



## Making Conversations Work: Rules of Thumb

Here are a handful of rules of thumb to use when leading authentic engagement conversations:

- **Take nothing at face value.**  
Notice what words and phrases people use. Probe by asking, “What do you mean?” and “What are you getting at?”
- **Listen for where people get stuck.**  
Watch for when people want more facts or if a perception blocks them from talking more about a concern.
- **Ask people to square their contradictions.**  
Illuminate what folks are struggling with. Ask, “I know this can be a really tough issue, but how do the two things you said fit together?”
- **Keep juxtaposing views and concerns.**  
Pointing out contrasts will help people articulate what they really believe and give you a deeper understanding of what they think.
- **Piece together what people are saying.**  
Folks don’t usually make one all-inclusive statement about what they think or how they feel. Say, “This is what I’m hearing. Do I have it right?”
- **Keep in mind the “unspoken” rules.**  
Different conversations and spaces have their own sets of “rules.” Check out the level of trust people have and what that means for how you should interact.
- **Watch out for your own preconceived views.**  
Everyone has biases that can serve as filters when asking questions and interpreting what you hear. Be alert to them.



## Making Conversations Work: Trouble-Shooting Strategies

Become familiar with these before the conversation and review them regularly.

IF	THEN
A few people dominate the conversation	Engage each person from the beginning. Make sure everyone says something early on. Ask, “Are there any new voices on this issue?” or “Does anyone else want to jump in here?” Be direct and say, “We seem to be hearing from the same people. Let’s give others a chance to talk.” Call on people by name to answer.
The group gets off on a tangent or a person rambles on and on	Ask, “How does what you’re talking about relate to our challenge?” or “So what does that lead you to think about (the question at hand)?” Ask the person to restate or sum up what they said in a few words. If you can’t get a person to focus, interrupt him/her when they take a breath and move to another person or
Someone seems a personal grudge an issue and about it	Remind the person where the group is trying to focus. Ask him/her to respond to the question at hand. Acknowledge the person and move on. Say, “I can understand where you are coming from, but we need to move on.” If the person continues to be disruptive, interrupt them. Say, “We heard you, but we’re just not talking about that right now.”
People argue	Don’t let it bother you too much — it’s okay as long as it is not mean-spirited. Find out what’s behind the argument — ask why people disagree, get to the bottom of it. Break the tension with a joke or something funny. Stop to review the ground rules. Take a break. Consider having a separate conversation to work through the conflict.
People never disagree or are “too polite”	Play devil’s advocate. Bring up different or competing ideas (even if one of them comes from you) and see how people respond. Check it out — tell the group you’ve noticed that they don’t disagree much and ask if everyone is really in as much agreement as it seems.