

Start your own exploration.

What new conversations about dying are possible now?

1. Design.

Over the years, we've tried many different ways to hold conversations where clinicians to revisit their experiences in ways that enable them to revisit, reframe, and reflect. We consider these conversations to be pivotal to the personal and professional development needed for high-level performance and culture change.

The principles that we use to design powerful conversations turn out to be ones that we stumbled upon, mostly by accident. For someone trained in a medical school, they are deeply counterintuitive.

- a) **Reflection is a social process.** While it's often used in education as something that happens inside one learner's head, we have actually found that the juicy bits occur in the interaction between us as we think together. So you're not asking people to look inside their head so much as you are creating a thinking space, or feeling space.
- b) **A circle invites participation.** Our learning spaces often have default arrangements that create classrooms. Break up classrooms, and form a circle. It's well worth the bother.
- c) **Embrace outliers and renegades.** The people who aren't the usual suspects—who aren't predisposed to this—are the ones you need to attract. In other teaching situations, having learners who are roughly at the same place in their learning can make things easier; but in the reflective circle, you need the unexpected observation, reaction, insight.
- d) **Our deepest insights are embodied.** Think of this as a conversational ritual that you are hosting. What visual, audible, tactile cues can you use to open the thinking space, and open your group's awareness?

2. Invite.

We have rushed into many reflections only to realize we've left the group behind. The design principles we use can become assumptions that aren't evident to others. So craft an invitation, even as simple as what you say as people are sitting down, to help them know how to participate, and what you're hoping for.

- a) **Set expectations high.** Make clear what you hope the group will leave with—these are aspirations. It's invigorating to aim high.
- b) **Bring evocative artifacts.** Words tend to put people in their heads. So bring artifacts that are outside the usual to help create a thinking space: perhaps a poem, a bell, a snapshot, a flower.
- c) **Start with a provocative question.** Craft a catalytic question—not something easily answered, but important and juicy.
- d) **Use boundaries for safety.** Mention confidentiality, speaking for oneself, taking a moment before responding. Then ask for other suggestions.

3. Open.

We use an opening bell to mark the beginning, and the sound of the bell fading into silence is an implicit guide to slow down.

- a) **Model curiosity.** We've all been in discussions with a leader who seems to have heard it all before—this is a dialogue killer. Show your group how to listen.
- b) **Speak non-judgmentally.** In our day jobs, we are often called upon to render judgments—great, okay, terrible. But within the space of a reflection circle, language that is descriptive, not evaluative, allows insight to emerge.
- c) **Pass a talking piece.** The ritual of picking up or passing a talking piece, a native tradition, tends to slow people into a deeper reflective space, and releases people from conversational small talk.

4. Close.

Shape the closing moments so that the group can finish gracefully. The constraint of time and an impending end often creates valuable urgency.

- a) **Give a heads-up.** Notice that 5 minutes are left. This enables people who have been politely waiting to step into the conversation.
- b) **Ask for take-away thoughts or questions.** Before the very end, ask everyone: What are we taking away? Try asking everyone in the circle to contribute a word—you can write these on a flipchart to create an impromptu word cloud.
- c) **Ring the bell** or read a poem to close. Savor the last moments of the reflective space you're created together.

5. Harvest.

A postscript reminds people of what happened, and what they took away.

- a) **Acknowledge the group's presence.** This can be as simple as an email with a photo of the word cloud, or an article someone mentioned, or a memorable quote.
- b) **Celebrate insights.** Or any other accomplishments—but make them visible.
- c) **Offer gratitude.** A simple thank you is just fine.