

Dignity Conversations: Public Meetings

CONVERSATIONS THAT LEAD TO INSIGHT AND ACTION

Safety is an Element of Dignity that needs to be upheld at every public meeting. People need to feel safe speaking up and offering feedback. If we're afraid of being embarrassed or getting attacked, we can't have a candid conversation, and we can't solve our problems.

- When you speak in public, do you get nervous? What tends to make you nervous? On occasions when you're not nervous, why not?
- Can you recall a time when you felt especially anxious or unsafe speaking in public? What was that experience like for you? Have you ever intentionally made others feel unsafe? What were the circumstances?
- What happens when people do not feel safe speaking up? What happens to the public discussion? What happens to the relationships? What happens to the community? What happens to the problems you need to solve? What steps have you taken, or might you take, to make sure people feel safe speaking up and offering feedback?

Researcher Daniel Kessler, creator of the Tolerance Project, finds that when people hear those on the other side offering opposing opinions, the listener's empathy drops. But when people hear someone on the other side tell personal stories to explain their point of view, the listener's empathy rises – even when they don't agree with the point of view.

- How might this insight be used to improve the tone of a school board meeting?
- Do you think asking a person to share a personal story would defuse hostility? Would it be practical for a town to make this storytelling a feature of its public meetings?
- Would there have to be more dignity in the culture for people to feel safe sharing personal stories, or would the personal stories themselves help lift dignity in the culture?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said that the best way to put the past to rest is acknowledgement. When we have been roughed up, he said, we want to be acknowledged for what we've been through.

- How could this insight apply to holding an effective town hall meeting?
- Some officials have said that – on the advice of their attorneys – they can't respond to citizen feedback expressed in public meetings. How would you feel if you went to a public meeting, expressed a deep concern, and heard no response?
- Have you ever seen the mood shift when someone is acknowledged for their hardship and told, "That should not have happened." Can you think of a time this happened to you?
- Some experts say the best way to defuse hostility is to let the angry person speak without interruption and when they pause, ask them to say more. Why do you think this would work?