



CONVERSATION REMINDERS

1. SMILE (NOT IN A CREEPY WAY)
- ~~2. ASK THEM TO TAKE ACTION~~
2. SAY "HELLO". SMILE AGAIN.
3. TALK ABOUT CAMPAIGN
4. ASK THEM TO TAKE ACTION



STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS ON CAMPAIGNS

Level 2: Fundamental activist skills

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Stall in Glebe 2010 © Amnesty International

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you haven't signed up to join our movement yet, head over to our [Get Active](#) page.

You can find other modules on fundamental activist skills [here](#). We recommend getting familiar with them all if you are new to activism.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au.



Perth activists protesting death penalty 2013 © Lucas Mathersul

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our module on how to have structured conversations on campaigns. Driving positive change in the world involves talking to a lot of people. It's vital that we get the word out and build up mass support around our campaigns. Face to face conversations are still one of the most effective ways of doing this.

By having a direct conversation you'll see who are already allies and will take action. You'll also see which people don't lean either way but will take action with the right amount of convincing. Then there are those who we may never be able to get on board for a variety of reasons.

Being prepared for all types of conversations is one of the most useful activist skills. We're not expected to be an expert on every issue we talk about. But, if we're skilled enough in the art of conversation we will come across as confident and persuasive.

In this module we will cover topics like how to start a conversation and keep it flowing. We'll also look at what kind of language is most effective in getting your message across. Finally we'll cover how to handle objections and difficult conversations.



Petitioning at Brisbane Pride Festival 2019 © Abbey Ashfield-Crook

Why structured conversations?

Structured conversations work. We know they work because we do them all the time, even if it's sometimes unconscious. It could be working out a tactful way to ask someone for a favour. You could be trying to subtly shift a conversation to a different topic. Even working out how to get out of a conversation you don't want to be. These all take a bit of strategy and structure. There are many times where we have a purpose when interacting with others, it's not always noticeable. Throughout our lives we get quite good at being structured in our discussions.

When we want something out of a conversation the best approach is to be polite and diplomatic. Our minds map out what we want to say before the words leave our mouths. We use our knowledge of the person to shape what we say. We avoid particular words and tones because we know they will lead to a negative response. Throughout our lives we learn how to do this to maintain good relationships with others.

There is a big difference between a typical conversation and one you'd have as an activist. Activism related conversations happen under uncommon circumstances. Most of us don't tend to talk to strangers about complex issues where we have no idea how they'll respond. It's completely normal to feel uncomfortable or apprehensive about it at first. Like learning any skill, it takes a lot of practice to feel confident. That's why it's important to work out what you want to say beforehand and to fine tune what you say. Our aim is to have lots of successful conversations that lead to someone taking action.

Active listening & the 70 / 30 rule

But, we should first talk about the most important part of any conversation, which is how to be a great listener. Active listening is about concentrating on what the other person is saying. Giving them the space to get all their thoughts out uninterrupted. Then using those responses to tailor the conversation to that person. Through this we can work out what their values and concerns are and what might motivate them.

It's said that a well structured conversation generally splits 70 / 30. 70% of it spent listening to the other person, leaving us 30% of the time to speak. This is so they don't feel like they are being talked at and are able to voice their views. A conversation where a person feels engaged with and heard is more likely to lead to them taking action. But it also leaves them with a positive experience that they will remember. Which means that they will be more open to engaging with us again.

Here are some tips on how to be effective when communicating non-verbally:

- 1 Use body language which shows you have an interest in what they are saying. You want them to know you are open to discussion which means looking open. Make eye contact, smile, walk over to speak with them and give them your full attention. Be relaxed, friendly and genuine.
- 2 Watch their body language as well, it can inform you of many things. Watching their expressions and body language will tell you if they agree with you or not. Also whether they want to stop the conversation and leave.
- 3 Show respect for what the other person is saying even if you disagree. Don't interrupt them with counter arguments. Listen with empathy and commit to understanding what they are trying to say. Keep calm and attentive throughout.
- 4 Not all silences are awkward. They can be a moment for the other person to process and even shift their views. If it feels right then give the other person a quick moment to reflect on what you said.



Activity: Practice active listening with another person. Ask them to speak for 3 minutes on any topic they like. While they are talking pay close attention to what they are saying, but remain silent the whole time.

At the end of the 3 minutes give a summary of what they said in detail. How did it make both of you feel? Did you notice that you were able to recall more information?

(NOTE: If you are unable to practice with someone, find a short recording of an individual speaking. Listen to them for 3 minutes and then try to recall everything they said.)

Conversation starters

To listen to what someone has to say we first have to convince them to stop what they are doing and engage with us. This can be tricky, because people don't tend to want to stop and speak with a stranger. They might be reluctant to stop because they don't want to be in a situation where they have to say 'no' to your ask. They may also not want to feel bad about something they don't want to think about, like human rights abuses. There are also friendly people who will enjoy coming up and taking action as well. There's always a mixture of experiences.

How you start the conversation will determine your odds of them stopping to speak with you. But, in most cases you do need to be the one to do the initiating. Standing and watching people walk past hoping they will stop won't achieve much. You will need to encourage people to come speak with you. This means interacting with as many people as you can to increase your odds of success.

- 1 Make sure there are no barriers or large distances between yourself and the person. If you're at a stall come out in front of the table to be closer to where people are walking.
- 2 Begin engaging with the person as they are walking towards you and are in speaking distance. If you begin while they are next to you or have walked past then they will keep walking in most instances. You need to give them enough time to process what you are doing and to make a conscious decision to stop.
- 3 Make eye contact with them and get their attention with a friendly greeting. At that point they'll be trying to work out what you want from them. You could summarise in one sentence what the purpose is of getting them to stop. "Would you like to sign a petition for...?"
- 4 Think about why they might be choosing not to stop and add something to reassure them. "...it'll only take a couple of minutes and you'll be taking action to protect human rights for..."
- 5 Don't feel bad if someone keeps walking, it happens. Move onto striking up a conversation with the next person.

Conversation structures

Now that you've got someone to engage with you we can move onto the next step, which is how you can take the information about a campaign and frame it into a pitch. One of the most common frames we use in campaigning is Outrage / Hope / Action.

It begins by invoking a sense of outrage in a person. We do that by talking about a terrible human rights situation that is happening. It's a way to get the other person to shift focus to what you are saying. They should now be a prime audience and you have started to tap into their values.

Don't worry though, they'll move past this upset soon, because the next part is to give them hope. We have to transform that outrage into hope by explaining that there is a solution to the problem. Something that is achievable if we can show enough public support with our campaign. We have to convince the person that this is possible.

This is when we bring the call to action into the mix. We can only achieve this solution if people take action. This action can take many forms such as signing a petition or contacting their MP. But it needs to be something easy for them to do, in most cases it should be something they can do on the spot. Asking them to do a future action is less likely to happen once the outrage is gone.

Here is an example of the Outrage / Hope / Action model in action.

How do you feel about the fact that children as young as 10 are locked up in Australia?

We know that kids in prison are less likely to access what they need to grow up resilient, happy and healthy. Things like education, mentoring and community support. There's overwhelming evidence of the harm prison does – it's the very last thing we want for kids.

We're here today to build public support for a better path for our kids. How do you think we could change this?

Instead of putting kids this young behind bars, governments can fund Indigenous-led solutions and community programs which have proven better outcomes for children and communities.

Will you add your name to our petition and call on all governments across Australia to raise the age kids can be locked up to at least 14 years old?



Free to be kids design © lagetjr Tadros



Activity: Imagine you are in an elevator with another person. You only have 30 seconds to summarise a campaign to them before they reach their floor. How can you sum up what the campaign is about, what the solutions are and the call to action in that time. Keep practicing until you think you've got it summed up well in that amount of time.

Deeper conversations

At this point in the conversation you've got the person's attention. You have explained the campaign to them and what it is you would like them to do. In many instances that's all you need to do and they'll take the action without any more need for convincing. This can be convenient for both of you because it's a quick interaction and you can both move on.

But, is it going to be something that has had a meaningful impact on that person? They might only be taking action to get back to what they were doing and never think more about it. It can be worth it to take the opportunity to talk to them further. Find out more about how they feel about the issue. You're going to help them form a deeper connection and they could get more involved in the future.

People that don't take action straight away will want more information or convincing. They might disagree with it altogether, but we'll focus more on that soon. For those that seem open to the issue it's a good opportunity to put your active listening skills into action. You need to work out what they need to know to take action and you can do that by asking them. The best way to get people talking about what they think in detail is by asking open ended questions. Those are questions that don't result in single word answers such as 'yes' or 'no'. Have a look at the following examples.

Yes / no question vs. an open ended question:

1. Do you feel it is wrong to detain people seeking asylum in offshore detention?
2. How do you feel about detaining people seeking asylum in offshore detention?

The way we have phrased the first question will most likely elicit a single word answer. While the second question will give them an opportunity to give a detailed response. Stick with open ended questions and you should get all the information you need.

They might also have more questions for you about the issue and want to hear your thoughts. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

- If you don't know the answer, that's okay, you're not expected to know everything. It's best to not pretend like you do know and give incorrect information. Tell them that you can look into that for them or can put them in touch with someone that does know. Also let them know that they can check out our website for more information.
- If you do know the answer, keep it as succinct as possible. In your preparations for the day you could think about what the most likely questions will be. This will give you the chance to come up with some responses beforehand. But don't go overboard trying to think of every possible question someone may have. You can have time to think about your answer as well before you give a response. Let them know that you appreciate their question and you need a moment to think. Make sure your response gives both of you the ability to continue the conversation.

This should result in the person having enough info to take action. But if they need to know more, encourage them to take action online.



Petitioners outside concert 2011 © Amnesty International

Dealing with difficult conversations

So now we're going to cover what to do when you're in a difficult conversation or encounter. Though rare, it is the reality of being an activist that these types of interactions will happen from time to time. But we have some tips on what you can do when this happens. You can use the Three E's to get to the bottom of a person's objection. Through this you can try to come to a positive mutual understanding, even if you still don't agree with one another.

Explore:

- Listen to their objection and use open ended questions to identify what their concern is. It may not yet be obvious to them either. This will clarify it for both of you.
- Avoid questions that seem accusatory, such as "Why would you think that?" These types of questions will make people feel defensive. If that happens they may treat the situation as a potential conflict rather than a discussion and you have lost their support.

Equalise:

- Once you have an idea what their concern is you can acknowledge it without agreeing with them. Particularly if it something discriminatory or hateful. "Let me just confirm what you're saying, is it..." Make sure they feel you have understood what they are trying to say before continuing.
- Explain that you can see why they might think that. They should now see that you are not an opponent, that you are both speaking calmly and with mutual respect.
- You can also use this as an opportunity to show that you are willing to explore their views. As long as they are willing to listen to yours as well.

Elevate:

- Continue to pose questions that allow the person to review and change their position. Then help them identify an alternative viewpoint. If they can reach this new conclusion through their own reasoning it is more likely to stick.
- If you are able to convince them to see things from your perspective then ask them to take action.
- If you are unable to shift their views then thank them for stopping to speak with you and end the conversation.

Here are some other tips for situations you might find yourself in.

Dealing with non-aggressive time wasters

- Whether it's with a supporter or non-supporter don't get distracted by an interesting or passionate debate. Stay focused, and ask yourself if it is a worthwhile use of your time. Try to keep all interactions to around 5 minutes so you can ask more people to take action.
- The best way to end these conversations is to thank the person for the chat and ask them to take action. If they don't do it then thank them again and let them know you have to speak to more people. Be polite, firm and move on to the next person.

Dealing with hostility and ignorance

- In most cases if someone becomes negative or hostile it is because they are identifying you as part of a movement or ideology, not as an individual. You just happen to be the person they have targeted. Use the three E's with them, but keep in mind that there are some people you can never convince.
- Think before you respond to a negative comment to avoid escalating the situation. Stay calm and be assertive. Use non-threatening body language.
- Do not feel like you have to tolerate hateful or aggressive behaviour. End the conversation there and ask them to move on. Walk away from them if necessary. Your safety and well being should always take priority.
- Always work in pairs. So that when a situation arises, there is someone with you for moral support. Work out a signal for them to intervene if tensions rise. Debrief with them afterwards and take a break if you need it.
- These encounters can be very stressful, even traumatic. But they are also rare. Don't let anyone put you off being an activist. Through our activism we challenge all of society to change, which does not come without opposition. At the end of the day our actions mean future generations suffer less of the same ignorance and hostility. Someone has to stand up to it.



Activity: Put it all into practice. Try role playing a full conversation with another person using these learnings. Ask them to role play a variety of scenarios so you can practice how you would engage with different people.

What's next?

That brings us to the end of this module. We hope that you have now learned what you need to know to get out there and start asking people to take action. As we said earlier it takes practice to build up confidence. So start with people you know and trust then work your way up to other members in your community. Also make sure to have a look at our other modules on [fundamental activist skills](#) too.

If you have any questions you can get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au. Thank you for your time!



Visit the Skill Up page for more activist development resources.

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