



Session outline

session title	Mastering difficult conversations
duration	120 minutes
objectives of the session	• Understand why constructive conversations become difficult during conflict, pressure, and disagreement. • Learn practical strategies to keep conversations productive when tensions arise. • Identify ways to strengthen collaboration and repair relationships within teams and organisations.
when and how to use this session	This session is useful for teams, boards, staff, volunteer groups, or project teams that want to strengthen communication and working together. It can be used when an organisation is experiencing tensions, recurring misunderstandings, disagreements, or conflict. It can also be used proactively to build a healthier communication culture before any challenges arise. The session is particularly relevant during periods of organisational change, strategic planning, difficult decision-making, or when new people join a team. It helps participants reflect on how they communicate under pressure, understand what contributes to conflict, and identify practical ways to maintain collaboration even when opinions differ. The activities can be used as a standalone workshop or integrated into broader work on organisational culture, conflict transformation, governance, leadership, or team development. Organisations may also revisit the session periodically to reflect on how communication and collaboration are evolving over time.

session description and outline	Youth organisations bring together people with different experiences, values, priorities, and communication styles. When organisations face pressure, disagreement, or difficult decisions, working together can become challenging and communication can break down. This session explores how to maintain open conversation even when they become uncomfortable or conflict emerges. Through reflection, practical exercises, and discussion, participants will learn how to recognise signs of communication breakdown.	
methodology	Step 1: Welcome & setting the scene Welcome participants and briefly introduce the session. Facilitator input: <i>"In every organisation, difficult conversations are inevitable. We won't always agree, and that's okay. The goal of this session isn't to avoid conflict, but to explore what helps us stay in collaboration when conversations become challenging."</i> Exercise: What does a constructive conversation look like? Invite participants to think about a constructive conversation they have experienced in their organisation (with their friends or elsewhere) even if people did not fully agree. In pairs or small groups, ask participants to discuss: • What made the conversation constructive? • How did people communicate with one another? • How did it make you feel? • What behaviours helped people stay engaged? • What made it easier to listen, ask questions, or disagree respectfully?	15 mins

After 5–7 minutes, invite groups to share their reflections in plenary. Capture key words on a flipchart (e.g. curiosity, respect, listening, trust, openness, asking questions, acknowledging emotions, shared purpose).

Facilitator debrief:

Highlight that constructive conversations are rarely conflict-free. What makes them effective is not the absence of disagreement, but the presence of behaviours and conditions that allow people to continue working together.

Explain that throughout the session, participants will explore what happens when these conditions begin to disappear, how to recognise early signs of communication breakdown, and what individuals and organisations can do to strengthen collaboration.

Step 2: Recognising Communication Breakdowns in Practice

20 mins

Participants reflect on situations where communication became difficult in their organisations and identify patterns that may have contributed to the situation.

Individual reflection (5 mins)

Ask participants to think of a recent disagreement, tension, or difficult conversation within their organisation.

Reflection questions:

- What happened?
- What made the conversation difficult?
- What impact did the situation have on relationships, decision-making, or the work of the organisation?

Small-group discussion (10 mins)

In groups of 3–4, participants share examples and discuss:

- Which patterns appear most often in our organisations?
- Which patterns are the most difficult to address?
- What usually happens when they are left unresolved?

Plenary debrief (5 mins)

Bring participants back together and collect key observations.

Facilitator highlights that communication breakdowns are common in all organisations and that recognising them early is often the first step towards restoring collaboration. Emphasise that conflict itself is not necessarily harmful, but unresolved patterns can gradually undermine relationships and organisational effectiveness.

Step 3: Recognising Communication Breakdown

25 mins

Part 1: Individual Reflection – What do I do when communication gets difficult? (5 mins)

In this step, participants are going to be reflecting on their own communication styles and pitfalls. Print the list below, one per participant.

Ask participants:

"Think about a recent disagreement, conflict, or frustrating discussion. Which of the following reactions do you recognise in yourself? Tick all that apply."

When communication becomes difficult, I sometimes...

Check the handout section for our recommendations which can be printed and handed out to each individual participant.

Part 2: Pattern Spotting (5 mins)

In pairs or small groups, participants compare their answers.

Ask:

- Which behaviours appeared most often?
- Which seem to go together?
- Are there any common themes emerging?

Each group writes their emerging themes on a flipchart.

Part 3: Facilitated Debrief – What Patterns Do We See? (10 mins)

The facilitator collects the themes and helps participants identify four common patterns that often appear when collaboration starts breaking down.

Facilitator guidance:

If participants do not identify them naturally, help them group behaviours into the following categories:

1. Defensiveness

Examples:

- Interrupting
- Explaining immediately
- Becoming argumentative
- Rejecting feedback
- Proving we are right
- Repeating our point

Key idea: When people feel criticised, threatened, or judged, they often move into self-protection.

2. Assumptions

Examples:

- Guessing intentions
- Thinking "they don't care"
- Thinking "they never listen"
- Interpreting comments negatively
- Assuming we know what someone means

Key idea: Curiosity is replaced by stories we create about other people.

3. Avoidance

Examples:

- Staying silent
- Delaying conversations
- Avoiding people
- Agreeing publicly but disagreeing privately
- Hoping problems disappear

Key idea: Avoidance can reduce discomfort temporarily but often increases problems later.

4. Loss of Trust

Examples:

- Sharing less information
- Feeling suspicious
- Reduced participation
- Reluctance to collaborate
- Stopping input from others

Key idea: Trust tends to weaken gradually when tensions remain unresolved.

Part 4: Reflection (5 mins)

Ask participants:

- Which of these patterns is most common for you?
- Which pattern do you see most often in your organisation?
- Which pattern is easiest to recognise?
- Which is hardest to notice in yourself?

Facilitator conclusion:

Communication breakdown rarely happens because people disagree. It usually happens because defensiveness, assumptions, avoidance, and loss of trust begin to replace curiosity, openness, and communication. Recognising these patterns early is the first step towards rebuilding collaboration.

We recommend allowing time for a short break after the first 3 steps.

Step 4: Recognising Communication Breakdown in Practice

Use scenarios from the facilitator card.

Participants work in groups of 4–5 and analyse one or two scenarios.

25 mins

For each scenario, discuss:

- What signs of communication breakdown can you identify?
- Which behaviours suggest defensiveness, assumptions, avoidance, or loss of trust?
- What might happen if nobody addresses these patterns?
- What could help restore communication and collaboration?

After 15 minutes, groups share their observations in plenary.

Facilitator input:

Remind participants that the goal is not to decide who is right or wrong, but to recognise communication patterns early enough to prevent relationships and collaboration from deteriorating.

Scenario 1: The Funding Disagreement

Two board members strongly disagree about applying for a large funding opportunity. One argues the organisation should apply immediately because it would secure long-term stability. The other opposes it, saying the funding source is not aligned with the organisation's values.

Over several meetings, both repeat the same arguments. They stop responding to each other's points, become increasingly frustrated, and begin discussing the issue through other board members rather than directly with one another.

Scenario 2: The Silent Volunteer

A volunteer regularly attends meetings and used to contribute actively. Over time, they become increasingly quiet and stop sharing ideas. When asked for input during meetings, they often respond with "I'm fine" or "Whatever the group decides." A few weeks later, another team member learns that the volunteer feels their ideas are usually ignored and believes decisions are already made before discussions begin. Meanwhile, some team members have started assuming that the volunteer is disengaged, uninterested, or unwilling to contribute.

Scenario 3: The Rushed Decision

A project team is preparing an important funding application with a tight deadline.

One team member wants to finalise decisions quickly to avoid missing the deadline. Another repeatedly raises concerns that key voices are not being included.

As tensions increase, comments such as "You're blocking progress" and "You don't care about participation" begin to appear.

People start focusing more on defending their position than understanding each other.

Scenario 4: The Feedback Conflict

During a meeting, a team member gives direct feedback to a colleague about their behaviour.

The colleague immediately explains why their actions were justified and argues that the feedback is unfair.

The person giving feedback feels frustrated and concludes that "they can never accept criticism."

Afterwards, both avoid working together whenever possible.

Scenario 5: The Unclear Roles

In a new project, responsibilities were never clearly defined.

Two people begin taking initiative in similar areas. One starts feeling that their work is being taken over. The other feels they are stepping in because tasks are not moving forward quickly enough.

Neither raises the issue directly. Instead, frustration grows, meetings become awkward, and both begin interpreting each other's actions negatively.

Plenary Debrief

Invite each group to briefly summarise their scenario and reflections.

Then ask:

- Which signs of communication breakdown appeared most often?
- Which patterns were easiest to recognise? Which were more subtle?
- What could have prevented this situation?
- What happens when these signs are ignored?
- What can individuals or teams do to notice and address them earlier?

Facilitator closes by highlighting:

Communication breakdown is rarely caused by a single event. More often, it develops gradually through patterns such as defensiveness, assumptions, avoidance, and declining trust. Recognising these early warning signs gives individuals and organisations the opportunity to intervene before collaboration breaks down completely.

Step 5: How to make it through difficult conversations?

15 mins

Participants work in small groups and revisit one of the scenarios from Step 4 or a real situation from their own life or organisation).

They reflect on both the group dynamic and their own personal responses when communication becomes difficult.

General guiding questions:

- What could have prevented this situation from escalating?
- What helped or could help people stay engaged in the conversation?
- What behaviours help rebuild trust during disagreement?
- What helps people feel heard, even when they do not agree?
- What makes collaboration easier when tensions are high?
- If I were in this situation, what would be difficult for me personally?

Plenary debrief:

Bring groups back and cluster answers into two categories:

Practices that support collaboration between people (e.g. asking questions, clarifying goals, checking understanding, naming tension early)

Practices that support individuals in the moment (e.g. pausing, noticing defensiveness, reframing assumptions, staying curious)

Facilitator closing reflection:

Collaboration is not only about what teams do together, but also about how individuals manage their own reactions in real time. The ability to notice defensiveness, assumptions, or withdrawal early often determines whether a conversation breaks down or continues constructively.

Step 6: Applying what we learnt (individual and organisational level)

20 mins

This final step invites participants to reflect on how they can apply the session in practice. While we cannot always prevent disagreement or conflict, we can develop habits that help us stay engaged, communicate more intentionally, and recognise when collaboration is beginning to break down.

The facilitator shares a set of practical reflection questions that participants can use before, during, and after difficult conversations. Participants can take these away and use them in their everyday work or within their organisations.

Before a difficult conversation:

- What am I bringing into this conversation?
- What am I feeling right now?
- What assumptions might I have?

During the conversation:

- Am I listening or preparing my response?
- Am I assuming intentions or asking questions?
- What is happening in my body or emotions?
- What is one question I can ask to better understand?

After the conversation:

- What went well, even if it was difficult?
- Where did I react or withdraw?
- What helped me stay engaged?
- What would I do differently next time?

Facilitator prompts (if groups are stuck):

- What could have helped you stay present in the conversation?
- What might help someone not shut down at that moment?
- What could shift the tone early on?
- What would help people feel heard?
- What could help someone re-enter the conversation after withdrawing?

Organisational Reflection

Participants reflect together on how collaboration currently works within their organisation and identify one area they would like to strengthen.

Participants complete the following reflection:

Next Steps for Our Organisation

One thing we already do well that supports collaboration: _____

One communication challenge or pattern we want to address: _____

One practice we want to introduce or strengthen: _____

Who will take this forward?

When will we revisit this conversation?

Facilitator concludes:

"Collaboration is not the absence of conflict. It is the ability to continue working together despite disagreement. The earlier we recognise defensiveness, assumptions, avoidance, and loss of trust, the easier it becomes to respond in ways that strengthen relationships rather than weaken them."

preparation	Familiarise yourself with the terminology and conceptsIf helpful, prepare flipcharts or a presentation with the information.
material/ space needed	• <i>Post-its</i> • <i>Flipcharts</i> • <i>Markers</i> • <i>You can print the annexes if you find that helpful</i>
results/ takeaway/ outcomes	• Better understand the patterns that contribute to communication breakdown, including defensiveness, assumptions, avoidance, and loss of trust. • Be able to recognise these patterns in themselves, others, and within their organisations, and understand how they influence collaboration. • Gain practical strategies and reflection tools to navigate difficult conversations more constructively • Identify concrete actions they can take, individually or within their organisation, to strengthen communication, trust, and a culture of constructive dialogue.

Handout - Step 2

When communication becomes difficult, I sometimes ...

- ☐ Interrupt people before they finish speaking
- ☐ Feel suspicious about people's intentions
- ☐ Become unusually quiet
- ☐ Focus on proving that I am right
- ☐ Avoid certain people after a disagreement
- ☐ Feel less willing to collaborate
- ☐ Share less information than usual
- ☐ Assume I already know what someone means
- ☐ Delay difficult conversations
- ☐ Feel anxious or tense
- ☐ Reject feedback quickly
- ☐ Repeat my point over and over
- ☐ Agree publicly while disagreeing privately
- ☐ Interpret comments negatively
- ☐ Feel misunderstood
- ☐ Stop asking certain people for input
- ☐ Explain myself immediately
- ☐ Become argumentative
- ☐ Guess someone's intentions without checking
- ☐ Feel frustrated or irritated
- ☐ Stop engaging in discussions
- ☐ Focus more on what I think people are trying to do than on what they are saying
- ☐ Feel exhausted after discussions
- ☐ Withdraw from conversations
- ☐ Become reluctant to share ideas openly
- ☐ Hope the issue resolves itself on its own
- ☐ Experience physical reactions (racing heart, tension, feeling hot)
- ☐ Think "they don't care"
- ☐ Think "they never listen"
- ☐ Feel reluctant to contribute in meetings

Scenario cards - Step 3

Scenario A - The Funding Disagreement

Two board members strongly disagree about applying for a large funding opportunity. One argues the organisation should apply immediately because it would secure long-term stability. The other opposes it, saying the funding source is not aligned with the organisation's values.

Over several meetings, both repeat the same arguments. They stop responding to each other's points, become increasingly frustrated, and begin discussing the issue through other board members rather than directly with one another.

Scenario B - The Silent Volunteer

A volunteer regularly attends meetings and used to contribute actively. Over time, they become increasingly quiet and stop sharing ideas. When asked for input during meetings, they often respond with "I'm fine" or "Whatever the group decides." A few weeks later, another team member learns that the volunteer feels their ideas are usually ignored and believes decisions are already made before discussions begin. Meanwhile, some team members have started assuming that the volunteer is disengaged, uninterested, or unwilling to contribute.

Scenario C - The Rushed Decision

A project team is preparing an important funding application with a tight deadline. One team member wants to finalise decisions quickly to avoid missing the deadline. Another repeatedly raises concerns that key voices are not being included. As tensions increase, comments such as "You're blocking progress" and "You don't care about participation" begin to appear. People start focusing more on defending their position than understanding each other.

Scenario D - The Feedback Conflict

During a meeting, a team member gives direct feedback to a colleague about their behaviour. The colleague immediately explains why their actions were justified and argues that the feedback is unfair. The person giving feedback feels frustrated and concludes that "they can never accept criticism." Afterwards, both avoid working together whenever possible.

Scenario E - The Unclear Roles

In a new project, responsibilities were never clearly defined. Two people begin taking initiative in similar areas. One starts feeling that their work is being taken over. The other feels they are stepping in because tasks are not moving forward quickly enough. Neither raises the issue directly. Instead, frustration grows, meetings become awkward, and both begin interpreting each other's actions negatively.

Handout - Step 6

Next Steps for Our Organisation

One thing we already do well that supports collaboration:

One communication challenge or pattern we want to address:

One practice we want to introduce or strengthen:

Who will take this forward?

When will we revisit this conversation?
