2026

WestEd
Western Educational Equity Assistance Center

How Do We Hold This Conversation Together? Building Relational Trust Across Difference

Lauren Trout

Overview

This resource is designed to support educational leaders in preparing for and engaging in difficult conversations, particularly ones that involve reaching across difference—differences of identity, experience, worldview, and power. These kinds of differences are in every school, district, and educational community. Rather than offering a script or "right" way of engaging in these conversations, this resource introduces a framework built on relational trust. It assumes that the shape of a difficult conversation depends on how much trust currently exists between the people in it.

While educational leaders often must make difficult decisions alone, conversations are by nature collaborative. Because of this, the framing for educational leaders should not be "What is the right way to have this conversation?" but rather **"How do we hold this conversation together?"**

The resource walks through four levels of relational trust: low, medium, high, and broken. For each level, it offers a description of what relational trust between different people can look like, and it provides a protocol to help structure a rightsized conversation that spans their differences and then a vignette or examples illustrating the protocol in practice. Whether you are a classroom teacher, a site administrator, or a state or federal education agency employee, this resource is meant to help you feel equipped to hold difficult conversations—not through individual expertise or the perfect choice of words but through the relational values you already have.

Knowing how to hold difficult conversations is an essential competency for educators and education leaders. Strong teams, healthy school cultures, and continuous improvement all depend on adults being able to talk honestly with one another, especially when practices need to change. Leaders regularly ask colleagues to adopt new approaches and must be prepared to navigate resistance when they do. When not every student is being supported to meet high standards, educators need to be able to talk with one another about why and be able to make changes together. Engaging in productive difficult conversations—and modeling that practice for others—is one of the leadership skills that makes this possible. This resource is part of the WEEAC's work to help the adults in education institutions understand one another and work together to provide the best educational opportunities for every student.

WestEd
Western Educational Equity Assistance Center

Introduction

It is Wednesday morning, and you are sitting in your car in the parking lot 5 minutes before you need to walk through the door. You have been sitting here longer than you planned.

There is a meeting on your calendar that you have been quietly dreading for weeks. It is not a crisis; nothing has exploded, no one is demanding immediate action, which almost makes it harder. The situation has been building slowly, the way things do when no one quite says what they are really thinking. You all know what needs to be discussed, and yet everyone keeps circling, somehow avoiding discussion.

From the privacy of your car, you name what sometimes feels impossible to say in the meeting room: that you all are coming to this issue from very different places, histories, experiences of what is at stake, and understanding of what is even true about the situation.

You have lain awake rehearsing versions of what you want to say in your head. But rehearsing a conversation and being ready to have it feel like very different things. Even if you could find the perfect words, you do not get the sense that they would be enough for the conversation to feel successful. You wonder whether the trust, having been both built up and worn down over years of working together, is strong enough for you to have the conversation.

You pick up your bag, open the car door, and walk inside.

Every educational leader can name a conversation that needs to happen and has not happened. Most often, the tension around these conversations stems not from a lack of information or will but from a lack of relational conditions that would make honest conversation possible—especially for relationships that span the many and valuable differences that shape strong and healthy educational communities.

For educational leaders, the differences between themselves and others can be in several overlapping dimensions:

- **identity:** race, gender, sexuality, disability, age, religion, and other aspects of who someone is in the world
- **experience:** a person's lived history within an organization, system, or community (including experiences of being served well by it versus being overlooked or harmed by it)
- **worldview:** philosophy, values, and beliefs that inform habits, decisions, and interactions
- **power:** formal and informal authority, including whose voice has historically exerted the most influence in a particular context

Not all difference carries the same weight, but differences almost always are present in difficult conversations that educational leaders face.

Difficult conversations across difference can often feel like chores or avoidable tasks. But at their core, they are fundamentally human and relational practices. As a result, their success is determined not by individuals doing it "right" but by groups having the relational trust to navigate discomfort together. It is not about being "good" at difficult conversations; it is about being able to stay turned toward and respectful of others when challenges arise (Ross & Ghadbian, 2020). The more opportunities educational leaders have for building and deepening relational trust across difference, the more resources they have to navigate difficult conversations when they arise. Conversely, when relational trust is low, broken, or untested, the conversation must not be abandoned; it must be calibrated to what the conditions can actually support.

Reframing Difficult Conversations

> "What if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?"
>
> —*Bayo Akomolafe (n.d.)*

Imagine you need to have individual conversations on a sensitive topic with three colleagues. One colleague is new and you have not really had the chance to connect. The second colleague has been with you through thick and thin for a decade. The third colleague is someone you usually try to avoid due to an unresolved past conflict. While the content is the same for all three conversations, the approach will inherently vary based on the dynamic between you and the other person in the room.

A person's capacity to have difficult conversations, especially with someone different, is a relational and human capacity. When tasked with a difficult conversation, people tend to focus their energy on the "technical" elements—finding the perfect words or technique that will ensure they do it "right" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). But difficult conversations across difference are not problems to solve or tasks to get through. They are ongoing relational practices, held collectively, that build the conditions for more conversations to become possible, for strong communities (Evans & Vaandering, 2022), and for more human and just systems (Stanford Social Innovation Review, n.d.). **Imagine what changes about how you engage in difficult conversations across difference when you hold them not as individual tasks to get right but as shared markers of healthy communities.**

For educational leaders, engaging in complex, relational processes can often feel at odds with day-to-day pressures like time constraints, senses of urgency, and expectations to find quick solutions. These ways of operating and making decisions can be antithetical to relational trust (and, it could be argued, are the results

and costs of avoiding or denying the value of difficult conversations).

This reframing of engaging in difficult conversations is not new. It comes from a restorative paradigm, which belongs to Indigenous communities from many places around the world. This perspective includes beliefs, practices, values, habits, and mindsets that honor people's inherent interconnectedness, and it holds that people belong to each other. It is a worldview in which no one is disposable and people need each other to do more than survive.

Trust, Difference, and the Space in Between

The most successful difficult conversations are the ones that are attuned to the relational trust between the people involved. Relational trust is defined as "a relationship where people accept risk and vulnerability because they judge the other as respectful, holding personal regard for others, acting with integrity, and competent in their role" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 23).

Relational Trust as the Primary Resource

Defined in this way, relational trust is the primary determinant of and an anchor point for what is possible in difficult conversations. It does not just inform tone and technique; more importantly, when relational trust is high, conversations treat imperfection with dignity and offer opportunities for repair if harm inadvertently occurs. Trust is what allows people to bring their full selves and experiences into the room, to bring curiosity to things that challenge their understanding, and to stay present even when the conversation is difficult.

This is not to imply that skill and preparation are irrelevant. But individual skill in a difficult conversation without relational trust becomes a tool rather than a way of being. It is attunement, not technique, that supports difficult conversations, especially those across difference.

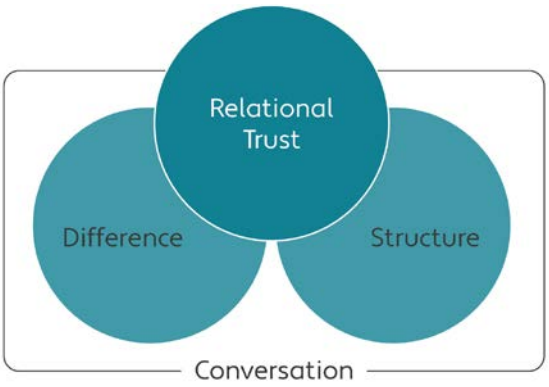
The Reciprocal Relationship Between Trust and Difference

Within systems shaped by unequal access and power, the differences include experiences of harm, and they inform interpersonal dynamics long before individuals even meet one another (powell, 2012). This often silent but widely felt tension can create complex conditions in which two people—even if they have genuine personal regard for one another—still have fragile trust across specific elements of difference.

Not all difference carries the same relational weight. A difference in views about instructional philosophy is not the same as a difference rooted in racial identity or institutional power. The latter tends to carry historical and present harm that the former does not. This does not mean the conversation cannot happen without deep trust; it means the conversation needs to be rightsized to the trust that currently exists.

Trust shapes how interpersonal difference can be felt and shared in conversations (Figure 1). Difference, in turn, informs how each person's level of trust is applied. When relational trust is high, differences between two people in a conversation can be generative—expanding ideas, beliefs, and values. When trust is low, that same difference can become a source of guardedness or lack of safety. When someone names a difference, they are testing trust levels, and how that naming is received either expands or contracts what can be named the next time. Therefore, the trust-building work that supports difficult conversations is not a set of technical steps to follow but rather the enactment of a set of human-centered values.

Figure 1. Relational Trust



Adapted from theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman, the concept of the "adjacent possible" describes the set of all immediate, achievable changes that can be made from a current state—the next right step available given where things actually stand, not where we wish they stood (Kauffman, 2023). What is next possible is based on what is now actual. When applied to difficult conversations across difference, this concept releases educational leaders from the paralysis of the ideal. It shifts the question from "How do I do this difficult conversation right?" to "Given the relational conditions that exist right now, what is the most human-centered next step available to me?"

The adjacent possible also means that trust building is not superfluous to the real work. It *is* the work. Every interaction that deepens trust across difference expands what is possible in future conversations.

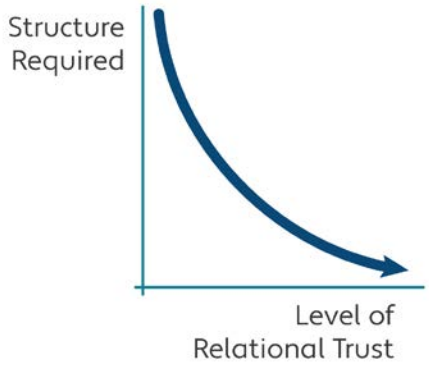
"Rightsizing" the Conversation: The Four Levels of Relational Trust

This section is designed to offer educational leaders a practical framework for engaging in difficult conversations across difference. It identifies four levels of trust—low, medium, high, and broken—and for each it offers

- a description of what this looks like across difference in educational contexts,
- a protocol to support difficult conversations across difference, and
- a vignette illustrating a rightsized conversation at that level.

As you read, notice that the lower the trust level, the more structure the conversations require. As relational trust goes up, so too does the ability to move away from highly structured conversations and let trust do the heavy lifting (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Structure and Relational Trust



Level 1: Low Relational Trust

While there may be professional courtesy and an ability to coexist among people with low relational trust, there is little authentic or genuine exchange. Across difference, there is guardedness—an awareness of the gap but no established bridge. Conversations at this level feel high risk because there is not yet enough trust for either person to feel safe expressing discomfort or being vulnerable with the other.

Rightsizing the Conversation

At low trust, the rightsized difficult conversation is about identifying individual and shared values and bringing curiosity to stories, beliefs, and ideas that either participant in the conversation holds as truth. Participants are being invited to identify the things that are important to them while also examining the things they think they do or do not know. Self-reflective practices that ask participants to hold multiple truths and perspectives offer small exchanges with low stakes that can begin to establish genuine relational trust. This mirrors what *Crucial Conversations* authors describe as building a shared "pool of meaning," the idea that the more relevant information two people surface and share, even at low trust, the more possibilities open up for a conversation that serves everyone involved (Grenny et al., 2022).

Conversation Protocol and Vignette: Reflective Process

Reflection is a vital tool when relational trust has not yet been established because even though self-reflection asks a lot of oneself, it asks little of the other person. Educational leaders can use reflective processes to examine assumptions, positionality, and emotional responses before or during difficult conversations across

difference. Adapted from A Reflective Process for Working Through Complex Restorative Practice Dilemmas in Schools (Wu & Trout, 2022), the following reflective process takes inspiration in part from Gibbs's (1988) Reflective Cycle and Gorski and Pothini's (2018) equity literacy case study analysis process. The reflective process consists of six stages to help educational leaders engage in difficult conversations, and (as shown in the protocol provided in the left column of Table 1) each step includes questions to ask oneself:

1. **Describe** the situation prompting the conversation.
2. **Surface** your own emotions and thoughts about the situation.
3. **Consider** the emotions and thoughts of others involved in the situation.
4. **Imagine** the values and guiding principles that would contribute to a meaningful conversation.
5. **Identify** the constraints and challenges that are at play, including factors beyond your control.
6. **Act** on a rightsized first step based on the reflections identified in previous stages.

In practice, most of this protocol's reflective work happens before the conversation itself. The vignette below describes an example of this reflective work largely to illustrate the thinking, not to suggest that the process should unfold aloud in front of the other person.

Vignette: Diego is 3 months into a new instructional equity coordinator role at the district office. Part of his job is reviewing discipline data, and he's noticed that one high school teacher, Ms. Nelson, has a referral rate well above her peers. He has never had a real conversation with her—they have exchanged hallway pleasantries but nothing more. He needs to raise it with her, and he is dreading it.

Table 1. Reflective Process Protocol and Examples of Responses

Reflective process protocol	Vignette examples
Describe the situation prompting the conversation. • What story or belief am I holding as true about this situation or the other person that I have not yet questioned? • What are the identities and positionality of the individuals involved? • What information do I not yet have that might be useful to learn? • What questions do I need to ask?	**Pre-Conversation Reflection:** *Diego names what he's holding as true: that Ms. Nelson is targeting certain students unfairly. He notices he doesn't actually know her reasoning, her classroom context, or what's been happening this year. He also notices the positional gap between them—he's newer and younger and arrives with the title of "equity coordinator" attached to his name before she's ever gotten to know him as a person.* **Collaborative Conversation:** *Diego describes the story he's been holding: that something about how referrals are being written feels inequitable, though he's not certain why. Ms. Nelson tells her own story: that she feels watched, reduced to a number without anyone asking what her year has actually looked like. Neither corrects the other yet—they just let both versions sit on the table.*
Surface your own emotions and thoughts about the situation. • How do my prior experiences inform this situation? • Which aspects of my identity might be shaping my view of the situation and my relationship with the individuals involved? • What emotions am I feeling about the situation? • How is my own comfort or discomfort with conflict shaping how I'm approaching this?	**Pre-Conversation Reflection:** *Diego sits with his own discomfort: He's nervous this will read as an accusation. He notices that his own experience—as a student who was frequently disciplined—makes this topic personal, not just technical. He identifies his fear plainly: He's afraid of being dismissed as "the equity guy with a spreadsheet."* **Collaborative Conversation:** *Diego admits his nervousness—that his own history of being disciplined as a student makes this topic hard for him to raise neutrally. Ms. Nelson admits hers—that being new to this school year's mix of students has left her overwhelmed, and she's aware that admitting this feels risky to say to someone from the district office.*

WestEd
Western Educational Equity Assistance Center

Reflective process protocol	Vignette examples
Consider the emotions and thoughts of others involved in the situation. • What might this look like from the other person's perspective—and what am I assuming rather than actually knowing? • Who has power in this situation, and who does not? Why might that be? • How can I bring curiosity, rather than certainty, to what I don't yet understand about the other person?	**Pre-Conversation Reflection:** *Diego tries to imagine the conversation from Ms. Nelson's side: a new person from the district showing up with data about her classroom, no relationship, no context for the year she's had. He asks himself what he's assuming about her intentions versus what he actually knows—which, he realizes, is almost nothing yet.* **Collaborative Conversation:** *Diego, rather than guessing about Ms. Nelson's perspective, asks her directly what this situation looks like from her side. She tells him about three students who've made the year especially hard and what she's tried before reaching for a referral. He asks Ms. Nelson what he's been assuming but actually didn't know—and names it out loud: He assumed indifference, not exhaustion.*
Imagine the values and guiding principles that would contribute to a meaningful conversation. • What shared values, even small ones, might exist between us that this conversation could surface or build on? • What would it look or sound or feel like to have this conversation with curiosity instead of certainty?	**Pre-Conversation Reflection:** *He looks for a shared value to stand on: Presumably, they both want students to succeed. He imagines opening not with the data but with curiosity about her year—what she's noticed, what's been hard.* **Collaborative Conversation:** *Together, they land on a shared value: Neither wants a student sent out of the room unless there is truly no other option left. They imagine what it would look like to build a shared understanding of "no other option" between them rather than Diego imposing a standard from outside.*
Identify the constraints and challenges that are at play, including factors beyond your control. • What is keeping this conversation from happening or from going well right now? • What inequities or biases might be present that I should account for or try to mitigate? • What would need to be true for a small amount of trust to be established here?	**Pre-Conversation Reflection:** *Diego recognizes that what is standing in the way is not the data but the absence of any relationship that would provide a foundation for holding a hard conversation about the data.* **Collaborative Conversation:** *They name what has actually been standing in the way: not disagreement about students but the fact that this is the first real conversation either has had with the other. Diego asks what would need to be true for a bit more trust to exist between them going forward—and Ms. Nelson says simply, "Coming to ask me instead of the data first. Like you did today."*

Reflective process protocol	Vignette examples
Act on a rightsized first step based on the reflections identified in previous stages. • What is the first step I will take based on these reflections and the information I have? • What would a rightsized first step look like—one that doesn't ask more of this relationship than it can currently hold? • What part of the cycle might I need to return to after that first step?	**Pre-Conversation Reflection:** *Rather than opening with the referral numbers, Diego asks Ms. Nelson for 15 minutes to hear how her year is going, with no agenda beyond listening. He decides the data conversation can wait for a second meeting—this one is just about establishing that he is a person worth talking to.* **Collaborative Conversation:** *They agree on a small, checkable step: Diego will check in with her every other week, informally, before any data conversation happens—and Ms. Nelson agrees that if a referral pattern is building, she will flag it for him directly rather than leaving him to discover it in a report.*

Level 2: Medium Relational Trust

There is an established relationship and some history of genuine exchange among people with medium relational trust, but the specific dimension(s) of difference at the center of their conversation have not yet been navigated together. While there is goodwill and a sense of safety, there is also uncertainty about whether the relationship can hold the particular difficulty that needs to be named. The tension at this level often centers on a fear that difficult conversations will damage preexisting relational trust.

Rightsizing the Conversation

Having some relational trust offers opportunities to bring rightsized vulnerability into the conversation. While vulnerability can sometimes be viewed as synonymous with weakness, it is a powerful asset for educational leaders. Showing up to conversations as a human, first and foremost, creates conditions for expanding relational trust. And in sharing experiences and feelings, unanticipated ideas, solutions, and opportunities emerge.

Conversation Protocol and Vignette: Story Exchange

Storytelling is a human-centered and relational medium that spans time, cultures, and difference. It offers opportunities to connect and witness one another as an entry point to exploring difference (Collective Change Lab, n.d.). Adapted from Narrative 4's Story Exchange (Narrative 4, n.d.), a global storytelling methodology used to bridge divides across identity and experience, the protocol provided in the left column of Table 2 invites participants into shared vulnerability at a pace appropriate for medium trust. This protocol offers a structured way for educational leaders to share each other's stories in order to build trust across a specific dimension of difference.

Vignette: Priya (assistant principal) and Tom (dean of students) have worked closely together for 8 years. They trust each other's judgment, fill in for each other without being asked, and have weathered plenty together. But after a recent incident in which a Black family raised concerns that their son's discipline referral was handled differently than a White student's in a similar situation, something has felt unspoken between them. They have not talked about race directly in 8 years of partnership, and neither is sure the relationship can hold that conversation yet. They decide to try a Story Exchange before attempting to talk about the incident itself.

Table 2. Story Exchange Protocol and Examples of Responses

Story exchange protocol	Vignette example
Prepare by having each person choose a personal story connected to the topic of the conversation and to the difference at its center.. This does not need to be about the issue itself; it can be a story from earlier in your life that shaped how you experience that particular difference (identity, experience, worldview, or power). Ground yourselves in the guidelines: • Listen for understanding, not response. • Hold what you hear with care.	*Priya and Tom agree that the story doesn't have to be about the incident. Priya chooses a memory from being one of the few South Asian kids in her elementary school and of the specific moment a teacher mispronounced her name in front of the class for the 3rd year in a row.* *Tom chooses a memory from growing up in a rural, mostly White town and the day he first realized—in his 20s, as a new teacher—that a student's experience of the same school building was entirely different from the one he'd had as a student there himself.*
Share your stories with each other one at a time. As you listen, pay attention to detail, tone, and what is left unsaid, not just the content of what is being said.	*Priya tells her story first. Tom listens without preparing what he will say next, paying attention not just to the mispronounced name but to how her voice changes when she describes deciding, at 8 years old, to just let it go rather than correct the teacher again.* *Then Tom shares his story, and Priya notices the discomfort in how carefully he chooses his words around the moment he describes as "the first time I understood I hadn't been paying attention."*

Story exchange protocol	Vignette example
Retell your partner's story back to them, speaking in the first person, as though it had happened to you. Use their voice and perspective as closely as you can recall. If the retelling misses something important, gently correct it in the moment rather than waiting for the reflection step—then continue. A retelling does not need to be perfect; the goal is to show genuine effort to understand, not to pass a test.	*Tom retells Priya's story back to her, speaking as her: "I decided it wasn't worth correcting her again—I was tired of being the only one who had to explain myself."* *Priya retells Tom's story, speaking as him: "I realized I'd walked through that building for years without ever wondering what it looked like for a kid who didn't look like me." Both notice what the other captured and where their voice went a little wrong.*
Reflect together on what it felt like to hear your story told back to you—what your partner captured, what surprised you, and what this exchange revealed about a dimension of difference you had not yet navigated together. Stay curious; the goal is deeper understanding on both sides, not correcting the record.	*Priya tells Tom that hearing her own story in his voice, and hearing him name his blind spot in his own, made her trust that he could actually hear what she needed to say about the referral—not as an accusation, but as an observation he might not have had access to before.* *Tom says the exercise made him realize how much he had been avoiding the topic out of fear of getting it wrong rather than genuine unwillingness to look at it. They agree to talk about the referral itself next week—not today and not without checking in on how it is landing for each of them as they go.*

Level 3: High Relational Trust

For people with high relational trust, there is a deep, tested relationship across difference—one that has survived previous difficulty, navigated disagreement, and built genuine mutual understanding and self-understanding. While their conversation may still be difficult and bring discomfort, there is confidence that the relationship can support the conversation and survive it.

Rightsizing the Conversation

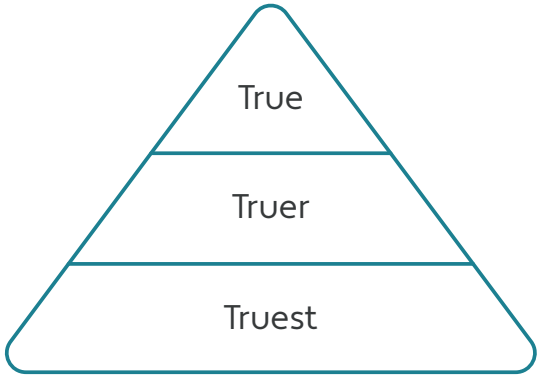
Conversations with high levels of relational trust do not require the same levels of structure for safety and can instead lean into higher levels of vulnerability and authentic participation in the difficult conversation. These kinds of conversations do not avoid mess; they assume mess as part of the process. Here, "safety" does not mean comfort or protection from discomfort. It means feeling safe enough to say the harder, truer thing and stay in the conversation rather than retreat from it (Gregory, 2026).

Conversation Protocol and Vignette: The Depth Model

The Depth Model (Figure 3 and Table 3), adapted from Rob Schacter at the Leadership Institute of Seattle (personal communication, May 2024), offers a way for practitioners to deepen their self-awareness by reflecting on what is True, Truer, and Truest about their desires and motivations in a given moment or situation (Harnetiaux et al., 2024). When reflecting on True, Truer, and Truest desires and motivations becomes an ongoing practice, it has the capacity to lead to individual and collective transformation.

In communities that commit to speaking at the Truer and Truest levels, individuals must engage in three key practices: **reflecting honestly on their core needs and desires**, **sharing often hidden parts of themselves**, and **holding others' vulnerable desires and motivations with care and tenderness**. Conflict in these communities, then, becomes less about being "right" and more about discovery and exploration. Figure 3 offers a visual for exploring these different levels and is followed by a brief example for each one.

Figure 3. Levels of Desires and Motivations



Vignette: A principal has partnered closely with a district-level colleague for over a decade—trading ideas, filling in for each other in hard seasons, and building the kind of relationship that has survived real disagreement before. When the district rolls out a new disciplinary policy without the principal's input, the principal requests time to talk it through with her district-level colleague.

Table 3. Depth Model and Examples

Depth model	Vignette example
True—Your desires and motivations at this level are what you would easily express to other people. These paint you in the most appreciative light possible, likely appear noble, and do not run counter to cultural taboos.	*"I'm frustrated by this policy because it's not what's best for students and staff."*
Truer—Your Truer desires exist a little below the surface and might appear less noble. This level is where your hope to be altruistic bumps up against your desire for self-preservation in the face of uncertain external conditions.	*"Leaving me out of decisions that impact me is disrespectful."*
Truest—In *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, Stone and colleagues (2010) put forth that humans at their core are always asking three questions: "Am I worthy of love? Am I competent? Am I good?" Your Truest desires and motivations recognize and honor the great lengths that humans go to in order to answer these questions in the affirmative. People want to convince themselves that they are worthy of love, that they are competent and good, and that they are on the right side of history. And people are desperate to be seen this way by others too. Your Truest desires exist in the realm of what may be largely unconscious to you. Although everyone is trying to ask and answer these three questions, it can feel vulnerable and potentially shameful to share your desires and motivations at the Truest level. By taking the time to surface what is Truest in a given situation, you can work to understand your underlying needs, desires, and motivations and can develop greater compassion for yourself and others.	*"I want to know that my years of experience and perspective still matter. Being left out made me question whether my input is valued."* *As one of the few women of color at her leadership level in the district, the principal recognizes that being overlooked lands differently for her than it might for others—it brushes up against a longer history of having to prove she belongs in the room. Naming this Truest desire to her colleague, rather than staying stuck at "I'm frustrated about the policy," is what allows their high-trust relationship to hold the fuller weight of what is actually going on.*

Level 4: Broken Relational Trust

For people with broken relational trust between them, trust has been damaged by a specific incident, a pattern of harm, or the accumulated weight of unaddressed difference. There may be active pain, anger, or withdrawal. Across difference, broken trust often carries the weight of larger systemic and historical harm. Conversation that needs to happen feels impossible—or likely unsafe—to one or more of the people who need to be in it.

Rightsizing the Conversation

Broken trust is not simply a breakdown in communication. It is a signal that something has bruised or broken the inherent dignity of one or more people involved (Kaba & Hassan, 2019). At this level, the rightsized response is almost never the direct, unstructured conversation that might work well at higher levels of trust; that kind of exchange assumes a baseline of safety that broken trust, by definition, does not have. Rightsizing at this level means centering repair before reconnection: naming what specific action caused harm, understanding its impact on the dignity of those affected, and taking honest responsibility. This is not avoidance. It is the honest recognition that some relationships require intentional care and rebuilding before the people can hold a conversation at all and that this rebuilding is itself the work, not a delay of it.

Conversation Protocol and Vignette: Relational Apologies

Apologizing is one of the most undertaught skills in professional life—and one of the most important. A meaningful apology restores dignity rather than further diminishing it. Knowing how to give one well is critical work for all humans. The protocol below in Part 1: Engage in Solo Self-Reflection and Part 2: Craft a Meaningful Apology is adapted from Mia Mingus's transformative justice writing on accountability and apology (2019). Mingus's framework focuses on conflict, hurt, and low-to-moderate breaks in trust between people who want to stay in relationship. This protocol aligns with what Grenny and colleagues (2026) describe as the core skill of accountability conversations: separating the content of what happened from the pattern it is part of and the relationship it affects. A good apology, in their framing, is not just about the specific incident—it is an opportunity to signal whether this is a one-time misstep or part of a pattern the other person needs to brace for again.

Part 1: Engage in Solo Self-Reflection

Do some self-reflection before approaching the other person. Skipping this reflection is the most common way an apology goes wrong. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I name specifically what I did—not "something went wrong," but the actual decision or action?
- Do I understand the impact on the other person, even if it differs from what I intended?
- Am I naming my intent to *explain* what happened or using it to *excuse* what happened? (Good intent does not cancel out real impact, and leading with intent can put the other person in the position of managing my feelings instead of having their own feelings heard.)

- Depending on the difference between us, do I know what *they* would need for this to feel safe or worthwhile? How do I avoid designing this conversation entirely around what is comfortable for me?
- Am I open to hearing and understanding other experiences or perspectives that will help prevent future harm or conflict?

If you have difficulty answering these questions honestly, you may need to reflect further and/or talk through your reflections with a trusted colleague who might offer support to deepen the necessary self-reflection.

Part 2: Craft a Meaningful Apology

Use the following steps (Table 4) to prepare for offering a meaningful apology.

Table 4. Crafting a Meaningful Apology

Step	Example
1. Say it plainly. Avoid "if this caused any issues"; say an actual "I'm sorry" or "I want to apologize."	*"I want to apologize for how I handled the reassignment last month."*
2. Name the harm specifically. Say what you actually did, not a softened version of it. Avoid "I know things felt rushed" (vague) or "I'm sorry you felt excluded" (relocates the harm into their feelings rather than your action).	*"I made that staffing decision without looping you in first, even though it directly affected your classroom."*
3. Name the impact—not your intent. Resist the urge to explain yourself here. This step is about showing that you understand what it cost the other person in their terms.	*"That put you in front of your students and their families with no warning and no way to prepare. I can see why that felt disrespectful on top of everything else this year."*
4. Take responsibility by naming your own action. This is the load-bearing move. Connect the specific action directly to the specific impact; no passive voice, no diffusing it onto "the process" or "the timeline."	*"I decided to move quickly because I was worried about the budget deadline. That was my call, and I should have talked to you before making it, not after."*
5. Commit to something specific and checkable. Avoid "I'll do better," but make a concrete, observable commitment.	*"Going forward, any staffing decision that affects your team I'll bring to you before it's final, not after. If that doesn't happen, I want you to call it out—you won't be out of line for doing that."*
6. Explicitly invite pushback, and mean it. This matters because silence from someone (especially someone with less power) is not the same as agreement. In some cases it may be the absence of safety.	*"You may see this differently than I've described it or think I'm still missing something. I'd rather hear that now than have you carry it."*

Closing Invitation

This resource is based on the premise that every interaction that builds trust across difference is an act of educational leadership. Every moment of honest self-reflection before a difficult conversation is an act of educational leadership. Every decision to rightsize a conversation rather than abandon it is an act of educational leadership.

This work is not about individuals perfecting how they have difficult conversations. It is about communities building enough relational trust, especially across difference, to stay moving toward one another as they navigate complexity, change, and uncertainty. Individuals who compose these communities can do this by becoming and staying attuned to the self, to others, and to what the relational container needs for engaging in difficult conversations together. That attunement is already within reach.

References

Akomolafe, B. (n.d.). A slower urgency. *BÁYÒ AKÓMOLÁFÉ*. https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/a-slower-urgency

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Collective Change Lab. (n.d.). *Systems storytelling hub*. https://www.systemsstorytelling.org/

Evans, K., & Vaandering, D. (2022). The little book of restorative justice in education: Fostering responsibility, healing, and hope in schools. Good Books.

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. FEU.

Gorski, P. C., & Pothini, S. G. (2018). *Case studies on diversity and social justice education*. Routledge.

Gregory, E. (2026). *Reclaiming psychological safety: How to really make it safe for candid dialogue* [Webinar]. Crucial Learning. https://cruciallearning.com/resource-center/webinars/reclaiming-psychological-safety-how-to-really-make-it-safe-for-candid-dialogue/

Grenny, J., Hale, J., Patterson, K., Maxfield, D., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2026). *Crucial accountability: Proven skills to build trust, address disappointment, and get results* (3rd ed.). McGraw Hill.

Grenny, J., Patterson, K., McMillan, R., Switzler, A., & Gregory, E. (2022). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high* (3rd ed.). McGraw Hill.

Harnetiaux, J., Trout, L., & Wu, K. (2024). *Restorative ways of being to embody what is possible: A guide for restorative leaders*. WestEd.

Kaba, M., & Hassan, S. (2019). *Fumbling towards repair: A workbook for community accountability facilitators*. AK Press.

WestEd
Western Educational Equity Assistance Center

Kauffman, S. (2023, April). *The "adjacent possible"—and how it explains human innovation* [Video]. TED Conferences.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. Jossey-Bass.

Mingus, M. (2019). *How to give a good apology part 1: The four parts of accountability*. Leaving Evidence.

Narrative 4. (n.d.). *Story exchange*. https://narrative4.com/story-exchange/

powell, j. a. (2012). *Racing to justice: Transforming our concepts of self and other to build an inclusive society*. Indiana University Press.

Ross, J., & Ghadbian, W. (2020). *Turning towards each other: A conflict workbook*. Movement Strategy Center.

Stanford Social Innovation Review. (n.d.). *The relational work of systems change*.

Stone, D., Heen, S., & Patton, B. (2010). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most, 10th anniversary ed.* (2nd ed.). Penguin Books.

Wu, K., & Trout, L. (2022). *A reflective process for working through complex restorative practice dilemmas in schools*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd.

For more information, please email weeac@wested.org or visit the WEEAC website at weeac.wested.org.

© 2026 WestEd. All rights reserved. WestEd leads the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center, serving Alaska, American Samoa, Arizona, California, Colorado, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Acknowledgments
The Western Educational Equity Assistance Center would like to thank the following individuals for their essential feedback on this guide: Ayele Dodoo, Candace Colbert, Natalie Walrond, Amber Valdez, Rebeca Cerna, and Patrick Moyle.

The contents of this guide were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (S004D220004). The Department does not mandate or prescribe practices, models, or other activities described or discussed in this guide. The contents of this guide may contain examples of, adaptations of, and links to resources created and maintained by another public or private organization. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. The content of this guide does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department. This guide is not intended to represent the views or policy of, or be an endorsement of any views expressed or materials provided by, any Federal agency.