



Session outline

session title	Handling discomfort within your team
duration	90 minutes
objectives of the session	• Develop a shared understanding of the difference between discomfort and harm in group settings. • Strengthen participants' ability to recognise their own emotional and physical reactions during challenging conversations. • Build confidence in staying engaged in constructive disagreement without avoiding or shutting down discussions. • Support teams to create shared agreements that foster safe, inclusive, and productive dialogue.
session description and outline	In youth organisations and activist spaces, difficult conversations are inevitable, but they are often either avoided or shut down too quickly due to discomfort being confused with harm. This session helps participants clearly distinguish between discomfort and harm, and develop practical skills to stay engaged in challenging conversations in a constructive and respectful way. It can also support teams to co-create shared agreements on how to navigate disagreement, emotional intensity, and potential harm, with the aim of strengthening collaboration, trust, and psychological safety within their organisations.

methodology

Step 1: Introduction and understanding discomfort and harm

10 mins

Welcome participants and briefly introduce the session. If you want, include an energiser or an icebreaker, depending on the needs of the group.

Explain that the session will focus on:

- Understanding the difference between discomfort and harm.
- Recognising emotional and physical reactions during difficult conversations.
- Exploring ways to remain meaningfully engaged during disagreement.
- Developing practices that support respectful and productive dialogue.

Transition recommendation:

"Difficult conversations are part of working with other people. The goal is not to avoid discomfort altogether, but to better understand it and respond to it constructively."

Understanding Discomfort and Harm

Introduce the key concepts. Flipcharts or presentation could be used for this step to aid learning.

Facilitator input

What is discomfort?

Discomfort occurs when people feel challenged, stretched, uncertain, defensive, embarrassed, or emotionally activated.

Examples may include:

- Receiving critical feedback.
- Hearing an opinion you disagree with.
- Being asked to reflect on privilege or power.
- Realising you may have made a mistake.
- Speaking in front of a group.

Discomfort can feel unpleasant, but it is often part of learning, growth, and collaboration.

What is harm?

Harm occurs when people are made unsafe through actions such as:

- Discrimination.
- Harassment.
- Bullying.
- Humiliation.
- Threats.
- Personal attacks.
- Exclusion based on identity.

Harm affects a person's dignity, safety, or ability to participate and therefore requires intervention.

Reflection exercise

Ask participants:

- What do you think about this division? Do you understand the difference between discomfort and harm?
- Can you add any other situations/examples?
- Did you experience any of these in your life/organisation?
- How do I recognise the difference?

Facilitate a short plenary discussion.

Key message

Not all discomfort is harm.

At the same time, harm should never be dismissed as "just discomfort."

The goal is to build the capacity to tell the difference.

Step 2: Personal reactions and tips

35 mins

Participants reflect individually and then discuss in pairs or small groups **(10 mins)**

Reflection questions

- What situations tend to trigger discomfort for me?
- How does discomfort show up in my body?
- What helps me stay engaged when I feel challenged?

Facilitator input (15 minutes)

"We can get better at allowing discomfort and engaging in challenging but not harmful discussions."

Introduces the following principles and discusses with participants:

1. Not everything uncomfortable is dangerous

Our bodies sometimes react to disagreement as if it were a threat. Possible reactions:

- Racing heart.
- Tight chest.
- Feeling hot.
- Wanting to leave.
- Wanting to shut down.

Invite participants to ask:

"Am I unsafe right now, or am I uncomfortable?"

2. Thoughts are not always facts

When challenged, people often assume:

- "Everyone thinks I'm wrong."
- "They're attacking me."
- "I don't belong here."

Encourage participants to ask:

- What evidence do I have?
- Could there be another explanation?
- What would I tell a friend in this situation?

3. Avoidance makes discomfort bigger

Avoiding conversations may provide short-term relief, but often makes future conversations more difficult.

When conversations become difficult, some people:

- Stay silent.
- Leave the room.
- Withdraw emotionally.
- Avoid certain people.

Growth happens when people practice staying present a little longer than feels comfortable.

4. Feelings are information, not instructions

Feeling upset does not automatically mean:

- The conversation should stop.
- The other person is wrong.
- You should leave.

Instead, ask:

- What value is important to me here?
- What am I trying to protect?
- Why is this affecting me so strongly?

Emotions provide information. You still get to choose your response.

5. Disagreement is not rejection

Someone disagreeing with your idea does not necessarily mean:

- They dislike you.
- They reject you.
- You do not belong.

Strong teams learn to separate:

Critique of ideas from judgement of people.

They also learn to recognise that:

Disagreement can be part of collaboration.

Deep-dive: Personal reflection (10 mins)

Invite participants to reflect individually and then share in pairs or plenary:

- One insight about how I respond to discomfort.
- One thing that helps me stay engaged in difficult conversations.
- One practice I would like to bring into my organisation.
- One thing our team could do differently to better navigate disagreement.

Step 3: Discomfort vs harm in practice

25 mins

Participants work in small groups.

Provide each group with one or two scenarios (the scenarios are ready for print on the bottom of the outline).

Example scenarios

Scenario A

A board member receives feedback during a meeting that their communication style often prevents others from contributing. The feedback is specific and respectful, but the board member becomes visibly upset, leaves the room, and later says they felt personally criticised.

Facilitator note: Discomfort.

Receiving constructive feedback can feel uncomfortable and emotionally activating. Feeling upset does not necessarily mean harm has occurred if the feedback was delivered respectfully.

Scenario B

During a discussion on inclusion, one participant challenges another person's viewpoint. The conversation becomes tense, but both participants listen to each other, ask questions, and continue the discussion respectfully, even though they do not reach agreement.

Facilitator note: Discomfort.

Disagreement and tension are normal parts of collaboration. People may feel challenged, but the interaction remains respectful and psychologically safe.

Scenario C

A participant repeatedly jokes about another member's nationality during meetings. After being asked to stop, they continue making similar comments, saying they are "just trying to be funny." The targeted participant becomes increasingly uncomfortable and eventually stops contributing.

Facilitator note: Harm.

The behaviour targets a person's identity, continues after a clear boundary has been expressed, and affects their ability to participate. This requires intervention.

Scenario D

A volunteer presents a new idea during a meeting. Several people disagree and explain why they think it will not work. As the discussion continues, some participants begin interrupting the volunteer, dismissing their suggestions, and making comments such as, "You clearly don't understand how this organisation works." The volunteer becomes quiet and no longer contributes.

Facilitator note: Harm.

Disagreeing with an idea is not harmful in itself, but interrupting, belittling, and making personal comments crosses the line from respectful disagreement into behaviour that undermines someone's dignity and participation.

Discussion questions

- Is this discomfort or harm?
- What makes the difference?
- How should the group respond?
- What support might be needed?

Debrief

Helps participants identify where the line between discomfort and harm may lie and why different people might experience situations differently.

Step 4: Creating Team Agreements

25 mins

Team agreement (recommended if participants are from one organisation)

(20mins)

Participants work together to create a set of agreements for handling difficult conversations within their organisation.

Possible guiding questions:

Participation

- How do we ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute?
- What do we do when some voices dominate discussions?

Disagreement

- How do we challenge ideas respectfully?
- How do we separate disagreement from personal attacks?

Feedback

- How do we give feedback in a way that supports learning?
- What should we avoid when giving feedback?

Emotions

- What do we do when discussions become emotionally charged?
- How can people ask for a pause or support?

Repair

- What happens when someone feels hurt?
- How do we acknowledge mistakes and move forward?

The group then agrees on 5–10 practical principles and documents them for future use.

	Closing Reflection (5 mins) • What agreement feels most important to me? • What will be hardest to put into practice? • What commitment am I making today?
preparation	You can decide how you want to present the facilitator input, you can make a presentation, prepare flipcharts and print scenario cards for step 3.
material/ space needed	• Pens, markers • Printed scenario cards • Flipcharts, papers for participants
results/ takeaway/ outcomes	• Better understand the difference between discomfort and harm. • Recognise personal reactions to challenging conversations. • Develop strategies for staying engaged when feeling uncomfortable. • Build confidence in navigating disagreement constructively. • Create practical agreements that support respectful dialogue and stronger team cultures.

Scenario cards

Example scenarios

Scenario A

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Scenario B

During a discussion on inclusion, one participant challenges another person's viewpoint. The conversation becomes tense, but both participants listen to each other, ask questions, and continue the discussion respectfully, even though they do not reach agreement.

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