

Tools for Challenging Conversations

2026 National Conference

JESSICA SCHMIDT: Hello. Other than being cold, how are you? It's great to see you. This makes me think that we all are maybe involved in a few challenging conversations. When I walked in this room, I was like, "Oh, look at the space we're going to have to fill." I'm so glad to have all of you here today. For those of you who don't have a seat yet, there's still room up here with chocolate. Come on in. I'm truly thrilled to have this time with you. And as we get started today, just to help me get an idea of who's in the room, if you are an orchestra musician, can you raise your hand for me? Wow, welcome. Great. If you are, and these things are not mutually exclusive, if you are an orchestra administrator? All right, fabulous. Board member? An independent entity? Yes, all right. Those are the ones to watch out for. And anyone else who I have forgotten? We're thanking tech folks, other folks who are involved, presenters. Great. Fabulous.

Well, I am, as I said, truly honored to see you this afternoon. My name is Jessica. I am a consultant here in the U.S. I'm based out of Boston. I partner with orchestras to design and put into practice the work of inclusion and equity through all of the daily decisions we make through strategic planning, through learning and development, all of those pieces. I also am a professional coach, a mediator, and I was talking to my wonderful colleague over here. I love humans. Humans are interesting to me. And I love all the strange things we do with and for each other. My background is as a horn player. I studied horn at IU in Bloomington with Mike Hatfield and Myron Bloom. And then I went on to be an administrator at the Dallas Symphony, the Pittsburgh Symphony, and up until 2017, the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

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And I left in 2017 to pursue this work independently because I saw so many orchestras struggling with these big-picture questions around justice and equity and power and privilege and race and gender and all of these things that we were lacking a lot of the tools to discuss at that time and are still working to build. And I've worked with about 35 different orchestras since that time. So, again, I'm very, very excited to see you all. We today are going to have a whirlwind hour and 10 minutes or so. And to give you a very, very clear idea of what today will be and what it won't be, I want to offer to you—

You came in today to talk a little bit about challenging conversations. The first thing that we have to say about this is if I say those words, every one of you has a different idea in mind of what that is. They're all different. They all have nuance because, again, we're dealing with humans, and we are all very, very different. There's no one-size-fits-all. I've had a number of leaders say, "Can you just give me a one-pager on how to deal with this situation?" And I'm

like, "I can't do that, sorry." There really is no one-size-fits-all. So I'm going to offer to you today truly a whirlwind sampling. We're going to move very quickly. I'm going to give you a lot of material. And some of it for you might be new, and that's great. And some of it you might say, "This does not fit my needs." That's okay, too. Others of you might see some of this material and say, "I know that really well." Please, at your table, have those conversations, contribute. Raise your hand if you have questions or comments. Today will not be a presentation from an HR professional. I do not have an HR background, and I want to thank the folks in the room who do. That is a different world, and today we are talking about difficult conversations before they reach the point of a formal grievance and HR issue. And there is a time and a place and, again, a deep thanks to those professionals who do that work.

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It will not be a fix for discomfort. Unfortunately, I cannot take that away for all of you. Discomfort is a part of this process. So, again, as we get into today, take what serves you, leave what doesn't. Any of the models I present for you today, also see them as fundamentally flawed, just as humans are. They present some ideas. They won't be perfect, but take what works in your setting. And I certainly will also be sure these slides are available for you and also have left some resources for you in yellow on many of the slides. As we get into today, if you've worked with me before, and there are some of you, bless you, who have, you know that I am a huge fan of setting up some community agreements. And what I love about this is they are a way for us to decide how we wish to operate with each other versus sitting in, "I don't like it when this person does this," or "They shouldn't do this." In advance this is a way of saying, "This is how we wish to work together in this space." If I'm working with a group, and we're working over a long period of time, I will ask that we come up with these together. Because we have 70 minutes together today, I'm going to offer some community agreements, and then you can let me know how they sound to you and if there's anything you want to add.

First, if we do get the chance to have some conversation today, we're going to see how time flows, make I statements. If you have a question, if you have a comment, speaking from a place of I, you cannot go wrong. Where we get into some challenges, especially in our field, is they, us, we, making those generalizations. We do not have to agree. That's why we're here, right? We're sitting in a space of talking about challenging conversations. And a part of that is being willing to be uncomfortable. When we are uncomfortable, we know we're in a space of growth. With this topic, with all human topics, expect and accept a lack of closure. This is not going to be a marketing budget for '26-'27.

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We're not going to close it out. We're not going to all put the stamp on it. This is going to feel, if we've—I saw a laugh over here, which makes me think they're still working on theirs. This should make us feel a little bit like there's more to learn, this topic. Practice curiosity versus judgment. And that goes for these materials that I'm offering to you as well. We are all teachers and learners in this space. And finally, center the voices of people who represent marginalized identities who choose to share in this space. And we'll talk more about that experience of marginalization in just a bit. But for now, I want to check in with you. Are there any questions on any of these? Great. And if these feel good to you, can you just give me a thumbs up? Oh, wow. I wish I had taken a picture of that. I've never felt so affirmed in my life. Great. Fabulous. And again, these are helpful. I was working with a client orchestra. We were using this in an equity and inclusion committee setting. And the client had a couple musicians come to me and say, actually, "We've taken these into the orchestra committee room because they're helping us to stay really focused on how we wish to be with each other, especially in very, very challenging conversations." So tool number one for you.

As we have this conversation about challenging discussions, I want very briefly to talk a bit about psychological safety. We have some psychological safety experts in this room, and all of you through your lived experience can also tell us a lot about psychological safety. How many of you are talking about this at your orchestras or your organizations? Yeah? Great. Seeing more and more individuals having those conversations, I'm going to define psychological safety in the way that Amy Edmondson did. And she's one of the founders of this idea and this concept. She was studying the healthcare industry, and she set out doing her PhD research thinking that she was going to study the relationship between error-making and teamwork. She was expecting to find that more effective teams made fewer mistakes.

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But what she found was that teams who reported better teamwork were experiencing more errors. And they were able to share those errors and share learning. They had created an environment of support where errors were accepted and learning was appreciated. She defined psychological safety as the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Before I say anything more about this, just call to mind in the current moment you're in, you will not need to share this, kind of where you are if you're thinking about this definition. And for those of us in the room, we can probably call to mind a job where we felt very little psychological safety and maybe, if we're lucky, some places where we did feel a lot of psychological safety. The kicker behind psychological safety is this deep fear of negative consequence, right? Why do people not speak up, not speak up with new ideas, with learnings, with observations? When we consider psychological safety, we

are considering the point of view of the individual who we are centering and saying, "What are the things that they are concerned about?" again, based on power dynamics, around their identity. This is a map, and I want to say, again, it's a framework. It is not perfect, but it offers four stages of psychological safety. The first, at the bottom, is inclusion. This is being in a group, feeling included, feeling that you have some voice within a space. The second is learner safety. This is when it feels okay for me to feel out some learning, to make some mistakes. Contributor safety, a feeling of, "I can add to this setting. I'm not just pulling from it, I'm adding to it." And challenger safety, "I can suggest changes without negative ramifications."

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You can see that this has been set up as kind of that pyramid shape. What I want to emphasize is that these stages do not always fall in order. Sometimes we feel contributor safety, and we don't feel learner safety. Sometimes we have yet to feel even some sense of deep inclusion, but we're at the stage where we're pressing toward challenger. But I want to offer this to you again as you start to frame difficult conversations, thinking about where this shows up in your experience and places where you have felt the ability to fall into these categories and have gotten signals that you are not safe to fall into these categories. Some of the great benefits when we have psychological safety are we obviously think about, my gosh, we're an arts field, right? We have more room to explore and improve our ideas to play, to find joy in what we're doing. We find that reduction and burnout are very real. We have the ability to make mistakes and learn from them in a setting where there will not be retribution.

We have greater sharing of learning across group members. "Hey, I screwed up over here, but I wanted to tell you about it because actually I learned something from it. I think we can all benefit from this." Improved ability to carry out experiments and risk intelligent failures, and improved ability to attract, recruit, and retain the highest levels of talent. Finally, greater resilience of people and teams. I want to name all of these because, again, as you're sitting here, setting into those jobs you've held where you've felt psychological safety or community spaces where you've felt psychological safety, my sense is you can probably remember how it feels to fall into these categories. Right? You were benefiting from learning and sharing. At the same time, I want to be very clear that psychological safety is also not just blurting out what you wish to say at all times.

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And this is, you know, this is a judgment call, but psychological safety, when we're talking about it, it's freedom to share thoughts and ideas. It isn't saying everything you want all the time. Ability to express concerns, but not letting emotions go in ways that harm others, and here the others have been hurt so much that they're falling off the screen. Allocating tasks

when needed. Yeah, absolutely part of psychological safety, but not a what will be, will be kind of lackadaisical approach. A space where people feel a sense of ease and support, absolutely. But not a space free of discomfort. If anything, discomfort might rise a little bit, right? As we share mistakes, as we move into really honest discussions with each other. Taking measured and shared risks after considering potential outcomes. But not taking risks and hoping for the best. And finally in psychological safety everything is considered, so thoughtful considered decisions and discussions. But it is not everything is tolerated, right? And I think we've all seen that as well. So again, briefly, as we get into challenging conversations and the steps we can take here, I wanted to name again this overall picture of a psychological safety, and also not to just leave you with a concept, but to leave you with a few things you can consider immediately in your workplace and do in order to continue to create and support psychological safety. The first is prioritizing concern for colleagues as people. I was working with an organization last week, and I was working with a junior team, and they said, "Our senior team has modeled for us how we take care of each other during bereavement periods." And I was like, what kind of organization is this? Like leaning in. And they had actually put into place about that. It was actually five individuals either on the senior team or close had lost a parent in the last year, year-and-a-half. And the junior staff was looking at these individuals and saying the prioritization for health and care was there.

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And it was giving them hope for the organization and safety to be able to speak up in the ways that they needed to speak up. Actively solicit questions and of course listen as those questions are answered. Model fallibility. Own up to mistakes. There is something so powerful, and we've all had the boss who says, "You're right. We should have tried this. I should have tried this. I could have done this better." Comes into a meeting and says, "I've thought about this. This is what I would do differently." Model that. Additionally, explain reasons for change. Power can be held by not sharing information. And as an orchestra-loving individual, I will say I think as orchestras sometimes that happens, right? We hold information back as a way of withholding power, and sometimes we don't explain reasons for change either subliminally or clearly because we want to hold on to that power. Be precise with information, share it frequently and also provide multiple ways for team members to share input, and not just share input, but to be heard, truly heard, and to have clarity as to how that input will actually make impact over time. So again, as we get started, I wanted to cover in 10 minutes the 20-year topic of psychological safety.

All right, let's talk about challenging conversations. When you think of challenging conversations, I want you just to think quietly for a moment. What emotions for you come up before or during them? And then connected to that, what are the things that you fear before a challenging conversation or perhaps during? And I know we have a swarm of people here,

but again, we're all in it. We're all having challenging conversations. Anybody want to just toss out an emotion that comes up for them before or during?

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MALE VOICE: Fear.

SCHMIDT: Yes, fear. Fabulous. What else?

FEMALE VOICE: Anxiety

SCHMIDT: Anxiety, absolutely.

FEMALE VOICE: Dread.

SCHMIDT: Dread, yes.

FEMALE VOICE: Disappointment.

SCHMIDT: Disappointment.

FEMALE VOICE: Regret.

SCHMIDT: Regret, exhaustion. Yes, absolutely. Let's dig into, with all of those emotions sitting here underneath that. What are the fears?

MALE VOICE: Identity.

SCHMIDT: Identity. Say a little bit more about that.

MALE VOICE: [INAUDIBLE]

SCHMIDT: Yes, what does this mean for me, all the things I've told myself about myself, and what's going to happen with that? What else? What's under there in terms of the fears?

MALE VOICE: [INAUDIBLE]

SCHMIDT: Rejection, yes. And do you want to say a little bit more about how that might appear?

MALE VOICE: [INAUDIBLE]

SCHMIDT: Yes, so the answer was, "I've already put in a lot of work to this relationship. I might lose what I've gained. I might lose that social capital if I bring this up." Absolutely. Other fears that are lurking for you?

FEMALE VOICE: [INAUDIBLE]

SCHMIDT: Vulnerability, yes. It's like we're all just soft baby animals, right? That we're just like, "Please, please, if I say something, you know, pet me, please be kind to me." There's great vulnerability in opening up a conversation. Absolutely. Anything else?

MALE VOICE: Do you want to make the situation worse?

SCHMIDT: Yes, absolutely. If I say something, will it amplify the conflict? Absolutely. Very, very real. I'm going to take all these suggestions and compose a piece for next year's conference. These are all real. These are all very, very real. And again, we're not going to get rid of those fears, but sometimes holding on to what is actually underlying this and naming that before you choose to move into the conversation can be unbelievably helpful.

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We today are going to move very quickly through some steps for planning and preparing for a conversation that could be challenging. We are going to move through some ideas for engaging, and then we're going to end with some following up things that can be important. Again, we're moving at the speed of light today. All of these areas deserve many more hours of study, but we will open up the sandbox today with the hope of continuing the conversation and having some shared language together. All right. You've got that pit in your stomach. You have a challenging conversation that could happen. And you are trying to make some decisions around whether you have the conversation. One thing we do know is that the anticipation is pretty horrific, right? How many of us have been in anticipation of a conversation, and that anticipation was worse than the actual conversation? Yeah. Yeah. And it's funny again. Humans are funny, right? Because it's hard to remember that as we choose to step into a conversation. Some of the things we can consider as we decide for our brains and our hearts where we want to go with a conversation. It's fundamentally, what is the purpose? Is the purpose to support with care the relationship and the individual to make positive change? Is the purpose to call this person out and shame them? A lot of different questions being honest about the purpose. What assumptions are you making? Let's say in this case, I'm going to think of a one-to-one conversation. What assumptions are you making about the person's intentions? How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? What might the other person be thinking about this situation, and a big one: Are they even aware of the problem? In our world, where we're going from rehearsal to concert, to rehearsal to concert, to planning, to season

announcement, how often in a workplace setting do we have a moment of, "I had no idea. I'm so sorry," right?

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And that would be a great reason to have that conversation. And then also, as we just said, what are your needs and fears? What are things you need to be really thinking about to be open in this conversation? And the big one, how have you contributed to the problem or challenge? Are you ready to hear feedback about that? If you're not, it might not yet be time to have the conversation. And to say a little bit more about that, I'm going to offer you a tool. When I saw this, perhaps I saw a little too much of myself in it. So I want to share it with you. It's really hard to see, so I'll walk you through it. It's called the Curiosity Curve. It's by Jeff Wetzler. And it is, in his words, on the left, going from a zone of curiosity to a zone—

Excuse me, on the left, going from a zone of certainty to a zone of curiosity. So on the far left, the orange, is sort of a self-assessment as you're thinking about moving along this archway of, "I really dislike this person. I hate the situation. I hold absolute disdain for the moment." Is that a great time to have a conversation? No. Do we have conversations sometimes when we are in that space? Yeah. At work and at home and with friends, right? So, with the Curiosity Curve, what Jeff is saying is that ideally we want to be moving toward this zone of curiosity through disdain to kind of a dismissal, that lighter orange to maybe, "Okay, I'm willing to hear you out," to the point that we're in that blue zone, and we're really able to self-regulate it in that blue zone. Some cautious openness. I am ready to hear what this person has to say. To the darker blue, genuine interest. I'm very curious. I'm ready to be curious versus judgmental.

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The final stage is what he calls "fascinated wonder." And this one, I think, scares me as much as the disdain, the idea of somebody just kind of sitting there with so much excitement that they can't wait to hear your challenge. But the idea would be that again, we're checking in with ourselves before the conversation and waiting if we need to wait, and saying, "I need to be in a place where I really can be a listener and can be receptive and curious." Another piece of getting ready for a conversation is to consider logistics. We have, I want to name Susan over here who is the queen of study around trauma and trauma-informed practice in our space. And she's amazing. Make sure you say hello. A really, really important piece, and I'm going to leave her to the next session on this, but seeking consent. We want to check in with the person and say, "Hey, I would like to have this conversation with you." We also don't want to be coy. Is there anything worse than somebody saying to you, especially in a position of power, positional power over you, "I need to see you at five o'clock. We have something to talk about." Versus, "Could I see you at 4:30 today? Are you free? Because I wanted to talk

to you about ticket sales next week and something that wasn't quite working in the database." Okay, that's different, right? So we are caring for the person we are with. We are sharing power by not being coy, by asking them for consent. Use a neutral location. I see this in our field a lot, the power of a closed office door. The power of calling someone into your office for those of us who have maybe that artistic or managerial office space. Wonderful, that's great. That's not a bad thing, but that's your space, right? And it signals, in some ways, your power in that space. I would highly suggest if at all possible you check in with the person and say, "Where might it be comfortable to have this conversation?" I hear this a lot with music directors. "I need to have this conversation with you, and it's backstage in my office."

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Again, being as open as possible, seeking a place that's neutral. If this means a walk down the street to a park, and that's okay with the other person, that's great. Be mindful of this. In this regard, I want to name the word "power," which I mentioned at the top of our session. Power is a really interesting thing. When we hear it, sometimes we go to, "Ooh, that's good," or "Ooh, that's bad." Power is really neither. We just don't talk about it enough, right? We have choices about how we handle power, and there are different types of power. I'm going to run through some ways that those connect with identity today, but having a clear idea of how power sits in the room is so important as we have challenging conversations. Power is fundamentally the capability of individuals or groups to bring about change by influencing people, affecting our environments, addressing personal or group needs, pursuing desires, protecting interests, defining issues, setting agendas and expanding or limiting the scope of discussion, and by determining who can participate in decision-making and how. What's fascinating about power is most of us will find times where we have some really strong power and other times power will shift a little bit. We may feel farther away from power in decision-making. I'm going to jump, actually, to—

Forgive me here, as I move to a different slide. Power is also relational. And when we think about power, this is, again, why we have to talk about identity, because at different times we will be closer or farther away from power, and that changes how we have these conversations. An example here is how many of you in this room are left-handed? Oh, my gosh, so many.

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I once did this with an orchestra, and not one of them. I was like, am I—something's wrong here, checking in with musicians. So we have a number of left-handers. Left-handers, what are some things that have been designed in the world that are not designed for you? Oh! Scissors! Can opener! Door knobs! What else? Desks! Notebooks, writing utensils, table

settings. Okay, we will have a support group after this for you. This is a very silly example, but your use of hands is interesting because you can hear right-handers. How many right-handers in the room have thought about doorknobs recently? Okay, yes, thank you, you're in the middle of a remodel. Generally, we're not thinking about this, right? And so most of us who are making decisions for the world, often we are in this space of power of, "I'm right-handed and I'm kind of making these decisions for everyone," and our left-handers are farther away from that power-making and that decision-making ability, right? It does not mean that our left-handers aren't powerful. They are powerful, as you heard. I'm a little scared. But our right-handers are a little closer to being able to make those decisions.

An example here would be as we think about identity. I am an able-bodied, cisgendered white woman. I'm thinking about this in terms of how I walk into spaces and how I sit with all of you or stand with all of you today. But when we are thinking about, for example, being able-bodied, when we think about how our streets are designed, right? Getting on and off street corners. And when you are using a wheelchair or not using a wheelchair, oftentimes those decisions have been made by individuals closer to power who are making decisions for the individuals who are in need of that support in terms of their disability.

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So, again, very, very interesting and very important as we're thinking about how do we set up these conversations to invite people into power and to share power? Fundamentally, a team is only as psychologically safe as the least safe person on the team. Individuals who hold the least psychological safety tend to be those who represent marginalized identities. Again, this does not mean they are not powerful individuals. This means, again, we're looking at psychological safety, and this becomes really important in these conversations. I have to put my glasses on for this one.

Structural inequities and inequalities create steeper gradients for some people than for others, which means the personal cost of speaking up is higher for people who are already marginalized or disadvantaged. Psychological safety programs that ignore this, that treat the team as a level playing field or that measure average safety without attending to who is least safe do not actually address the problem. They address the experience of the already comfortable. I just kind of want to let that sit for a second, and that source is on the page for you. So, again, we've got to know, and some of these aspects of identity are visible, and others are not visible. How many of you have seen this chart before? Yeah, great. To bring it back in the center, and I want to say very clearly that this chart is not perfect, does not use perfect labels. We do not all fall into these labels, and also a lot of aspects of identity are not on this chart. But you can see examples from gender, to skin color, to formal education, to

mental health and body size and housing. And you can see the group that is closer to power, closer to decision-making for the whole, and those that are farther away.

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When you walk into a space certainly you're not going to be just logging all aspects of identity for every person, and we're getting to know each other and building vulnerability. That won't happen right away, but we need to be aware of this as we walk through spaces and we lift up voices and we create difficult conversations that are truly ones that are honoring psychological safety. Intersectionality, for those of you who have not heard of this term coined by the brilliant Kimberle Crenshaw. Kimberle Crenshaw is a Black scholar, and she said, "Listen, my identity as a woman is not separate from my identity as a Black woman. I'm a Black individual. And she argued that aspects of our identity all come together and amplify each other, most especially from marginalized aspects of identity. And so this is a great chart. I'll leave this with you again in the slides. But she is saying, "Listen all these pieces come together, and we land again in different places, maybe at different times of our lives, even, closer to decision-making power and farther away.

So I want to just offer this to you as something that you can take with you in these conversations. Conflict navigation, as we start to move into conflict, and okay, we're sitting in this conversation, we're about to have this. Some things to keep in mind, I was looking up some stats this week, and this one kept coming up that the average U.S. employee spends roughly 2.8 hours per week dealing with interpersonal conflict. I couldn't find the stat on orchestras. [LAUGHTER] Managers spend about 4 hours per week, that's used loosely about 10% of their total work time, again, not orchestra hours dealing with interpersonal conflict. Conflict is real.

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When I trained as a mediator, my teacher said, "Conflict is a growth market." And I was like, "Oh," but it's human, right? And again as we move through, as we grow, we're thinking about conflict and I'm actually starting to embrace it a little bit. Again, I want to offer to you a big topic but a short resource. This is a chart of what is called the TKI assessment or conflict styles. How many of you have seen this before? Yeah. Again, we could get very complex with this, but what I want to offer to you is that there is no bad or good conflict style, but that we are all carrying around some pretty deep stuff from our past jobs, from our childhood days, from our teachers, ways of being with each other that immediately set up a scope of a difficult conversation. It can be really helpful to have everybody speaking the same language

and to be able to say, "I fall into this category generally to set up a conversation." It becomes less personal and less, "Why are they doing it this way?"

On the top left, I'm going to walk through these with you. The left-hand side is importance of achieving a goal, so you're very goal-oriented. I've just got to kind of come to an answer on this goal or decision at the top, less so at the bottom. And the bottom axis, importance of relationship low-to-high. Top left, high achievement of goal, low relationship status. This is thinking about what would be a competing style. So fundamentally one party says, "I want what I want. I'm going to win. I'm in it to win it." The top right, high importance of relationship, high importance of achieving the goal, collaborating. I don't want to rest until everybody wins, which is sometimes a challenge in itself, right?

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In the middle, compromise. "I will, and I want to meet in the middle." We're both going to lose something. We're both going to gain something, but I want to find that middle place. Bottom left. As an Upper Midwesterner, this is where I fall—avoidance. One or both parties seek to suppress the conflict. I just will skip this at all costs, do whatever I need to do to pass this conflict. And accommodating, also Upper Midwestern. I'm generalizing. One party yields the win to the other party. "I just want this to end."

I was working with a board member a couple weeks ago, brand new to me, wonderful human being, and as we finished up our conversation, he said, "I just want you to know, I'm the kind of guy, I hate conflict, I just hate it, and I will do anything to get out of it." And I was like, this is our first meeting, and he shared this with me. And what a gift that was to me, not as a, "Well, that's great, I'm so happy for you," or "You're a bad person," but, "Wow, that can help me to help you as we move through challenging conversations together." This, again, is another way of moving back from, "I don't like you, I don't like this conversation" to, "What do we have at the table?" And I also want to say that these styles change, right? Depending on the situation, depending on where we are in life. What aspects of our personal lived experience might inform conflict styles? Shout them out, I named a few. Childhood, yes. That was so heavy. Beyond childhood, yes. Shout it out. Conflict styles, yep. Religion, absolutely. Divorce, yeah. Relationship status, absolutely. Language, so we've got a little nature and nurture here, right? I was just listening to a podcast and somebody said, "Yeah, my kids, when they came into being, they're still the same kids."

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It's amazing. They carry some of those personality traits that they showed me on day one. There is some personality and body chemistry involved in conflict style. There's also socialization. So we know that social location, where you are in the world, customs, thinking

about things like race, class, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, complex cultural influences that impact these identities can be really important. Again, as we're having conversations with people from very different lived experiences to have these sharing moments with each other. Family systems, huge. Past experiences with conflict. "I've been burned before. You won't burn me again. I'm going to avoid this." Education, modeling, what we saw and what we continue to see. Media consumption and the stakes. And again, we know that our conflict styles can change over time, in the room. Again, I would offer this, a challenging conversation that we're probably all involved in in one way or another is negotiations. What happens in a worst-case scenario for negotiations? We go after each other as people, right? We dehumanize each other. We "they" them, we "we" instead of I. We don't understand where we're coming from in terms of conflict style and preference. We don't have the tools to move through. These are some things that we can consider.

For situations, I got a request once from staff. If I am in a position where I am presenting a challenging conversation to my manager, what are things that I should think about? And then I often get the reverse question. I'm a manager. What are things that I can think about? So for those of you in the room who hold either of those positions, this is for you. If you are holding less positional power and you know that, you're going into a manager, to a section leader, name how you want to be listened to. Say, "It's really important for me today that I just feel heard," or, "It's really important today that we—I really want to work on finding a solution with you."

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That's all acceptable and helpful. Name your needs and preferred communication style. Some of us may need to say, "Listen, I've got this topic in mind. I want to get your initial reaction today, and then can I think about it and come back?" Introverts in the room might really need some time to process something. It's okay to say that. Frame questions and concerns with ideas from your functional area. I hear this from managers all the time. "I'm very happy to entertain a challenge. I would love it if my team member brought in a way of moving through the challenge." Consider that. Lean into your own power as an expert in your area. Actually, type of power is expert power. And this is something that I see oftentimes, employees who are at an entry level or a mid-manager level thinking about, "Do I represent expertise in this area?" Absolutely you do. You were hired for a really important reason, whether you're in the orchestra or you're on staff or you're a board member. Lean into your expertise in that area. Hold on to that and take that space.

More positional power. First of all, realize you have more positional power. This person is walking in, and you have a make-or-break moment around psychological safety. They're choosing to share something with you. They're choosing to bring up something that's hard.

And fundamentally, they're checking in on, "Will this be an unsafe place for me? Will there be retribution?" What are things we can do? Encourage clarifying questions of all types without shame. Truly, all questions are welcome. And how you react non-verbally here also big. I was just talking with somebody about Zoom world, where if somebody rolls their eyes, immediately that person says, "Not again. I'm not going to share this again." Consider it different, learning and communication styles.

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A separate session we could offer here is considering something like neurodiversity. What can we do as we think about members of our team, ourselves perhaps, and different styles and ways and needs around thinking and speaking? What can we do to create environments that support that brilliance and that difference? Avoid interrupting? Boy, again, data shows us that we have a primal reaction, especially when there is a big topic named. Very much you want to lash out usually, right? It's really important that we monitor where that's coming from. Usually the general rule is don't go with your first reaction. Kind of wait for a second. Go with that second, better self as it comes into being. It's okay as a manager to say, "I don't know." It's very powerful. And again, I hear a lot of feedback from people who are on teams saying, "I just wish they would have said, I don't know." Additionally, I wish they would have said, "I hear you, and I would love to make this change, but I also want to be honest that it's not going to happen now." Rather than leading the individual on to believe that yes, I hear your feedback, and it's going to change. That can be demoralizing over time.

And framework as a manager about being about learning, not just execution. And again, acknowledge when you make a mistake. Show your team that your space is a space where that can happen. Okay? We're going to move into—believe it or not, that was all prep for your conversation. We haven't even started the conversation yet. Challenging conversations, again, I'm going to offer you some tools. Take or leave as you see fit. The first tool I'm going to offer to you in an actual challenging conversation is one that is actually adapted from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst Health Services. And it's an alcohol safety action program.

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And I saw this, and I've seen many versions of this, but this one really, this is the real stuff. And I might offer these to you today, and you might think, "Ah, this is never going to work in my space. This is too much of this or that. What I would invite you to do is take one of these five pieces and bring it back to your organization and try it out. Just see what happens. The thought here is using a five-point formula. The first point of the formula is "I care." I am having this conversation with you because you are important to me. I care about you as a

human being, and there's something significant that's happening, and I want to invest in our relationship. What a great way to start, right?

So this does not need to be, "I'm your best friend." This does not need to be, "I want to see you all the time," but I respect you, I care about how we work together. "I see." This becomes very important. Report and review actual events as you perceive them. This is I statements. "I noticed last week during this meeting that you responded in this way." So you are literally sharing facts. "And I noticed again this week that this happened." Again, factual. This is not, "I was in a space last week where some of your colleagues said you were difficult to work with." This is not an obtuse—you know, you're playing. "There's something that just isn't a fit in our section." This is specific, actionable feedback. Okay?

"I feel." This is the one that again for some people may or may not be a fit. Sometimes this is a, you know, this is the impact that this had on me. I know your intent was not to harm, but the impact was the following. I wonder why are you having this conversation in addition to I care? I wonder if you're okay. I wonder if there's another way that we might move through this together. And I will.

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And you can leave some space before this. "This is what I'm committed to doing to continue to move through this challenging situation." And again, all five of these generally, it's a tough ask, right? Your colleague might be like, "What did you have for lunch?" But it may work, and it may be a great hit home, but other times it is fine just to take a couple of these to start to practice. It is one thing, and you are nervous when you're bringing this up as the initiator, right? If you were the listener, that is another thing.

I want everybody in the room to picture themselves as a manager. If you're not already a manager, you are now I've promoted you. Somebody comes in hot to your office. Somebody walks in, and they are burning up. There is something that they are upset about. You can tell they are just anxious for an audience. They shut the door behind them. They sit down, start talking. One of the greatest tools you can have as a listener in that moment, or really listening or receiving any of these conversations, is to ask for clarity as to how you want them to have you listen. Just the question, "How would you like me to listen?" Before you get too far into the conversation. Do you want me to problem-solve with you toward a solution? Do you want me to be present with you to allow space for you to process? And should I offer help or feedback or would you prefer I just listen? What I hear a lot from teammates in our field is I get a problem-solving. And this is real, right? In our field, we've got to fix it. Got to fix it. Got to fix it fast. Something terrible will happen if we don't fix it. That is real. They are absolutely fixed at times. What I also hear from our colleagues is a lot of the time I want to be heard.

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I want there to be empathy in this space. I'm also testing out where there is or isn't psychological safety. Asking this question as a manager can be a huge boost to how you move through that challenge together. And again, this depends on your teammate, depends on the situation, but one way that you can walk through. For both the initiator and the listener, both people, thinking about active listening, using those I statements, really kind of checking in with yourself on both sides. If you are listening, listening deeply and noting when you are listening to respond, how many times are we listening to somebody and we have something we are ready to say, right? Especially in challenging conversations. Ask open-ended questions. Ask clarifying questions. Stick to talking about the issue. This one, if anybody in the room has somebody that they are living with, can be very important. I noticed the trash wasn't taken out this morning. That's something that we had an agreement about. Okay, it's about the trash versus, "And you did this five years ago to me. And I don't like the way you don't make the bed in the morning." Stick to the issue, right? This is not a time to drag a person. Rather, this is about the incident that happened. Let's talk about that incident.

Hear and note feedback. If you are in the moment of "I'm bringing this up, I have a concern," you might get some feedback from the person you brought it to. Are you ready to receive that? Are you ready to make change? Avoid the shaming and blaming, which can happen, especially when we are maybe not our most slept selves, and thinking back to that arch and where we're at and being ready for the conversation. If we are not ready for it, this can happen. Separate the issue from the person where possible.

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The number one fear of humans is being bad people. Making a mistake. I see this in equity and inclusion work all of the time. Individuals who opt out because they are so afraid of making a mistake, of causing further harm. If it can be said, if it can be said, I'm even walking into a room in a conversation saying, "I am concerned about bringing this in today, and I want to do it in a way that honors you and my care for you." That is a very different conversation from moving into shaming, again, the person, blaming the person, bringing the person down.

And finally, brainstorm-shared solutions for issues requiring a resolution. This does not mean that in this conversation you are having right now, you're going to hit a resolution right away, but commit to working toward it if you both believe it's important. Okay? I want to say just a quick word about active versus reflective listening. Does anybody want to win the door prize that I haven't created yet by describing the difference between active and reflective listening? Okay, I get the door prize. And active listening is signaling that you're listening, right? This is, again, we got really good at this from this point up on Zoom over the last few years. This is conversation indicators saying, "Yeah, I'm with you," asking questions, offering

feedback. This is not curling into a ball during a session in the corner. This is not having your iPad up here as somebody's talking. This is showing that you are present. You are staying physically present, mentally present, emotionally present.

Reflective listening is even a step beyond that. And again, there are times to think about using it. There are times maybe to stick with the active listening. But what you're doing in reflective listening is paraphrasing back. So your teammate comes in and says, "I am so frustrated about Friday's rehearsal. I started the rehearsal and it was like I wasn't even there."

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Just saying to the person, "It sounds like you were really frustrated about last Friday. Something went wrong operationally." That gives them a chance to say, yes, that is the case. Or to say, "No, actually what I'm frustrated about is the situation that happened during the rehearsal." Checking in with them, looking for clarity. Short statements that mirror back or summarize what was heard. It's amazing because sometimes, again, your teammate might just say, I need you to listen.

I was working with a group of staff over Zoom and it was like 100 people on Zoom during COVID. And I remember we had one team member who was just so—she was just frustrated. Every time we all met, you could just feel her frustration. And I was in mediation training at the time, and in mediation, you're often encouraged to just say the feeling, say what you're naming as a neutral party. And I thought, "What would happen if I actually did this over Zoom while I'm facilitating this?" And so I said to her over Zoom, "You are frustrated. You're angry because nobody's listening to you." And she just went, "Yeah. I am." And it was like I physically saw a cloud lift. She needed to be seen, right? We all need to be seen. And in this case, it changed how she participated. She had been trying for so long to have someone say to her, "I recognize and I validate that you're feeling this way." But I felt like calling my teacher after that and saying, "It worked. Something actually happened." So, you know, again, you want this to be authentic, but it can be powerful in saying, "You want help with this. You've been asking for help." And again, especially in a case where someone might be moving the whole of an agenda, another tool to have in your pocket. This can also be a check for accuracy. This is a great moment for someone again to say, "Actually, it's not about that. It's about this." And that comes up quite a bit when you are paraphrasing, when you're working with reflective listening.

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"It sounds as though you feel you aren't receiving enough support on this project. Is that right?" And then the person can say, "Yeah, I need more support," or, actually, "I'm good on

support. I just need to know this is a priority for the organization." Right? Two very different conversations.

Another piece here that I just want to name again, throwing a lot of information at you today, is the idea of how we walk into conversation holding positions. "This is what I want. This is what I believe. This is what you see," versus the interests and values that we hold, which are sometimes underneath the surface, and we keep them safe there until we feel vulnerable and able to show vulnerability in a way that models psychological safety.

Positions tend to lead conversations. What I mean by this is, again, let's take negotiations. We've got, let's say, two parties coming in. They're just starting with, "I want this, I want this." Very rarely in that initial conversation are we going to dig down to why, what's underneath it, and also the power of, "Hold on, we might be at two different places up in the top here, but actually underneath, we all care about this organization. We all care about the financial sustainability of the organization over the next year, and we care about that because we care about each other, and we care about this art form." One example of this, but the encouragement here is to, over time, again, you can only do this building trust, find those interests and values. A value might be honoring and taking care of each other. A value might be we care about this organization. They're often similar, and they're sometimes hidden. So the question becomes, where do we have overlapping values, not just these positions coming at each other?

I'm going to leave you with a resource here. Another piece that I would mention here is that it is so real everywhere as humans, but especially again in our field where we are pushed in so many different directions to jump to the binary, right?

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That person is good or bad. This is a situation that is a yes or a no. Again, with equity and inclusion work, this is where I see most discomfort. Just tell me, yes, is this good, or no, is this bad? Is this word okay? Is this concept okay? And we know again as humans that when it's messy, that's probably when we're doing the work, right? That with every person we're working with it might be different, we need to adjust, but the non-binary, the middle ground is where so many of these conversations live. Getting comfortable with that discomfort is a big part of these conversations.

Finally, thinking while we are in the conversation here, self-regulation. I heard a giggle, yeah. I should have said the top of the hour or two if anybody needs to use the restroom, any of those things, feel free to stand up, walk around, whatever you need to do to self-regulate. But thinking about using physical coping mechanisms, taking care of our bodies and our minds here, taking time before a conversation to review intention, to kind of settle in. I'll tell

you that I did this even for this session today before coming in. I was in my room just kind of thinking about like fundamentally, what do we want out of this time together? How can we be sure that that happens, holding care for each other? Pause, breathe and reframe. If you run into challenging ground, it is okay to pause.

A group of musicians once, this was a very real and honest and beautiful question, saying, if we really get into it, and we start to go to a place in a conversation where we're not honoring these tools, is it okay to stop? Like, absolutely it is. Absolutely. It's okay to say, "I just, in this moment, I need to step away." What becomes really important is that you commit to returning. So again, it's not an, I'm running from the person or the situation, but I need to take care of myself right now, and I'm happy to come back when I have taken that time.

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Seek third-party support if needed. So something I wish our field had is somebody on staff at every organization to support challenging conversations. And to just say, I'm going to be here with you. I'm not going to tell you the right or the wrong or this or that, but I will be here with you to support you as human beings in this conversation. There are people that do that. I do that. Call me. I will sit with you, and it does not need to be a formal mediation, but sometimes having that third-party to say, "I'm noticing this," to name the things that are present in the room can become really, really important, especially when power dynamics are involved and the experience of marginalization is involved. And asking yourself, "What really matters in this moment?"

At the start, somebody said, "What do I fear?" I fear damaging a relationship. If you are in a conversation, and you are really wondering, "Am I damaging this relationship?" It's also okay to say that, right? To check in and say, "I'm really worried about this. I'm sensing this right now. What matters to me in this moment is that we maintain this relationship." Is that always going to happen? No. And fundamentally, the thing I hear around this session more than any other is, "Why can't I change the other person?" And we know we can't, right? We can't control what happens. We can't control the other person. What we can do is work with the agency that we have and the power we have to set up the conversation or to be a listener.

Follow-up becomes very important here as well. Understand that resolution is not guaranteed. There might be angry feelings. There might be frustration. There might not even be an answer to the challenge. The way you end that conversation, "Do we need to meet again?" "What do we need to do to move forward?" becomes very important.

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Accept responsibility, not just for maybe harm that was caused, but also for moving forward as a team. This is what I'm committed to doing to be able to move forward, to work together. And agree on the conditions of the follow-up. Specifically, it does not hurt any of us in the chaos we are involved in at work to confirm key points of our discussion to say, "This is what I heard from you. This is what I'm committed to doing going forward. I'm going to take the following actions by this date and this date. And here's what needs to be done next. Am I understanding that correctly?" It does not hurt to be absolutely blatant about that and to plan for another time to meet again if it could be helpful. It could be very good.

We are at time, and I want to just so sincerely thank you for being such an amazing group today.

Again, this is just touching something that is so deep. I am so honored and thrilled that you chose this session today. I hope to meet many more of you, and for those past and current and old friends in the room, thank you for being here. This is some of the work I do with orchestras, and you can reach me anytime at orchestrateinclusion.com. I would love to hear about your current situation and how we might work together and be of support to each other.

I am excited to see and hear about all of your big conversations, and I'll be here for questions afterwards. Thank you all so much.

[APPLAUSE]

[00:59:35]