

Language, Please



Talk it Through

Let's start with what we're not trying to do with this editorial tool: tell collaborators how to talk to one another. What we do provide here are practical tips for editorial and business teams who are anticipating, in the thick of, or reflecting on a challenging workplace conversation related to individual or group identity.



WHY NOW?

Creators and other media professionals are reporting an uptick in tricky conversations about how a person's identity, beliefs, or group affiliations might factor in their involvement with a project or story. These exchanges take place across the range of contexts where we gather each day – communication platforms, chats, the margins of documents, virtual or in-person meetings. For example:

- *Your team is chatting about possible hosts for an upcoming event. “We shouldn’t use them, they’re [political affiliation],” writes one of your collaborators. Others chime in with thumbs up.*
- *An editor cuts out a piece of information in an article draft on a contentious topic, saying it’s unnecessary and would distract readers. They offer no further explanation.*
- *A high-profile external client uses language that conflicts with company values during a meeting. The manager of the team does not push back on their comments.*

These types of exchanges can come up in discussions of talent, coverage, audience, and partnerships. More often than not, the back-and-forth happens fast. Decisions or opinions can sometimes be expressed in a brief comment or emoji, without context, rationale, or a clear protocol for how others might engage.

Given deadlines and the state of civic dialogue, all this can be understandable – and repairable. Our aim is to surface some **best practices and strategies for course correction when a conversation goes off the rails.**



TOPLINE TIPS

The following overarching tips can foster dialogue that's respectful and supportive:

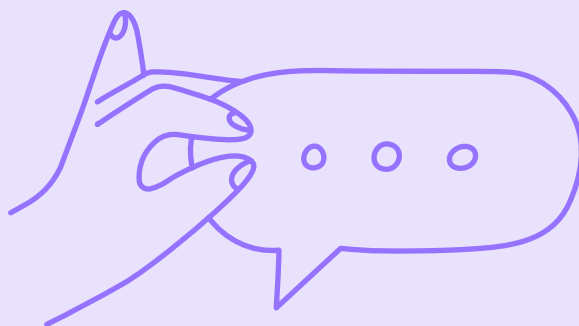
- Shifting to a spoken conversation or thoughtful message versus a fired-off response will make it possible to offer context and hear people out.
- **Rooting your comments in fact, not emotion, can help keep things professional and lower the temperature.** If your emotions are running high, take a breather, check sources, reflect on what you might be missing, and seek support before responding. You might also consider delegating the response to a trusted collaborator.
- Using “I” versus “you” statements can prevent the other person from feeling defensive.
- Where there isn't moral agreement, there is often agreement on the ethics of journalism. **Centering journalistic standards and ethics when sharing your opinion could help you find common ground.**
- If you have a dedicated channel for sensitivity reads, consider pinning guidelines for how to engage thoughtfully (including expectations for privacy and anonymity) and enlisting a moderator. If something comes up that could use in-depth discussion, being mindful of tone in writing can help alleviate potential hurt. A call or in-person chat is often useful for a clearer tone that reinforces collegiality and assumes best intentions.

- Sometimes when providing feedback, you might be channeling a possible negative reaction from a community, interest group, or critic. If that's the case, prefacing your comment by saying that's what you're doing and why (e.g., to ensure the team is prepared for possible pushback) can de-personalize in a useful way.
- If a conversation or thread takes a troubling turn, calmly calling out the need for a pause can help make time for you and others to regroup and determine the best next steps. For leaders in a situation like this, it's helpful to indicate that you'll re-engage shortly on new footing, so others know the issue is being addressed.
- Encouraging feedback – with clarity on what is and is not negotiable and why – conveys that you value your collaborators' insights. This is especially important if there's a power difference.
- Comments that would be well-received in one space may not be in another space. Taking stock of who is and isn't in the room – including the possibility that a crucial voice is missing, or that a specific topic merits a smaller group or 1:1 – can help align communication with context.
- Bear in mind that some voices are, in the wider world, disproportionately targeted and retaliated against. Consider those realities when making your next move to ensure an inclusive and healthy work environment.

Some possible language

*“I’m concerned that by not including [fact with cited resource] in this article, we’ll be doing a disservice to our readers by not presenting the full, truthful picture. **Can you help me understand why you don’t want to include it?**”*

*“**I keep thinking about the standard of minimizing harm** and worry that choosing this [host/guest/expert etc.] will perpetuate further harm by [fact-based reason, i.e. alienating audiences, amplifying hateful views, etc.]. What do you think?”*



“I found this helpful guide from [credible resource] on [topic at hand], and it suggested [recommendation]. Can you take a look and let me know how you think we should proceed? I have some thoughts and would appreciate hearing your perspective.”

Some possible language

“I know our organization really cares about [stated value], and I want to make sure we embody that by [decision, i.e., including/not including this person/perspective].”

*“I understand you take issue with this perspective, but my concern is that not including it makes the story less accurate. **Is there a way we can add enough context for people to understand how to make sense of the perspective** against the backdrop of all our reporting?”*

“I hear that you’re worried about [platforming/quoting] someone with [hateful/offensive] views in this [article/event]. At the same time, this is an influential [person/idea] our audiences need to see clearly. I see it more as exposing [a powerful person/the logic driving a burgeoning ideology], which feels important for us to do right now. How do you think we can do that responsibly?”

“I have a close connection with this community and think there’s a real risk of isolating them by [making this decision] because [explain how you think people in that community would perceive this decision].”



What do I do if I'm part of a group meeting or thread, and a collaborator communicates their point of view in a non-constructive way?

Reaching out to that person privately for a more in-depth conversation is a useful first step. Especially if you're in a leadership role, it's important to own your responsibility for fostering thoughtful conversations, which might involve reflecting on any moves you might have made to throw off the dynamic. You could try something like:

"I'm realizing I didn't frame this conversation the right way. Can you walk me through the reasoning behind what you shared?"

Once you get a more in-depth understanding of their thinking, reinforce where you are in the process. Something like:

"This was a helpful conversation. Let's keep this communication process in mind when providing feedback moving forward, so things are clear for everyone on the team."

In the same one-on-one conversation, come to a decision with this person about any necessary follow-up with others who'd been present for the initial exchange. You could ask the person to elaborate on their last public comment with the more in-depth explanation they shared with you. But be mindful that leaders in public channels have a duty to respond in certain situations.

What if a colleague provides thoughtful feedback that changed my perspective?

It can take a lot of courage for people to share their perspectives, especially if there is a power differential between the people or points of view involved. Being open to that feedback is a strong sign of leadership, and appreciating and implementing it after a thoughtful discussion is an even stronger one. Consider acknowledging the shift:

“Thank you so much for sharing your perspective. I think you’re right, and will follow your suggestion. I appreciate that you’re making our work stronger.”



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Relevant editorial tools from Language, Please include: “Can We Talk?” “Tips for Tricky Conversations,” and “Editing Personas.” All three are designed to encourage dialogue, foster understanding, and support inclusive communication across diverse, collaborative media workplaces.

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