

**CARDS FOR  
*FACILITATING*  
A DISCUSSION**

**TIMEOUT**

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# HOW TO USE THE CONVERSATION CARDS

A good dialogue is rewarding – and facilitating a good dialogue requires practice and repetition. These conversation cards will provide you with tips and phrases for guiding a dialogue. First, learn to master a few methods and then expand your skills discussion by discussion. Start from yourself and learn to be both a skilled listener and a facilitator.

In every discussion, it is important to find a good way to tune into and end the discussion properly, as well as to create an encounter in which everyone can participate as equals. Also, think about the situation preceding the discussion. For example, are there tensions between the participants and do you believe someone will dominate the discussion? In those situations, you should

study the cards containing advice for tough situations especially carefully.

## **Some tips for using the cards:**

- Start using the cards well before the discussion, already in the planning stage
- Read the cards through one by one and draw up a script that serves the objectives of your discussion
- Modify the wordings to make them better suit your speaking style and make notes of them
- Read through the cards and your notes once more just before the discussion or the day before it

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# WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

A dialogue is **a constructive and equal way of having a discussion**. It is aimed at understanding others, but not at reaching unanimity. At best, a dialogue generates unpredictable insights and new thinking.

A dialogue creates a trusting atmosphere and deepens the participants' understanding of almost any topic. With the help of a dialogue, you can bring together people from different backgrounds to an encounter in which they are on an equal footing. For example, use a dialogue as part of the preparation or before developing solutions and decision-making.

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# IMPROVING YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

**Imagine** in your mind the events and situations that the others are talking about.

**Try to conceive** what the other person is saying as a story with a beginning, middle and end.

**Pay attention** to the different dimensions of the experiences brought up by the others:  
perceptions, thoughts, memories, feelings and images.

**Listen to yourself!** What happens in you when the others speak? What kind of feelings does it evoke in you? What do you find new and interesting? What do you find annoying? What is difficult for you to understand? What impulses do you recognise in yourself?

**Wait for a while** before rushing to say what you want to say. What if your compelling need to speak eases when you just concentrate more on listening to the others?



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# PREPARING TO FACILITATE A DISCUSSION

- 1.** Think about how you will start the dialogue and how people will introduce themselves.
- 2.** Change the wordings in the ground rules for discussion to make them better suit your style.
- 3.** Plan how you tune into the topic and formulate the initial question.
- 4.** Familiarise yourself with the theme and make a list of questions related to the content of the discussion.
- 5.** Plan how you deepen the discussion and conclude it.
- 6.** Think about whether the discussion needs to be documented and how it will be done.  
Do you need a notetaker who will write things down?



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# EXAMPLE SCRIPT FOR BEGINNING A DISCUSSION

”Welcome everyone. The purpose of this discussion is to learn from one another and listen to each participant’s points of view and experiences of the topic. The intention is not to persuade, argue or convince the others about our own view, but to allow room for different perspectives and build an understanding based on each other’s comments. The goal is not unanimity, either.

Let’s try to detach ourselves from the normal discussion habits and not concentrate on what we want to say next. Instead, we will try to concentrate on listening to what the other person is saying. One person will speak at a time and

if you are not ready to speak you can pass your turn to the next person. If a question comes to your mind, write it down on paper instead of interrupting the other person. I hope this discussion will give you a new understanding of what is important to the others and a deeper understanding of what is important to you.

In this discussion, we are allowed to give up our roles – let’s participate mainly as ourselves. I will be facilitating this discussion and I will ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak and that we observe the ground rules for discussion. (Go over the rules). Does everyone find these rules acceptable?”

Welcome everyone!

The purpose of this discussion is to learn from one another and listen to each participant's points of view and experiences of the topic. The intention is not to persuade

# GROUND RULES FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSION

## DO THIS

## SAY THIS

---

**Listen** to the others, do not interrupt or start additional side discussions.

”Everyone must be given the opportunity to explain their views in peace. It is important that we do not interrupt each other or whisper with the person next to us.”

---

**Relate** what you say to what the others have said and use everyday language.

”The objective of a dialogue is to relate what we say to what the others have brought up in the discussion. Let’s try to use everyday language and avoid difficult terms.”

---

**Talk** about your own experience.

”To be able to better understand the issue discussed and each other, we should talk about our own experiences. This means that we tell the others what issues, events and situations have contributed to our views.”

---

**Be present and respect** the others and the atmosphere of trust.

”In a dialogue, it is important that we concentrate thoroughly on listening to each other and on understanding the topic we are discussing. We will respect the different views people have. Let’s keep the conversation confidential so that everyone can talk as freely as possible.”

---

**Search and bring together.** Boldly deal with emerging conflicts and look for issues that have gone unnoticed. Talk to the others directly and ask about their views.

”A dialogue should be a safe situation, in which conflicts can also be processed. In addition, it is important to look for things that have gone unnoticed for one reason or another. In the end, we can look at the links between the points of view that have come up in this discussion.”



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# TUNING INTO A DISCUSSION IN WHICH ALL PARTICIPANTS ARE EQUAL

Tuning in enables a trusting encounter in which the participants are on an equal footing. Tuning in moves the attention from other matters to this moment – the space, the other people and the topic discussed. Enough time must be used for tuning in order to create an atmosphere of trust in which the participants are prepared to share their experiences with others.

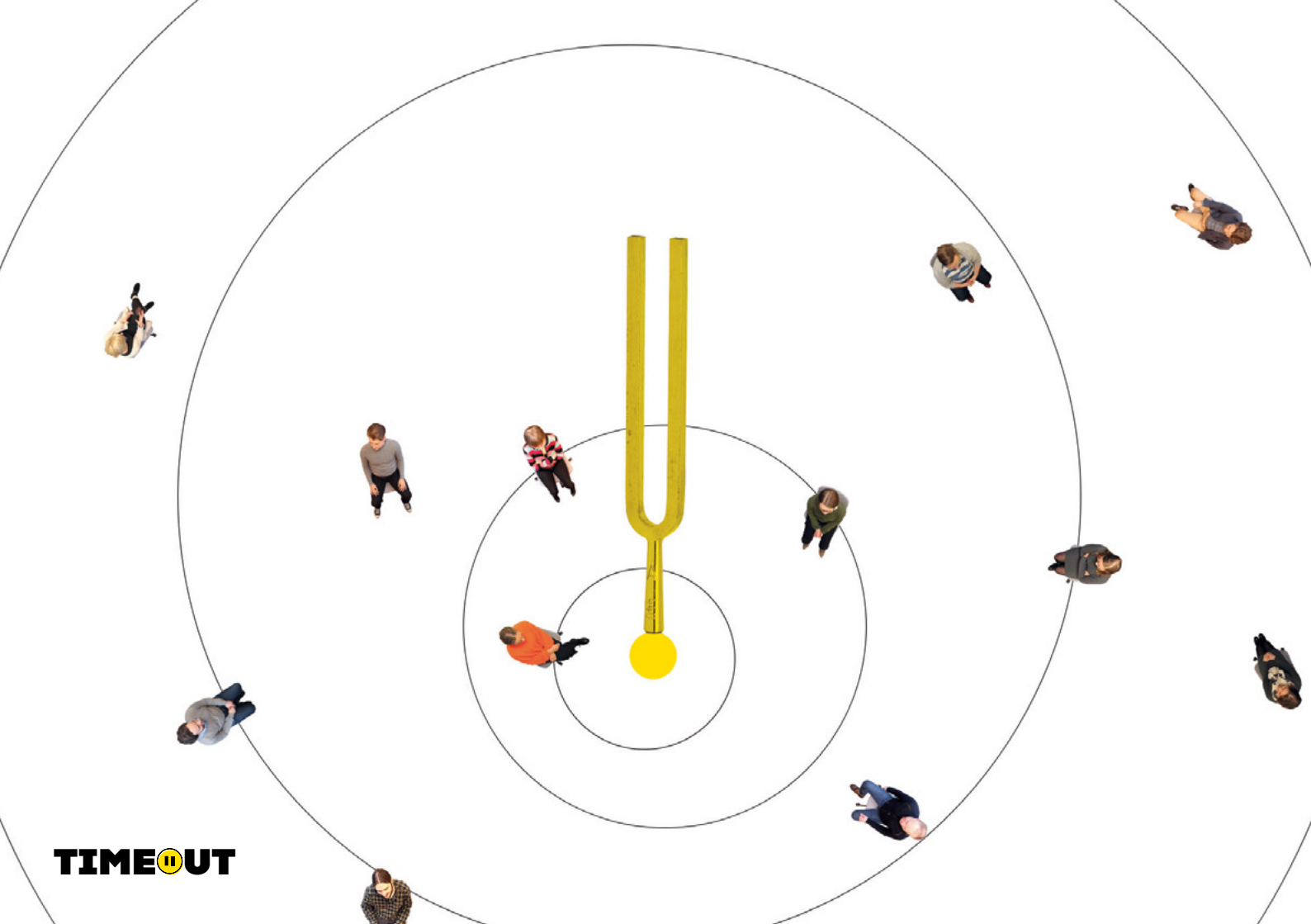
Who are you and what **brings you here** today?

What are the **experiences** in your mind when you come to discuss this topic?

What perceptions or **feelings** do you associate with the topic?

What is it like to talk **about this together**? How do **the people present affect** the handling of the issue?

What do we want to **aim at** in this discussion?



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# THE FACILITATOR'S BEST GUIDING MEASURES

## DO THIS

## SAY THIS

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The facilitator ensures that everyone is given enough space to talk about their experiences.

”Let’s concentrate on listening to this.”

---

The facilitator helps the participants to relate what they say to what others have said by steering the participants to pay attention to the links between the different points of view.

”How is this related to the previous points of view?”

---

The facilitator sets an example by talking directly about his/her own experiences.

”This is what goes on in my mind during the dialogue. What about the others? What kind of thoughts does this evoke in you?”

---

The facilitator helps the discussion to stick to everyday language and asks participants to explain any difficult terms that not everyone may understand.

”What do you mean when you say xxxx?”

---

The facilitator helps participants talk about the tensions, describe related experiences in more detail.

”Please tell us more. Let’s take time and listen to different points of view.”

---

The facilitator helps to find points of view that have gone unnoticed.

”What has not been brought up yet?”

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The facilitator helps to look at the links between different points of view.

”What do we agree on? Where are the differences? Is there something new we now understand?”



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# ENCOURAGING THE PARTICIPANTS TO EXPRESS THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES

## DO THIS

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Ask people to tell about events and situations that are important to them.

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Ask specifying questions about the different dimensions of the experience: perceptions, thoughts, memories, feelings and images.

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Ask specifying questions about the reasons and consequences.

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Ask the other participants to explain what kind of experiences come to mind when they listen to the others.

## SAY THIS

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”Tell us about some events or situations that have contributed to what you think about the topic of this dialogue.”

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”Tell us more about what you perceived/thought/felt/imagined in that situation?”

---

”What made that happen? What happened as a result?”

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”What about the others? What kind of experiences did you remember when you were listening to what was just said?”

**Set an example yourself. Tell the participants about an experience that has contributed to your views on the topic discussed.**



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# WAYS TO DEEPEN THE DISCUSSION

## DO THIS

## SAY THIS

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Aim to find a specified topic for the group to discuss in more depth.

”We have now discussed topics A, B and C. To move on to discuss the topic in more depth, which topic would you like to focus on?”

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Ask the participants in which kind of issues they would like to increase their understanding.

”What issues would each of you like to understand better?”

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Encourage the participants to bring up viewpoints that have not yet been presented. They may also be conflicting or difficult.

”Can anyone think of something that we have not discussed in connection with this topic, yet?”

To be able to direct the discussion from a general level to the participants’ experiences, tell the participants a personal experience related to the topic.

”This discussion reminds me of an experience of my own in which xxxx... Does anyone have any similar experiences or perhaps some completely different experiences related to our topic?”

Help the participants deal with experiences related to the topics at an emotional level.

”What goes on in your mind in connection with this topic? What kind of emotions does the topic evoke?”

Observe the atmosphere of the discussion and the level of the discussion. Do you think the participants find the discussion interesting and important?

”I think we are still talking at a rather general level. How should this discussion be deepened? What topic should we delve deeper into?”



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# WHEN CHOOSING THE TOPIC FOR THE IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION IS CHALLENGING

## DO THIS

When several topics have been brought up in the discussion, direct the participants to think about which one to choose for an in-depth discussion. A good topic: 1) affects as many of the participants as possible 2) is unclear or causes tension 3) within the time available, new understanding may be expected about it.

If there is only one topic or one of the participants is trying very hard to direct the choice, try to slow down the conversation and help the group discuss the different alternatives in peace.

If several topics attract support in the group, continue a closer examination of the topics a while longer.

If someone is very strongly opposed to the chosen topic, ask the person to give the topic a chance to develop. After a while, check how that person then finds the discussion.

If the participants cannot reach an agreement on choosing the topic, you can either vote or you as the facilitator can choose the topic to the best of your understanding.

## SAY THIS

"Topics A, B and C have now come up and we do not know which one to choose, yet. Let's discuss each topic for a moment and think about which one would be the most suitable one for us."

"Let's not make a decision yet but look at the different alternatives in peace. Tell me what you think about the topic that was proposed and also say if any other topics cross your mind."

"Talk about these topics that you find interesting a little bit longer so that we can understand better what each of you finds important about them."

"It seems that most people want to choose a topic that you did not find very interesting. Is it ok if we try to discuss this topic in more depth and I will ask you in a short while how you find the discussion and whether it has turned out to be more interesting?"

"We cannot reach an agreement about which topic to choose. I suggest that we vote for it. If we still cannot find a clear solution, then I will make the decision and I will also bear the responsibility for it as the facilitator of this dialogue."



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# ACTIVATING THE QUIET PARTICIPANTS

## DO THIS

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Say that you hope as many participants as possible will participate in the discussion and as the discussion progresses, pay attention to those who have not said anything, yet.

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Stop the conversation for a moment and say you would like to hear what those people who have not said anything yet have in mind.

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If the group is large or the atmosphere is tense, you can steer the participants to talk in pairs or small groups for a moment. After that, you can ask especially those people to speak who have been quiet until then.

## SAY THIS

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”For a successful dialogue, it is usually important that as many people as possible participate in the discussion. It does not mean that everyone must speak equally much, but that everyone has a chance to speak if they wish.”

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”We have already heard some of you. Therefore, I am now going to ask what those of you who have not said anything yet have in mind?”

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”With the people next to you, talk for a while about what kind of thoughts this discussion has up to now evoked in you. Then we can also hear thoughts from those who have not said anything yet.”



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# WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE DOMINATES?

## DO THIS

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At the beginning of the discussion, reserve yourself the right to limit the number of contributions and their length. Justify this from the point of view of safeguarding equality in the discussion.

If one of the participants dominates the discussion, intervene as soon as possible. Thank that person for bringing his/her views to the discussion. Say that you will next want to hear what the others think.

If the dominating person keeps asking for the floor, you can ask the person to wait and give room to the others for a moment.

## SAY THIS

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”The intention is to give everyone equal space to bring up their views. Is it all right with you that I allocate and limit your turns to speak, as necessary?”

”Thank you for bringing up your views. Now, it would be important to hear what the others think.”

”I will not give you the floor again quite yet. Let’s listen to what the others think first. Is it ok if you wait for a moment?”



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# HOW TO MOVE ON FROM A DEADLOCK SITUATION

## DO THIS

## SAY THIS

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Say to the participants that you think the discussion has come to some kind of deadlock situation.

”It seems that we are in a deadlock situation.”

---

Ask how the participants see the situation and what they think it is about.

”What do you think this is about?”

---

Ask the participants whether they have any ideas for how to proceed in the situation.

”Does anyone have any ideas for how we should proceed now?”

---

If no one can think of a good solution, give the participants a short break. After the break, ask the participants to reflect on the nature of the deadlock situation again and to come up with ideas for solutions.

”Let’s have a short break now and then together come back to think about how we can move on.”

---

If it is not possible to find a solution, ask the participants to think about what everyone can together learn about the deadlock situation and about what happened in the discussion.

”It seems that we cannot move on properly at this point. What do you think we can learn from this deadlock situation and about what has happened in the discussion?”



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# HOW TO ASK DIALOGIC QUESTIONS

A dialogic question must be genuine. Ask questions that help the participants to better understand the topic discussed, another person or you. Avoid rhetoric questions or questions that provide advice or express an evaluation.

## DO THIS

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Ask questions that are open, not closed. There is no one right answer to such questions.

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With your question, call attention to certain dimensions in the participants' experiences.

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Introduce the question by explaining what kind of personal experience it is motivated by.

## SAY THIS

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An open question: "Tell us what you think about the leisure time opportunities for young people in this area?"

(A closed question: "Should there be more hobbies for young people here?")

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"Tell us more about what you perceived/felt/thought/remembered/imagined when...?"

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"I have not experienced what you have, and that is why I would like hear in more detail what kind of..." or "I find it puzzling that I still do not understand what you mean when you say... Could you tell us a bit more about it?"



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# EMOTIONAL OUTBREAKS IN THE DISCUSSION

## DO THIS

## SAY THIS

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Say that you can see the discussion evokes strong emotions. Stress that bringing up different emotions is important so that you will be able to better understand each other and the issue you are discussing.

”I can see that this topic evokes strong emotions. It is good that they are brought up because it helps us understand this issue better. Let’s try to talk in peace by allowing room for all kinds of experiences.”

---

Show the person overtaken by emotion that you have noticed his/her reaction.

”I can see this matter is important to you. It is good that you bring up how you feel about it.”

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Allow equal space for all participants to talk about how they feel.

”What about the others? What kind of feelings do you have about this?”

---

If the emotional outbreak seems to affect the discussion, stop the discussion and give the participants a break. During the break, you can talk to the person who was overtaken by emotion.

”I think we are in deep waters now. I suggest we have a break and continue the discussion after that.”

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If the emotional outbreak is targeted at you as the facilitator, ask the participant to tell you about his/her reaction in more detail.

”Tell me more about what you find difficult about my actions in this situation? I can then try to clarify what it is about from my point of view.”

**Remain calm if there are emotional outbreaks.  
They are often important points in which the discussion deepens.**



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# THE BEST MEASURES WHEN THE STARTING POINT OF THE DISCUSSION IS A CONFLICT

- 1.** Introduction to the topic. Explain your own point of view on resolving conflicts.
- 2.** Establishing relationships. Briefly interview each party at the beginning of the situation. This way you can strengthen their trust in you and the situation.
- 3.** Questions. In advance, think about questions for structuring the situation.
- 4.** Clarifying whose turn it is to speak. If the parties easily interrupt each other, remind them whose turn it is to speak.
- 5.** Internal dialogue. If necessary, the facilitator can bring up what his/her own dialogue has been during the discussion situation. Ask, what kind of thoughts that evokes.
- 6.** Quality of the discussion. Ask how the participants find the quality of the discussion. Are the right issues talked about, and in the right way?
- 7.** Encourage tolerance to uncertainty. Bring up the fact that it is painful when things progress slowly and encourage the participants to bear it.
- 8.** Assessing acceptance of disagreement. Ask the parties what level of disagreement they can accept.



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# FLARE-UP OF AN UNEXPECTED CONFLICT DURING THE DISCUSSION

## DO THIS

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Stop the discussion for a moment and put the conflict you have observed into words.

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Ask the participants what they think about your observation. Agree together as a group whether any of the time reserved for the discussion will be used for examining the conflict.

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Stress that there is no need to try to resolve the conflict during the dialogue, but that it is enough to reach a better understanding of the points of view of the others.

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Ask the different parties of the conflict to explain their views and experiences in more detail. Emphasise the importance of listening.

## SAY THIS

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”Let’s stop here for a moment. I can see that there is some kind of conflict between you. Is it all right if we take some time to look at what it is about in more detail?”

---

”It seems to me that...” ”What do you think about what I just said now?” ”Is it sensible for us to use some of our time together to look at this conflict?”

---

”It is not necessary to try to resolve conflicts in a dialogue. It is enough if we gain a better understanding of what they are about.”

---

”Let’s listen to both of you/everyone in peace. Everyone will have their turn to speak. Do not interrupt each other; instead, try to listen to and understand each other’s points of view.”



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# CONCLUDING THE DISCUSSION

## **Ask the participants to answer at least these:**

What was the most important insight you gained in this discussion?

Where should this discussion be continued and who should continue it?

## **It is a good idea to also ask:**

Have we discussed the right issues?

Have we discussed different points of view?

Was our discussion constructive?

Did our understanding of the topic increase?

