Guidelines for Critical Conversations on Gender Awareness and Equity
A project of the Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate
Central Conference of American Rabbis

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“Sometimes the hardest conversations aren’t with people we would consider ‘difficult.’ They are with people who like you and respect you—who mean a lot to you.”

Betty Chan-Bauza, EarlyWarning Services

Goal:
To help rabbis assess, identify and address issues around gender awareness and equity in their respective institutional settings, with search committees, boards, clergy colleagues, staff, and laypeople.

Premises:

- Even those who consider themselves to be aware of and committed to supporting equity for women can maximize their awareness, improve their skills, and increase the comfort of those with whom they work.
- Culture change regarding women must include rethinking how conversations with others and self are conducted.
- Initially, any change, even one that is for the better, is likely to create discomfort or disorientation.
- People struggle because they have different narratives about a situation. “Truth” is often relative. Intention may be different from impact. Positions rigidify into “victim” and “victimizer.”

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• No conversation will be one and done. The goal is to create an environment that supports ongoing conversations about women in their workplace.

Critical Questions to Ask Yourself:

• Do I consider myself woke/aware when it comes to issues related to women?
• Am I conversant with the Reform Equity Pay initiative? https://reformpayequity.org/
• Do I have unconscious bias related to gender? How can I see my own bias?
• Do the women I work with feel supported by me? How do I ensure that they feel heard?
• How do I get an accurate read of how I come across to staff and volunteers?
• Has anyone ever reflected to me an image of myself that doesn’t fit with my own self-image?
• Do my public statements (sermons, reports, writings, curriculum, teachings) reflect my commitment to gender equity?
• If I am not in the room, do the gender dynamics and conversations change? If so, how?
• If I am in the room, do the gender dynamics and conversations change? How?
• Who talks first when I run meetings? Who talks most?
• How do I handle it if I do not see something as an issue but the other people in the meeting do?
• What is the gender balance of the staff and volunteers? How does that impact the way I work?
• Have I created an environment open to a variety of conversations?
• How am I involved in conversations regarding pay equity for women on my staff? Do I have influence in this arena? How might I become (more) involved?
• Do I feel apprehensive or comfortable about having these conversations?
• How can I build in accountability for my own actions? Do I have someone I talk to about these issues who can offer me feedback?
Critical Factors for Initiating Conversations with Others:

Having had the above conversations with yourself, how do you introduce these important conversations in the workplace?

- **First**, identify with whom you want to begin the conversation.
  - Are there people you want to partner with in conducting these conversations or would you like to initiate them yourself?
- **Second**, think about the context for the conversations.
  - Would they be one-on-one meetings? A group/staff/board meeting? A retreat?
- **Third**, anticipate who might be a willing participant and who might be resistant so you can plan your approach.
- **Fourth**, what would success look like?
  - There is a variety of tools whose goal is to create an open environment in which important conversations can thrive. If you familiarize yourself with these tools, you can create the ones that work best for you. For example, see [https://www.catalyst.org/research/conversation-ground-rules/](https://www.catalyst.org/research/conversation-ground-rules/) for clear ground rules for conversations. Another helpful source is [https://www.livingroomconversations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/NEW-Gender.pdf](https://www.livingroomconversations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/NEW-Gender.pdf)
  - Sometimes it is best to have a conversation about how to have the conversation. Consult first with the people involved. What would make them comfortable having the conversation? Is there something that would make them feel uncomfortable? Would they like to create their own ground rules?

Managing Conflict in the Moment

**Premises:**

- Experiencing conflict in the rabbinate is normative. It is important to understand one’s own relationship to conflict in order to do the work of the rabbinate most productively.
• Self-awareness and resilience are necessary in managing conflict in these settings.
• There are tools available to help manage conflict.
• Things always go wrong, no matter the type of rabbinate chosen. Conversations go wrong. There will be conflict and it will not necessarily be because one person did something wrong, but rather because engagement in communal relationships will inevitably lead to things going wrong.
• People have transferences to the rabbi, and that transference can be both positive and negative.

It Helps to Have a Plan!

• When you are anticipating a difficult conversation, it helps to have a plan.
• Based on what is known about the person, think about what might work with them. Does she respond to being complimented? Is he easily threatened?
• Use your own feelings as a guide to understand the other person.
• Try to make an emotional connection with them.
• Keep yourself as emotionally comfortable as possible.
• Don’t take it personally.
• Respect people’s defenses.
• Don’t ask “Why?” Ask “What?”
• Don’t fight the other person’s resistance. Work to resolve it.

Managing Conflict in the Moment: A Step-by-Step Strategy:

Sometimes, even when you have a plan, it just does not work out the way you had hoped. What can you do when things go wrong?

• Recognize that you are feeling uncomfortable (stressed, pressured, angry, defensive, overwhelmed). Be aware when you have been moved off center. Your immediate goal is to move yourself back into your comfort zone.
• Helpful, object-oriented phrases and questions:

  • “What makes you see it that way? Is that the only possibility?”
“I know that in the past this is an area where the conversation hasn’t gone well. Is there a way to make this conversation more comfortable?”
“Am I missing something? How am I not understanding you?”
“It wasn’t my intention to hurt your feelings.”
“Is there something I can do that would be helpful?”
“If you think X and I think Y, what should happen? “What makes you think X?” “What do you think makes Y better?”
“Is there any way that I can influence you?”
“Is this a hopeless situation?”
Buy some time. Don’t rush to react (whether the reaction would be to fix things or to fight). If you don’t know what to do, remind yourself that there may be nothing to do in this moment. Just sit with the conflict.
Try to let go of blame and, instead, embrace contribution.
Observe yourself. Is this something you should take personally? What exactly is bothering you?
Consider your relationship with the other person. Respond within the context of that relationship.
What is the goal of your response?
Follow up on the other person’s responses by asking more questions until you feel like you understand what the conflict is about.
If you feel like you are not making progress, you can always end this conversation with the intent to continue it at some point.
Assess if this is a conflict that can be resolved in the moment or will it take more time?

Use a Coach or Supervisor
There are some things that can be exceedingly difficult to figure out on your own!

On the one hand, that may be a hard thing to hear if you pride yourself on your self-sufficiency. On the other hand, there can be a fine line between self-sufficiency and grandiosity. Parker Palmer, who writes about the nexus
of spirituality and leadership, calls this “functional atheism,” the idea that “the ultimate responsibility for everything rests with [you].”\textsuperscript{2}

If you anticipate conflict, you can use your coach to help you make a specific plan for managing the situation.