

Suggestions for Positive Communication and Constructive Negotiation Right Relations Committee of Equal Access

The purpose of this document is to give you some communication tools to use when you are attempting to increase access and inclusion for persons with disabilities, and you seem to be encountering resistance.

The Right Relations Committee of Equal Access is a UU resource that helps people deal with such challenges. For further information and support, email ea.rightrelations@gmail.com.

Institutional Issues and Power Dynamics

Determine which people and groups influence decision-making about this concern and approach them.

Be realistic about how long it will take to solve this problem. Is this an organization that usually moves quickly or slowly? Is leadership pro-active or passive? Clearly focused or distracted and confused? Is change typically welcomed or resisted?

Identify individual(s) or group(s) resisting the initiative. Is it possible that most people agree with you, but are passively acquiescing to the objections of a vocal minority? If so, how could you encourage those silent voices to speak up? Who could help you mobilize those who have been passive?

Are people in favor of your general idea but unclear about how to proceed? Give them two or three specific alternatives to consider.

Positive Communication

State the goal for improved access or inclusion clearly. When people feel overwhelmed by pressures and priorities, it may be hard to find the mental "bandwidth" to deal with one more topic. To you this topic may be the top priority, but to others it may be just one of dozens.

Begin by educating people and raising awareness, especially if the issue is complex or unfamiliar. Lay the groundwork for change by providing educational opportunities and materials.

Find simple ways of saying what change is needed and what difference it would make to people with disabilities. Say these things repeatedly. We are not tape recorders, and repetition is often necessary in order for people to absorb messages.

In personal conversations:

Pre-communicate. Before beginning, talk about what you're going to talk about. Say what you hope to accomplish.

Once you begin, keep your main goals in mind. Concentrate on the most important items instead of getting lost in a dust-storm of details.

Throughout the conversation, try to stay connected, heart to heart. Assume that everyone has good intentions and is trying to do the right thing.

When you start to lose personal connection you might say, "I can feel myself starting to treat this like a battle. I care about you and I want to solve this problem in a spirit of mutual respect." Be especially careful if you find yourself getting flustered. Do not blurt things out while you are upset. Stop and take a breath.

Practice meta-communication, communication about communication. Comment occasionally about how this conversation is progressing. Express appreciation for what's working well. Mention ways that you are trying to be constructive and ways the other person seems to be doing the same.

After you say something important, check to see if your message was received. One of the main problems with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished. Don't just make noises in someone's direction and assume that your message is getting through. "The main thing I'm trying to say is _____. Does that make sense, or should I say more about what I'm driving at? Conversely, make sure you are hearing clearly: "Basically, then, you are saying _____. Is that right?" "Are you saying _____ or are you saying _____?"

For practical communication tips and techniques read "*Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most*," by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen.

Personal Commitments to Constructive Engagement

(Based upon the Covenant of Right Relations, Unitarian Universalist Church of Tallahassee)

I will ask myself "How does what I want relate to what is best for the whole congregation?"

I will address misunderstandings directly with the person involved.

I will first confirm my understanding of another person's position, with them, before I express my own position.

I will preface and follow critical comments with positive comments.

I will listen to others' ideas and opinions and speak respectfully, compassionately, and empathetically.

I will treat lay leaders and staff with respect, remembering that they are trying to act for the good of all members.

I will model UU principles by word and deed.

Other strategic options

Mediation: A trusted neutral individual assists all stakeholders in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement.

Arbitration: A neutral party holds a hearing on the issue and makes a decision.

In some cases a facilitator from outside of your congregation or other organization may be helpful. UU Districts may be able to provide such a resource, or at least offer leads.

Spiritual Grounding

This section was placed last in order to emphasize its importance.

Unitarian Universalism is a living laboratory for spiritual development. Interpersonal conflicts and inter-group frictions offer many opportunities for growth – growth in insight, self-understanding, skillfulness, and inner strength. How can you use these opportunities?

Keep in mind UU principles such as: the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion; acceptance of one another; and the use of the democratic process.

What resources can you draw upon that will give you courage, clarity, and compassion? Do you pray, meditate, journal or blog? Are there books or other media that lift you up and help you move forward? Do you participate in a UU small group ministry program or other relevant activity?

How can you draw upon the experience and expertise of your minister or other spiritual leaders?

What are your own spiritual priorities, and how does the problem you are dealing with connect with these priorities?