



ARC: Authentic Relational Conversations

The practice of engaging in empathetic conversation with people from different viewpoints to heal divides and build community.

ARO: Authentic Relational Organizing

The approach of developing and utilizing authentic relationships to bring about change and create an inclusive democracy.

ECHO CHAMBERS

What is an echo chamber?

- Talking ABOUT groups of people rather than talking TO them
- Only see and hear content from those whose opinions align with ours
- Affirmation from echo chambers causes people to become more extreme in views and values
- Absent of sources that allow for balanced examination of viewpoints, outlets further reinforce and amplify division

How do we solve the problem created by our echo chambers?

- We can't change what we don't understand.
- We have to pierce echo chambers with outside information to create any change.
- Understanding begins with listening.
- Studies have shown that fighting with someone can actually have the opposite effect and further entrench someone in their view.
- Break the barrier of isolation furthered by the pandemic.

GOALS OF A CONVERSATION

- Open up a channel for dialogue.
 - We aren't changing minds, but we are doing the first foundational step of opening a line of communication.
 - Systemic change requires some people to understand both sides.

- Make people feel heard.
 - Truly listen and connect.
 - This is not a tactic – it is rooted in authenticity.
- Keep tone pleasant and friendly.
 - De-escalate when appropriate.
 - Remember that the people responding don't know you and will not always assume the best of you.

GROUNDING IN THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Remember:

- Everyone is naturally trying to change everyone else's mind.
- Everyone thinks they are right.
- Everyone thinks they are a good person.
- Everyone wants to be understood and loved.

Examples of humanizing questions:

- What might this person want (in life, in the country, in the world)?
- What are their core values?
- What do THEY think YOU want?
- What do THEY think YOUR core values are?
- Who do they trust for news, opinions, and commentary?
- Where are they finding community?
- What is their vocabulary or preferred language?
- What are their worries and fears?

UNDERSTANDING DOES NOT MEAN AGREEMENT

- Know and honor your limits.
- For neutral subjects, all viewpoints can be given equal weight.
- Hatred and bigotry do not deserve the same credence.
- You do not have to agree with someone's opinion to listen to it.
- We respect that we are all human and deserve dignity.
- Get to the "why" and heart of hurtful opinions.
 - Don't assume you understand the motivators.
 - Thoughts may be driven by misinformation, fear, conditioning, or any combination of history.
- We are not fixed beings, and we should all be afforded the opportunity to grow and change.

WHAT IS LISTENING?

- Listening is active and participatory and aims to absorb meaning. Comparatively, hearing merely takes in words.
- We think much faster than we listen, so we are often filling in those gaps with our own words, views, and judgements.
- Less than 2% of the population has training in listening, yet it is a top business skill according to Forbes.

HANDLING OPPOSITION

Some of the ways we typically handle opposing views are to:

- Argue – Fight with the person in attempt to win or devalue the opposing opinion.
- Avoid – Ignore or actively stay away from the topic or the person as a whole.
- Accommodate – Compromise between the two oppositional points until no one is happy.

LISTENING CHALLENGES

- Listen to hear – Do you listen just to hear rather than to understand?
- Interrupting – Do you interrupt people when they are speaking?
- Rehearsing – Are you rehearsing what you are going to say as someone else speaks?
- Mismatching tone – Do you respond with an emotional tone that doesn't sync with what the speaker said?
- Parallel talk – Do you use someone else's stories as a segue to yours without engaging first?

BUILDING RAPPORT

- Find common ground – Move slowly or tip-toe at the start to find what triggers need to be avoided. Let them lay the groundwork for what they share.
- Don't focus on differences – At the start, make sure you are not focusing on how you are different, and instead on shared humanity or a neutral topic.
- Focus on a value-based end goal – Although you may have different tactics, you both may want the same end goal based on your values.
 - Example: You support universal healthcare and they do not. Connect in the value that at the end of the day, you both want all people to be healthy.
- Listen – Rapport is easier to build while listening rather than speaking!

Approach every conversation with these 3 things:

- Curiosity – Be truly open to learn from this person. Model yourself like a toddler, questioning everything as if everything is an opportunity for growth.
- Humility – Treat others with respect, giving them the space to express their thoughts and opinions without fear of being condemned or thought foolish.
- Empathy – Try to understand how the person is feeling and why they might feel that way.

DEVELOPING OUR LISTENING SKILLS

Ask better questions

- Open questions invite others to tell a story in response.
- Open questions gain new insights.
- Open questions usually begin with who, what, how, where, or when.
- If you think you know how the person will respond, you are not asking the right question.

Preferred language

- Inject as little “personal language” as possible.
- Remember that what one word means to you might not be the same for them.
- A person’s word choice gives a lot of insight into their feelings on a subject, what motivates them, and their values.
- Try to avoid using terms on the opposite side of the scale of perceived respect. Instead, use neutral terms when encountering language at one side of the scale.

Mirror language

- Mirroring their words after exploring their understanding of the meaning is a great way to build rapport.
 - This isn’t a simple trick or manipulation, and you don’t want to mirror words without understanding.
- First step is to make sure you are on the same page with their meaning. Get to the meaning through open ended questions.
 - Example: “When you say inflation, how do you experience that in your daily life or how do you see that in your community?”
- Once you both understand their shared meaning, you can use that language in affirming a shared value.
 - Example: “I can definitely see how inflation is making it harder for people to feel secure.”

Minimal encouragers

Acknowledge someone's statement with responses such as:

- I see.
- Wow.
- That sounds tough.
- I'm sorry to hear that.
- I hear what you're saying.
- I'm not sure I understand, can you explain?

Avoid saying "I understand" – we can't always fully grasp the complexities of someone's thoughts.

Emotion labeling

- Use emotion labeling to de-escalate when necessary.
- If a person seems aggravated, try to identify and label their emotions.
 - Example: "It seems like this issue makes you [frustrated, sad, angry, annoyed]."
- Allow space for person to correct the emotion they are feeling.
 - Example: "I'm not frustrated, I'm sad."
- Respond with understanding.
 - Example: "Okay, thank you for clarifying for me. I can see how this issue can bring about that feeling."
- Don't move forward until the emotional charge is lowered.
- If you find yourself emotionally charged, take a second to step away. Time helps lower the charge of an emotion.

Paraphrasing and summarizing

Paraphrasing – Extract the meaning and repeat it back, asking for confirmation.

- If someone is being aggressive or vulgar, soften and rephrase by repeating back to clarify without the charged language.
- This is a chance to show the person that you are listening while also demonstrating how to be less explosive.

Summarizing – Capture the main ideas and most prevalent emotion.

- Only use toward end of conversation to sum up long conversation and see if you missed any areas of potential elaboration.
- Use sparingly and only after showing understanding with long exchanges.

Avoid the straw man

- Straw man – A misrepresentation that is easier to defeat than the real opinion.
- Don't misrepresent a person's views. Check to make sure you understand and don't fill in your own gaps without their input.

- Don't let a person misrepresent your views. Take time to correct your view before moving on.

THE 3 C'S OF SELF-CARE

Community

- Chat with a family member or friend.
- Reach out to your SJA community!

Center

- Re-center around foundational elements and remember to ask questions that help humanize the other person.
- Imagine what your opinions and biases might sound like to them.
- Re-center in your growth and what you gain from talking to people with different experiences.
- Keep something close that reminds you why you do this work!

Calm

- Take a break and step away for a bit.
- Tag in another SJA member.
- Take a deep breath, count to 10 in your mind.

SUMMARY

- This is the art of listening – not just hearing, but truly and actively listening.
- Even when we don't agree, there is a lot to learn about people, their experiences, and their motivations.
- Engage in deep listening, without confronting or endorsing.
- Refrain from responding with emotion or anger. Be sure to thank each person for taking the time to have this conversation with you, and express your appreciation that they discussed these issues honestly.
- Go beyond your own understanding and look at the world from another's point of view.
- Avoid leading questions that might make people feel defensive, and often limit the options for someone to answer with.