

Um...Excuse Me? Having Hard Conversations with Confidence *Elective*

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SUMMARY:	In this session, participants will practice skills for having various kinds of challenging conversations, guided by the wisdom of the Hillel/Shamai relationship. - <i>Submitted by Ariella Rosen</i>
TOPIC(S):	Communication skills
LEARNING OBJECTIVE:	Participants will be able to identify and put into practice the skills for having a challenging conversation.
AUDIENCE:	This session is best for those 16 and up, though it can certainly be adapted for younger participants. Ideal group size is 20-30.
TIMING:	90 minutes
APPENDICES:	Communication packet
MATERIALS NEEDED:	Pens, Cardboard Boces
SET-UP DETAILS:	This session can take place in any space where participants can move around and interact with one another and have conversations.

SESSION TIMELINE & OUTLINE:

Establishing the Challenges [00:00-00:30]
 Empathetically Listening [00:30-00:45]
 Honestly Expressing [00:45-01:00]
 Knowing Ourselves [01:00-01:10]
 Tearing Down the Barriers [01:10-01:20]
 Debrief [01:20-01:30]

Establishing the Challenges (30 min.)

Welcome participants, and establish group norms, confidentiality agreement, etc.

On flipchart paper, start generating a list with participants- what are the things that get in our way when we are trying to have a conversation about a challenging topic with another person? (Try to keep responses focused on things that prevent THEM from communicating well in those moments, rather than blaming external factors like the other person.)

Ask participants to think of a time they needed to have a challenging conversation, whether with a camper, peer, or supervisor (or perhaps not even in a camp setting), and struggled. What went wrong? What was the outcome of that conversation? [Note: it should be something they feel comfortable sharing with others.]

- Spend 5 minutes journaling in response to this prompt.
- Ask participants to get into pairs and to share their situation with someone else. Each pair should feel comfortable enough with both partners' stories that they can potentially role-play that scenario later.

Acknowledge that there are many sorts of tough conversations we might have, from supporting a camper who is having a hard time to speaking with a camper who is bullying others, navigating conflict with a co-counselor, self-advocating to a supervisor, expressing political disagreements, etc.)

Explain: rather than go through each type of scenario, we are going to try to zoom in on particular skills we can practice that can be helpful in any circumstance.

We will be guided by two sources of wisdom: The Center for Nonviolent Communication, and the ancient debates of Hillel and Shammai.

(Explain that Hillel and Shammai were ancient sages famous for their disagreements. We can learn a lot from their teachings. [The Center for Nonviolent Communication](#) is an organization that trains people in how to communicate more thoughtfully and meaningfully with one another.)

[Disclaimer: Unless you are a trained facilitator, this will not be a full CNVC training, but rather guided (in a very basic way) by their approach.]

Hand out Conversation packets to participants.

Open with a dramatic telling of the Hillel and Shammai story on the opening page, and read the quote from CNVC founder Marshall Rosenberg.

What need did the student have? What needs did Shammai and Hillel have? How were those needs met or not?

“Empathetically Listening” (15 min.)

Story/Narration Game: Invite one participant to tell a story only by acting, no speaking out loud allowed. Ask another participant to narrate the story based on what they think the first participant might be acting.

After 2-3 rounds, invite one more actor to “tell a story,” and explain that the narrator cannot say anything until the scene has been complete. Pay attention to cues, and when the actor is finished, tell us what you noticed: how were they feeling? what sort of change happened from the beginning of the story to the end?

Discuss:

- When we REALLY listen, what is different? How can we become better listeners?
- Note that all behavior is a form of communication, and that communication is an expression of needs that need to be met.
- How can Shammai's teaching (on the handout) help us in being better listeners?
- Make a list of techniques- not interrupting, paying attention to body language, reflecting back, etc.

Ask the group: could anyone's story (from the opening journaling) have ended differently if it had been easier to listen and notice what was really going on?

Ask for a volunteer to role play their scenario with their original partner, this time practicing active listening skills.

“Honestly Expressing” (15 min.)

Play the “[Yes, but/Yes, and](#)” game with 2 volunteers. Play 2-3 rounds.
Unpack the experience. How is progress made? How is progress blocked?

Read the Hillel quote on the handout:

- When we have conversations, how do we stand up both for ourselves and for others?
- What gets in the way of us expressing our own needs?

Share a formula with the group: When you... I feel... because...

- What is useful about this sentence?
- How does it allow us both to advocate for our own needs and acknowledge the other person’s?

Ask the group: could anyone’s story have ended differently if you had had an easier time expressing yourself?

Ask for a volunteer to role play their scenario with their original partner, this time using the formula and/or saying “yes, and.”

Knowing Ourselves (10 min.)

Read the “Mindful Inner World” language from the handout. Ask the group to share examples of ways we act when we aren’t at our best. How do we take it out on others? (What happens when you’re: stressed? tired? hungry? homesick?)

Return to the opening story about the student who wanted to learn the Torah while standing on one foot.

What might have been going on with Shammai that day? Hillel? the student?

Ask the group: could anyone’s story have ended differently if one or both of you had been aware of your own feelings? If you realized that your/their reactions had more to do with your/their own feelings than the content of the conversation?

Ask for a volunteer to role play their scenario with their original partner, this time acknowledging what is going on behind the scenes for them.

Acknowledge the texts at the bottom of the page: Hillel and Shammai still had a great deal of respect for one another, despite their conflicts and disagreements.

Tearing Down the Barriers (10 min.)

Ask the group: was there any sort of problem or challenge that we haven’t covered yet that came up in your original scenario?

Invite each person to take a cardboard box, and to write on it what they understood to be the primary obstacle in their original scenario. Why didn’t the conversation “work?”

Stack the blocks forming a wall down the middle of the room, with one partner on each side.

Explain that we are going to remove the wall now, brick by brick, by declaring what communication tool you can use to change the outcome of that conversation.

Congratulate everyone for tearing down the barriers to effective, meaningful, and productive communication.

Debrief (10 min.)

We covered a LOT today in a very short amount of time. This could have been a multiple-day workshop. We can't do it all, but we can do a lot.

Review specific tools learned:

- Behavior is communication, communication is unmet need
- Active listening
- Saying "yes, and."
- Self-advocacy- using I statements, and "when you...I feel... because"
- Paying attention to what is going on behind the scenes for ourselves. Being generous in considering what others are carrying.

If you're short on time, consider doing the debrief while asking everyone to stand on one foot!

ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR BRINGING IT BACK TO CAMP:

Build this session out into a multiple-session curriculum for communication.

Utilize pieces of this session to work on bunk or staff dynamics, or any other sort of group work.