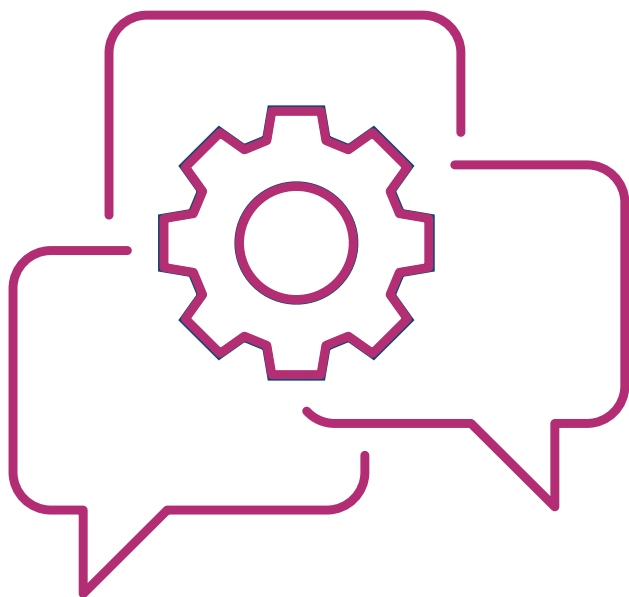




# Fostering Civil Conversations at Work: Host Guide



# INTRODUCTION

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At Inclusivv, we're on a mission to help organizations build cultures of trust, inclusion, and respect through peer-to-peer dialogue and structured conversations. We're honored to partner with SHRM to share with you the insights, knowledge, and strategies we've honed over the past decade working with organizations around the world.

We truly believe that by engaging and fostering civil conversations, we can bridge divides and build understanding to shape better workplaces and a better world.

**Fostering Civil Conversations at Work: Host Guide** was created to provide you with the essential mindsets and skills to engage in open and honest conversations at work (and beyond). It also includes an effective framework for hosting civil conversations among colleagues, peers, or leadership teams.

## KEY TOPICS

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- How incivility impacts morale and the bottom line.
- How to reframe mindsets and choose civility.
- How to recognize our own emotions.
- How to transform conflict into opportunity.
- How to host civil conversations.



For additional support or to learn how you can host civility trainings for your entire organization, please reach out to us at [Inclusivv.co/shrm](https://inclusivv.co/shrm). We want to help you spark meaningful conversations in your workplace.



**JENN GRAHAM**

FOUNDER & CEO OF INCLUSIVV

# WHY CIVILITY AT WORK MATTERS

Most of us have experienced or witnessed incivility in the workplace and beyond. Uncivil behavior can take many forms, such as spreading gossip, being rude, bullying, or undermining someone's work. These behaviors have profound effects, leading to demotivation, stress, and disconnection among employees and reduced productivity for businesses.

Recent SHRM research\* found that nearly **74% of U.S. workers had personally experienced or witnessed incivility in the past month**. More than half said at least one of the uncivil acts they observed occurred in the workplace. A lack of civility at work can lead to job dissatisfaction and turnover. More than 34% of workers who have personally experienced incivility at work said they were dissatisfied with their job, and 39% said they were currently searching for a new job.

**Acts of incivility can also impact how customers perceive a company. A recent study\*\* found that when customers witness other customers being uncivil to employees:**

**42%**

report that the rude behavior changes their perception of the company.

**40%**

question whether they want to do business there again.

**65%**

think the organization should better protect its employees.

**45%**

question its values.

## THE BIG SHIFT FROM INCIVILITY TO CIVILITY

To stop the cycle of incivility, we need a mindset shift. The biggest contributor to incivility is the belief that “I am right and you are wrong.”



When encountering differing views, we face a choice: Do we defend our position and distance ourselves from others, or do we seek understanding and explore new perspectives for a better way forward?

**We must shift:**

from “being right”	→	to “being curious”
from “winning”	→	to “learning”
from “separation”	→	to “connection”
from “controlling”	→	to “exploring”
from “defending”	→	to “inquiring”

**As part of this mindset shift, here are four key phrases to internalize:**

*“I’m not here to be right;  
I’m here to get it right.”*

*“We’re on the same team.”*

*“Curiosity is courageous.”*

*“Seek understanding,  
not agreement.”*

\*Source: SHRM Civility Index, August 2024.

\*\*Source: Frontline Work When Everyone Is Angry,  
Harvard Business Review, 2022.

# UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS

There are two conversations happening within every conversation:

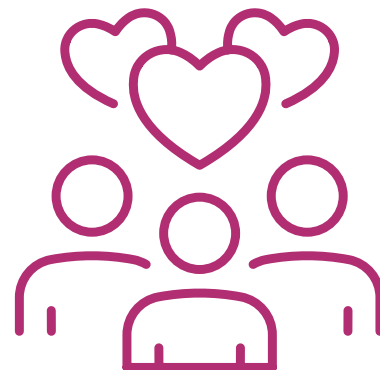
**The Content — Spoken**  
Topic, reasoning, facts, logic

**The Relationship — Unspoken**  
Emotions, tone of voice, body language

Some say that to disagree well, we should put emotions aside and be purely rational. But people aren't exclusively rational beings.

Emotions play a significant role in how we communicate and understand one another. Our emotions send powerful messages about what needs are—or are not—being met. Our capacity to recognize and express our emotions helps build genuine connection.

**One of the strongest negative emotions is fear.** Fear is often what keeps people from speaking up, especially when they have a different point of view. That's why psychological safety is so important.



## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety enables teams to take risks, express ideas and concerns, speak up with questions, and admit mistakes—all without fear of punishment or judgment. High psychological safety fosters trust, openness, and effective problem-solving within teams.

Characteristics of teams with low psychological safety:

- No willingness to take risks.
- A culture of blame.
- Fear that holds back progress.
- Difficulty solving problems.

Characteristics of teams with high psychological safety:

- Strong trust among team members.
- Opportunities to learn and grow together.
- Openness to challenge ideas.
- Innovation and effective problem-solving.

A famous example is Google's Project Aristotle, which studied over 180 teams and 50,000 people to find out what makes teams successful. They found that **psychological safety was the most important factor**. It mattered more than the qualifications of the individual team members.

# TURNING CONFLICT INTO OPPORTUNITY: CREATING BRAVE SPACES

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Different opinions can lead to positive outcomes if we create the right environment. We call these “brave spaces.” Brave spaces encourage open, honest, and sometimes challenging dialogue, with an emphasis on mutual respect and understanding.

## Examples of values and behaviors that set up a brave space:

- **Listen to understand:**

Focus on what the other person is saying, not just on how you'll respond.

- **Respect other perspectives:**

Everyone's experiences and views are valuable.

- **Show empathy and compassion:**

Try to understand and feel what others are going through.

- **Speak from your own experience:**

Share your own stories and feelings.

- **Be open to challenges:**

It's OK to challenge ideas and be challenged.

- **Challenge ideas, not people:**

Focus on discussing the ideas, not attacking an individual.

- **Assume positive intent:**

Believe that others mean well.

- **Accept nonclosure:**

Understand that not every conversation will have a clear ending.

- **Keep it private:**

What's discussed in the brave space stays there.



# MINDSETS OF CIVIL CONVERSATIONS

There are three essential mindsets for respectful and productive conversations:



## **Curiosity:**

Seek to learn from others.



## **Empathy:**

Demonstrate care and understanding.



## **Humility:**

Appreciate a variety of viewpoints.

By practicing these mindsets, you can start to disagree without being disagreeable.

Here are some techniques to help:

### **Acknowledge their perspective and emotions:**

*"I see your point and can imagine why you feel that way."*

### **Use "I" statements:**

*"I see things differently because ..."*

### **Ask clarifying questions:**

*"Tell me more. Can you explain why you think that ..."*

### **Find common ground:**

*"We both agree that \_\_\_\_\_ is true. Have you considered ..."*

### **Propose alternatives:**

*"What if we tried \_\_\_\_\_ instead?"*

# COMMON TRIGGERS FOR ESCALATED CONFLICT

If you're a manager or leader, it's important to watch for signs that conflict is becoming unhealthy or unproductive. Here are some common triggers that can make conflicts escalate:

## Perceived Disrespect

- Interrupting someone while they are speaking.
- Using a condescending or patronizing tone.

## Power Imbalances

- A manager dismissing an employee's input in a meeting.

## Unmet Expectations

- Assuming others know your expectations without discussing them.
- Promising more than can be delivered and failing to meet those promises.

## Fixed Narratives

- Believing someone is a good or bad worker based on stereotypes and biases.

# TIPS FOR DE-ESCALATING A HEATED CONVERSATION

If a conversation becomes too heated, harmful, or unproductive, try these tips to calm things down:

## Pause:

Take a breath and allow for silence. Wait until you can think rationally and consciously.

## Observe Your Emotions:

Notice your feelings and the inner dialogue you have. Ask yourself why you feel defensive and what underlying need is feeling threatened.

## Acknowledge All Feelings:

Recognize your feelings and respect others' passion. Everyone's emotions matter.

## Signal Understanding:

Show that you understand the other person's perspective by reflecting back what they shared. Feeling understood is crucial to resolving conflicts.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

Everyone wants to feel heard.

Prioritize empathy.

Separate understanding from agreement.

Ensure everyone feels valued and respected.

# HOW TO HOST CIVIL CONVERSATIONS

The best way to embody these essential skills and mindsets is to practice them. In fact, when training is combined with peer-to-peer conversation, **33% of participants\* report changing their behavior compared to just 3% as a result of only listening to a training.** That's why conversations are so powerful.

Peer-to-peer conversations allow workers the time to apply these theories and mindsets to their own work environment and hear key takeaways from their peers. This form of real-time learning is how key principles and behaviors become normalized in the culture.

## What you need:



**Host**



**4-8 People  
per Small Group**



**3 Big  
Questions**



**Equal Time  
to Share**



**One Voice  
at a Time**

### Step 1: Determine where and when you want to host a conversation.

These conversations can be woven into the day-to-day work environment, whether it's a team meeting, lunch and learn session, all-staff, town hall, chapter meeting, or large-scale summit. And remember, these can be held online or in person.

### Step 2: Determine who to invite and bring together.

It's ideal to have at least four people per conversation and as many as eight. And remember, you can have multiple tables engaged in conversation simultaneously.

### Step 3: Decide on the topic and craft meaningful questions.

The Inclusivv framework recommends three big questions, following the structure of a personal story, followed by the core tension, and then personal commitment to take action. For inspiration on conversation design, check out the [Inclusivv content catalogue](#).

### Step 4: Create the brave space by sharing ground rules for engaging in conversations.

Share the ground rules, such as:

- **Listen with curiosity.**
- **Engage with empathy.**
- **Appreciate authenticity.**
- **Respect those with lived experience.**

\*Source: *The Conversation*, Robert Livingston, 2021.

# LOOKING TO BRING CIVIL CONVERSATIONS INTO YOUR WORKPLACE?



At Inclusivv, we're committed to building cultures of trust, inclusion, and respect through meaningful dialogue. Inclusivv is the go-to resource for peer-to-peer dialogue, helping leaders build connections across differences and drive greater collaboration, innovation, and talent retention. In partnership with SHRM, we offer a range of civility solutions to build an inclusive and respectful workplace.

## Civility Training

Build the foundation for civility within your organization with this one-hour training, delivered online or in person, titled "Essential Skills for Civil Conversations at Work."

**60-minute training | Live online or in person**

## Civility Workshop

Learn the foundation for civility and then practice the essential skills for civil conversations in this interactive workshop titled "Practicing Civil Conversations at Work."

**60-minute training + 30-minute practice | Live online or in person**

## Civility Series

Access conversation content from Inclusivv's library of topics and access the entire series of civility trainings on demand.

**Content subscription | Facilitator training | On demand access**

To learn more about Inclusivv's civility solutions or to speak with a team member, visit

[inclusivv.co/shrm](https://inclusivv.co/shrm)

## MEET THE FOUNDER



### JENN GRAHAM FOUNDER & CEO OF INCLUSIVV

As a social innovation designer and former TEDxAtlanta organizer, Jenn has pioneered a unique approach to social change, using the power of structured conversations to bring together diverse voices and perspectives. Jenn is a sought-after speaker and thought leader, inspiring others to harness the power of conversation to bridge divides, foster understanding, and build stronger, more connected communities. In 2022, Inclusivv was a finalist in the SHRM 2022 Better Workplaces Challenge Cup—a global competition among startups working to build better workplaces and a better world.