



Better Conversations

Group Activities

Doha Debates works with Dr. Govinda Clayton, a senior researcher in peace processes at the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, to develop the Better Conversations video series. Dr. Clayton is also “the Connector” for Doha Debates. In the [Better Conversations](#) video series, he introduces the skills and practices necessary to conduct difficult conversations about potentially sensitive, local and global challenges. With these skills in hand, we can productively engage with the Doha Debates materials.

Better Conversations is a series of eight short videos introducing the skills:

[How to Get Along with Other People](#)

[Set Clear Goals](#)

[Manage Your Emotions](#)

[Understand Their Story](#)

[Master Listening](#)

[Body Language Matters](#)

[Change Your Approach](#)

[Ending on a High Note](#)

Pro-tip 1: The Better Conversations series can be taught in a sequence to develop a full range of social emotional skills. These Better Conversations Group Activities can be facilitated in any group setting.

Pro-tip 2: Educators may also choose to use these as individual activities selecting those that meet their learning goals, available time and needs of participants.

Pro-tip 3: Educators may assign participants to explore the Better Conversations videos as a self-study project, using the simple prompts accompanying the videos on our website.

Pro-tip 4: Consult the Deep Dive Guide for more information about facilitation.



1. How to Get Along with Other People

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [How to Get Along with Other People](#) and provides an overview of the essential skills necessary to have better conversations.

SKILLS

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship Skills

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Distribute sticky notes to all participants. Ask participants to answer the following question. They should put each answer on a different sticky note. Each participant should have at least three answers, but there is no maximum.
 - What are the qualities of a productive conversation?
2. Once they are finished, distribute another set of sticky notes to participants, this time of a different color. Ask participants to answer the following question, following the same instructions as above:
 - What are the qualities of a productive conversationalist?
3. Have participants come together in groups of three or four and share their answers to each question.
4. In their small groups, ask participants to organize their sticky notes into categories.
5. Once participants have finished sharing their answers, discussing them and categorizing them, they should share out with the larger group.
6. Explain to participants that they will be hearing from a conflict resolution expert, Dr. Clayton, about skills that make a productive conversation.
7. Show the video [How to Get Along with Other People](#).
8. Ask participants to reflect on the video. Consider using the following prompts:
 - What stood out to you? What surprised you?
 - What do you agree with? What do you disagree with?
 - Have you ever used any of these steps in a conversation? If so, which ones? How did it go?



1. How to Get Along with Other People

9. Arrange participants into six groups. Assign each group one of the following steps of a better conversation as outlined by Dr. Clayton.
 - Setting Goals: Figure out what you want and why it's important to you
 - Do a self-check in: How do you feel?
 - Active listening: Figure out other's perspectives
 - Ask questions
 - Look past positions and focus on interests
 - End on a positive note: Show gratitude
10. Instruct each group to prepare a short presentation about the step they were assigned, using the following questions as a guide:
 - What does the step entail?
 - Give an example of what the step might look like in practice.
 - What are some of the challenges one might face in carrying out this step?
 - Do you agree that this is an important step in having a productive conversation?
11. Invite participants to share their presentations and ask questions.

DEBRIEF

12. Give students five minutes to reflect on the group work they did in this session and how they might have used or could use the steps laid out by Dr. Clayton. Use the following prompts:
 - When you worked in small groups with your peers, did you find yourself using any of Dr. Clayton's steps to facilitate the conversation? If so, which ones? How did it work? If not, do you think any of those steps could have been useful to you in your group work?
 - Did you notice any of your peers using any of these steps? If so, which ones? What was it like? If not, do you think it could have been beneficial for peers to use these steps in their group work? Why/not?
 - Moving forward, do you think any of these steps could be useful in group projects? Which ones?
 - How can you be intentional about using these steps when having difficult conversations?
13. Invite students to share their responses and encourage them to speak about peers anonymously (especially if speaking critically).



2. Set Clear Goals

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Set Clear Goals](#) and presents the importance of establishing a set of clear goals for the conversation or debate.

SKILLS

- Self-management

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Begin by asking participants to think about a conversation they have had that was particularly unproductive. What made the conversation unproductive? Give participants two minutes to write down their answer. Ask participants to share with the group.
2. Ask participants what might have helped to make the conversation more productive? Write their ideas on the board. At this point, the goal is to brainstorm any idea without attaching judgment or evaluation to it.
3. Explain that this video from Dr. Clayton will introduce one way to make conversations better.
4. Show the video [Set Clear Goals](#).
5. After viewing the video, ask participants to reflect using these prompts:
 - What stood out to you?
 - What surprised you?
 - Do you agree with the video and why?

You may also want to ask more concrete questions about the video, particularly around the three reasons Dr. Clayton outlines for setting a goal.

- Dr. Clayton suggests that setting and sharing goals for your difficult conversation helps you to learn about the other person's perspective. Why is that important? How might understanding the other person's perspective change the outcome of your conversation?
- Dr. Clayton notes "you can hope that the other person will understand what you are saying, and perhaps be moved, but that might not always happen. So focus on what you can control." What can you control in these situations? What is out of your control?



2. Set Clear Goals

6. Have participants return to what they wrote about their unproductive conversation. Ask participants to imagine they were going into that conversation again and have them write down what their goal for the conversation is. Use these questions to guide them:
 - Do they think that having a goal might have helped make the conversation more productive? Why/not?
 - Do they think it would have been difficult to share that goal with the other person in the conversation? Why/not?
 - How might they have been able to work together to find a way through the conversation and forward?

DEBRIEF

7. After participants have thought independently about goals for their unproductive conversation, bring them together for a full group conversation. Invite participants to share their thoughts on goal setting in particular and more broadly about having better conversations. Consider using the following questions:
 - Dr. Clayton says that "setting out to change someone's mind rarely works." If that's the case, what is the purpose of engaging in better conversations?
 - How does having a goal help you in your better conversation?



3. Manage Your Emotions

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Manage Your Emotions](#) and the importance of identifying and communicating one's underlying emotions that may be driving the conversation.

SKILLS

- Self-awareness
- Self-management

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask participants to think about a conversation they've had in the past when emotions got in the way of having a productive discussion. As a facilitator, be prepared to share your own example.
2. Ask participants to identify how that emotion manifested for them in their body language or voice and write each one down on a sticky note. For example, raising one's voice, crossing arms, rising stress level, racing heartbeat, increased breathing, shutting down, sweaty palms, derogatory language, etc. The idea is to focus on how emotions in an unproductive conversation manifested, not on the subject of the conversation itself. Remind participants that they are identifying how the emotions manifested for themselves, not on the other person.
3. Ask participants to place their sticky notes on a wall or board. Arrange them into categories as they emerge. For example, "Emotions manifesting in..."
 - my language and words
 - my body
 - my voice
4. Clarify that difficult conversations are often associated with emotions, including passion and excitement. Emotions are not necessarily bad; they are important to negotiations, persuasion, and sharing ideas. Looking back at the board, point out how emotions that are not regulated or managed during difficult conversations can manifest in ways that derail one's focus on the topic and prevent us from listening carefully and respectfully to the other person. This has happened to all of us, but being self-aware of one's emotions and managing them can help us have better and more productive conversations.
5. Show the video [Manage Your Emotions](#).

3. Manage Your Emotions

6. Ask participants for their feedback and thoughts about the video. For example:
 - What was one thing that stood out to you?
 - What does Dr. Clayton mean by “hidden emotions?”
7. Dr. Clayton says that words like “should, bad/good, and wrong” are manifestations of hidden emotions when we want to blame someone or tell them that they are wrong. Ask participants if they agree or disagree. What are some other phrases or words that might show up in difficult conversations in which emotions are getting the best of us? Add them to the board or wall with sticky notes.
8. Remind participants that these manifestations are signs of underlying emotions. Being able to identify them in ourselves will help us manage our emotions and channel them productively in the conversation, rather than derailing it.
9. Ask participants to go back to the board and identify one or two manifestations of emotions that they want to manage in difficult conversations. Ideally, have participants choose from different categories (e.g. one body and one language). As a writing exercise, have participants reflect and identify how they might control the emotion. For example, “When my voice starts to rise, I will take a deep breath and pause.”

DEBRIEF

10. Ask participants to identify common strategies for managing emotions. What are some productive ways of managing emotions when it manifests in language, in the body, or in our voices?
11. Emotions are always present in our interactions with others, especially during difficult conversations. Can you provide examples of how emotions in such conversations can be used productively?



4. Understand Their Story

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Understand Their Story](#) and encourages participants to think about the stories that we tell about ourselves and how those may contribute to personal conflict

SKILLS

- Social awareness
- Relationship skills

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Begin the discussion by asking participants: What does it feel like when your side of a story in a conflict is not understood?
2. Show the video [Understand Their Story](#).
3. After the video, ask participants to reflect on the video by asking the following questions:
 - What stood out to you from this video?
 - In the video when talking about how to have a better conversation with someone, Dr. Clayton says, "Address your problem as the gap between these two stories." What does this mean?

DEBRIEF

4. Use the following questions to debrief:
 - What are some strategies to better understand someone else's story?
 - Why might it be challenging to accept that our stories of the same circumstance might be different AND both true?
 - If we accept this, how might it change the way you speak with others in difficult conversations?



5. Master Listening

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Master Listening](#) and defines what it means to listen, and how active listening can contribute to having better conversations

SKILLS

- Relationship Skills

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Begin a discussion with participants by asking the following:
 - What makes a conversation go really well?
 - What does it mean to listen?
 - What is the difference between hearing and listening?
 - What does it mean to be heard?
2. Show the video [Master Listening](#).
3. After watching the video, ask participants to reflect on the video. Consider the following prompts for the reflection:
 - What did you like about the video?
 - What stood out to you?
 - What surprised you?
4. Ask the following questions to review the video and more deeply understand the value and skills of listening:
 - In the video, Dr. Clayton says: "Don't say you understand. Say you WANT to understand and ask questions to prove it."
 - What is the difference between saying you understand and saying you WANT to understand?
 - What kind of questions can you ask to show that you want to understand someone's perspective?
 - Dr. Clayton encourages us to use our active listening skills to "imagine a world where both your stories can exist together"
 - What do you think that means?
 - What are the challenges of imagining a world where conflicting stories can exist together? What are the benefits?

DEBRIEF

5. Use the following prompts to debrief the conversation and video:
 - Has there been a time when you felt your conversation or perspective was misunderstood? If you could go back to that time, how might you incorporate some of Dr. Clayton's advice to change the way you communicated?
 - Would you be willing to try the listening activity Dr. Clayton recommends towards the end of the video with the "worst listener you know?" How might you prepare for this challenge?



6. Body Language Matters

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Body Language Matters](#) and introduces participants to the role of body language in difficult conversations

SKILLS

- Social awareness
- Relationship skills

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask participants what they know about body language and how paying attention to someone's body language can be useful in a difficult conversation.
2. Show the video [Body Language Matters](#).
3. After the video, ask participants to reflect on the video by asking the following questions:
 - What stood out to you from this video?
 - What surprised you about the video?
 - In the video, Dr. Clayton alludes to the cultural element of body language, noting that keeping eye contact about 70 percent of the time is unique to Western culture. How do you think body language differs between cultures? How do you think those differences might impact a conversation? What can you do if you misread someone's body language?
4. Ask the following questions to check comprehension and clarify key points from the video:
 - When having a difficult conversation with someone, what can we learn from their...
 - Legs and feet?
 - Arms?
 - Mouth?
 - Eyes?
 - Dr. Clayton talks about mirroring in the video. What is mirroring and how can we use it to strengthen our conversations?

DEBRIEF

5. Use the following questions to debrief:
 - Is body language something you have paid attention to before, either yours or that of someone else?
 - What do you think it would be like to pay attention to body language in a difficult conversation? What would be the benefits and challenges?



7. Change Your Approach

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Change Your Approach](#) and guides participants to identify three of Dr. Govinda Clayton's tricks for improving difficult conversations

SKILLS

- Social awareness
- Relationship skills

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask participants to imagine they are having a difficult conversation with a friend about a social or political issue that they feel passionately about. You disagree vehemently on one point and just keep arguing about it, seemingly unable to move past it. Ask participants to brainstorm what strategies they might use to move the conversation forward?
2. Explain that they will be watching a short video where Dr. Clayton introduces three strategies to move past those sticking points.
3. Show the video [Change Your Approach](#).
4. Use the following questions to discuss the video:
 - The first "hack" for a better conversation is to find common ground by focusing on interests and not positions. What does that mean? Can you think of an example of this?
 - The second "hack" for a better conversation is to reframe when you're feeling attacked. What does that mean? Can you think of another example?
 - The third "hack" for a better conversation is to use deep breaths to get out of your head and focus on the present. What does that mean? How does that benefit you in a difficult conversation?

DEBRIEF

5. Use the following questions to debrief the conversation:
 - What do you think of these strategies for better conversations?
 - What do you think are the challenges of using these strategies? What do you think are the benefits?



8. Ending on a High Note

PURPOSE

This activity accompanies the video [Ending on a High Note](#) and teaches participants the best ways to end a difficult conversation and why ending on a “high note” is so important.

SKILLS

- Social Awareness

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask participants how they think a difficult conversation should end.
2. Watch the video [Ending on a High Note](#).
3. Use the following questions to reflect briefly on the video:
 - What did you think of the video?
 - What stood out to you about the video?
 - What surprised you from the video?
4. Check comprehension and review the content of the video with the following questions:
 - According to the video, what is the difference between ending and completing a conversation?
 - Dr. Clayton suggests that we should end conversations on a positive note. Why is that?
 - Dr. Clayton lays out three steps to completing a difficult conversation. Review them:
 - Recap and reframe
 - Identify what's been left unresolved
 - Acknowledge and appreciate the contribution of the other person

DEBRIEF

5. Use the following questions to reflect on and debrief the video:
 - Do you agree that it is important to end on a positive note? Why/not?
 - What do you think it would be like to intentionally end a difficult conversation on a positive note? What would that contribute to the conversation?
 - What do you think would be challenging about ending on a positive note? What could you do to overcome that challenge?