators:

- A. Listen actively, look at the person speaking and "reflect back the most important thing that you heard the person say, or repeat the question they are asking but in your own words to be clear and to clarify."
- B. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate; invite all to share thoughts/opinions/questions, whether similar or different to what's already been said.
- C. Avoid finger-pointing or broad group generalizations
  - a. "Reassure" – This is an exchange of ideas, beliefs and feelings that involve a range of issues including faith, different faiths and cultures, different nationalities or another identity, so we do want people to talk about their own experiences regarding the topic at hand.

- b. As we do so, remember:
- i. Diversity exists among members within faith/community groups, not just among people of different faith/community groups.
  - ii. Remind everyone that no one is expected to be the ‘expert’ or ‘spokesperson’ representing all people from their own faith or community.
  - iii. Each person is a representative of him/herself and of his/her personal experience, and is encouraged to speak from his/her own personal understanding, experience and practice.
  - iv. Remind everyone that this is not the place for proselytizing, attempts at conversion, or pushing one’s beliefs on anyone else.
- D. “Do the best you can” — it’s okay to say “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” (better than presenting false/uncertain information as fact).

Here are some helpful suggestions and reminders for managing the conversation:

- A. Start simple — consider posing basic, concrete questions to start, as they can serve as the foundation to step up to deeper, more complex questions. Be sure subsequent questions encourage open-ended inquiry and allow participants to speak from their own perspectives rather than representing a group.
- B. Be organized but flexible in facilitation — let discussion widen out to include participants’ own questions, but bring it back to the main topic of inquiry.
- C. Be aware of your own ideas/assumptions/opinions/agenda — Remember that you are there not only to help the group draw from the Fact Sheets and to remind them to follow the Ground Rules, but also to help them reflect together. You are not there to push a particular point of view.
- D. Always ask, never tell — avoid contributing perspectives as if you were just another participant.
- E. Don’t answer participants’ questions about whether their thinking is ‘right’ on an issue — encourage open thinking and discussion.
- F. Don’t speak after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond to each other.
- G. Be deliberate about how you invite comments — Raising hands might be easiest in a larger group, but allow for a more informal flow in smaller groups.
- H. Pause occasionally if necessary and say “before we proceed, I want to make sure everyone has had a chance to speak” and solicit a comment from a quieter participant. Dividing a large group into smaller sections can make it easier for quieter participants to join the conversation.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, “Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or Controversial Topics,” *University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching*. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines#include>.

## **V. DEBRIEF THE CONVERSATION/EVALUATION**

We've included questions here to give both you and Tanenbaum an understanding how useful these events, conversations, and resources are. You can also use the questions you created to allow participants to reflect on what they've gained from the experience of the event.

If you have any images, videos or stories from the event that you would like to share, we welcome you to email them to [combatingextremism@tanenbaum.org](mailto:combatingextremism@tanenbaum.org) or to send them via mail (Tanenbaum, 55 Broad Street, 17<sup>th</sup> Floor, NY, NY 10004).

**Please include the following information in your evaluation:**

1. Location: School/House of Worship/Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_
2. Date of Event: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Name of facilitator(s): \_\_\_\_\_
4. Number of attendees: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Number of attendees who received the materials: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Fact and/or Question Sheets used:
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_
7. What did participants say they learned from the experience?
8. What did participants want to know more about?
9. Did the participants share anything about changes in their thinking about the topic?  
If so, please explain.
10. Did participants share any actions they plan to take to help others increase their understanding of the topic as a result of the event? If so, please explain.
11. Did participants express any ways they may act or approach something differently as a result of the event? If so, please explain.