



Top Tips for Conversation Starters

Setting the context: Why?

Starting new conversations is a step towards deepening relationships, carrying out social learning and encouraging dialogue – dialogue can only take place where there is mutual trust.

Conversation is about much more than the words used. Meaningful conversation depends on how and when we say things, how we listen, our non-verbal communication and the ongoing judgements we make as conversations take place.

An awareness of cultural differences and similarities, including those arising from faith and beliefs, an understanding of our own individual communication styles and how we are seen by others is important, but can be built during conversations.

Communication skills and relationship building skills are important to starting new conversations and all are relevant to lifelong learning. During conversations, we want to demonstrate and model the behaviours, knowledge and skills required to be inclusive and compassionate, and be open and encouraging.

When starting new conversations, we need to be aware of what 'type' of conversation we'd like to open:

- Are these Conversations to engage with people and be companionable?
- Are these Conversations to enable and support people to talk with confidence?
- Are these Conversations with people to explore and manage emotions around complex topics, themes with potential of significant risk?

Within your context or setting, you might have a priority or you might be open to conversations that combine more than one feature. Being ready to step in, whilst not appearing to 'listen in' could be an important role for a leader or facilitator to play.

This list shows some core communication skills. It's worth considering whether those you are working with have a grasp of any of all of these, and whether you might coach or tutor some of these skills in advance:-

- Active listening: making a conscious effort to *hear* what is said, feeding back by rephrasing or restating what has been heard.
- Environmental /spatial awareness: how the space is set up, who is taking part, is it public or private space.
- Use of non verbal language: posture and seating/ standing, proximity, body movements, facial expressions, eye behaviour, tone of voice, use of time, physical presence, use of pauses and silence, gentle cues such as nods.
- Summarising: deliberately providing a verbal summary, during the conversation or at the end.

- Clarification: confirming and checking, using different words for understanding and accuracy.
- Signposting: introducing and drawing attention to what is said, this might be around themes or features, commonalities or where there is difference.

Objectives:

Acknowledging the experience of being 'in conversation'

Items needed:

A dedicated space	Some 'things' to stimulate/ start the conversations
A timekeeper/ facilitator	Items for conversation breaks – drinks etc
People willing to take part	

Time needed: 5 minutes to 20 minutes depending on conversations and complexity of themes, topics, stimulus used.

Conversations can be tiring, especially if in second or third language. As facilitator or leader, ensure you have thought how you can create short breaks, maybe a drink, moving to another space, introducing another stimulus, swapping conversation partners.

Preparation:

Lay out the space and any items needed. Have something that indicates an opening for conversation and feels 'safe' for those taking part. Either;

- at least one example/ item/ object/ book to pick up and look at to start a conversation or
- an activity to carry out to start a conversation.

Suggestions for conversation starters:

Something to pick up or hold/ handle	A view from a window	A picture on a wall
A book	A plant/vegetable/fruit	
An item found outside (why not go outside together and find?)		
A photograph, on a palmheld device/ smartphone/ tablet or printed		
Something less tangible to have a conversation about; superstition and traditions, feeling safe and secure, children and families, hopes and dreams		

To request a "Conversation starter" workshop or for suggestions of "Conversation starter activities" contact: Lynn@glade.org or Liz@glade.org

For more materials & activities visit: <https://interfaithbelief.glade.org/>