Controversy With Civility

**Introduction/Purpose:** The purpose of the training is to deepen our understanding of controversy with civility. Controversy with civility is the act of respectfully and willingly engaging in dialogue around disagreements that arise from the sharing of diverse perspectives and opinions. To break it down: Controversy is a disagreement on an idea or topic that allows for the open discussion of those differences without creating an argument where one person’s goal is to win over the other. Civility means responding to a disagreement in a way that respects the point of view of others.

**Theory:** The first step in learning how to engage in controversy with civility consists of knowing that it is okay to express a disagreement with someone’s ideas or views. Often the first instinct is to avoid conflict situations, by giving in, walking away, ignoring it, or staying silent. Many people are conflict avoiders because engaging in disagreements across differences often means becoming vulnerable. Controversy is an inevitable part of group interactions which can lead to positive collaboration in an environment of civility. To better understand controversy with civility one needs to cultivate certain skills. The skills that this training touches on are building an awareness of one’s own world view, an awareness of other worldviews, identifying the root of controversy, and engaging in dialogue. (Introduction and theory 5 minutes)

**Knowing One’s Own World View:** The decisions that we make are influenced by our collective life experiences. Pass out the World View worksheet (found in appendix I-2). Instruct participants to spend some time thinking about their identity. Have individuals fill in the diagram with traits that make up their identity. For example, the center of someone’s diagram may be their gender because it informs other parts of their identity, but this may not be true for someone else of the same gender. It may help to do a diagram of yourself for the whole group. After most participants have completed the diagram ask them to turn to someone next to them and share their diagrams. (10 minutes)

**Debrief:** Ask participants to share any findings during this exercise. Ask if anyone had a difficult time thinking about their identity. The way we approach controversy is informed by our experiences too. Ask participants to consider putting controversy in the center of the diagram and think about what parts of their identity or experiences inform the way that they relate to controversy. (10 minutes)

**An Awareness of Other Worldviews:** Engaging in controversy with civility requires the understanding that there is not just one correct point of view. Each individual brings their own worldview to a situation. Cultural differences need to be taken into consideration too. Divide participants into pairs. In the pairs hand each participant a separate role, one supervisor and one worker. Give participants a moment to read their role and prepare to play this person. Tell participants not to share the role descriptions with one another. Begin role play. (15 minutes)

Roles:

5. The supervisor- You are from a culture where there are small power distances. In a work situation you value the input of your subordinates and seek a collaborative process (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). You are from a low-context communication culture, which means you
are direct in your language and use of words (Hall, 1998). You assigned your subordinate to a project and are having a problem with it not being completed on time. You want to work with them to create a solution so that the project can get done soon. You also want to know why the project was not done on time.

6. The worker- You are from a culture where there is a large power difference. At work you expect to be told what to do. An ideal boss would give clear concise instruction (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). You are from a culture that uses high-context communication, which means that you rely on cultural context to make meaning out of what you are saying. For example, you may tell a story that relates to what you are experiencing. Relationships and saving face are very important to you (Hall, 1998). You were assigned a project by your supervisor, but one of the pieces of the project was ruined by a co worker. Your boss is questioning you about the project, but you wish to maintain your relationship with both your co worker and boss.

Debrief: Ask participants to share their experiences attempting to communicate in the role play. (5 minutes)

Identifying the Roots of Controversy: Controversies can sometimes be attributed to a difference in opinion, but attributing a conflict to a difference in opinion does not get at the source. Instead try asking: Is this conflict a difference in values and ideas, which can be considered normal and valuable? Or did this conflict arise from a frustration surrounding a lack of decision-making, unresolved prior disagreements, a lack of communication, or a change that disrupted the norm? (5 minutes)

Dialogue: The ability to dialogue may be the most important skill in achieving controversy with civility. A dialogue is not a debate. The goal is to actively listen to one another and gain an understanding about what is being said. To engage in a dialogue practice: 1) Asking questions and seeking clarification, 2) Noticing what you are feeling and expressing your feelings about what is being said, for example, when I hear that I feel really disconnected, or I feel concerned about that, 3) Listening as much as you talk, 4) Seeking to empathize with other’s views. (5 minutes)

Conclusion: Controversy with civility does not mean avoiding controversy to maintain civility. A group is not required to agree on every issue in order to support controversy with civility. Rather controversy with civility creates an environment where opinions and differences are valued and can lead to a constructive dialogue around a collaborative outcome. Skills to cultivate include how to: engage in active listening, gain an understanding of worldviews other than one’s own, criticize ideas without demeaning the persons who express them, admit a lack of knowledge on a subject, slow the urge to judge, draw analogies in a discussion, and support others’ right to express ideas even if they are unpopular (Alvarez, 2009; Higher Education Research Institute, 1996).