

## **RECOGNIZING YOUR OWN EMOTIONAL RESERVOIRS AND REACTIONS**

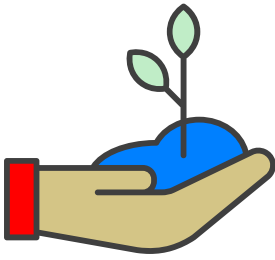
# **CULTIVATE POSITIVITY**

When you're engaging in a tough conversation on a sensitive topic, it can be especially challenging to navigate well without an existing baseline of positive sentiment towards one another, and a mutual commitment to being in relationship (even temporarily) with one another. If you don't have this baseline, there isn't enough positive emotional buffer to keep you from careening into the pits of negative reactivity, or much to stop you from writing off the other person as a whole.

### **BUILD YOUR BUFFER**

To build your buffer, it's a good idea to pro-actively build some positivity reserves. For example:

- Start with conversation on a non-controversial topic. Get to know each other as people—share, laugh, smile. Talk about kids, pets, where you grew up, weird bosses, whatever! Small talk can serve a function.
- Consciously identify things you appreciate or value about the other person. This can be the way they make eye contact, or the way they talk about their loved ones, or the way they listen, or the fact that their values are important to them (even if they diverge from yours).
- Name what you appreciate about your counterpart, or what you value in the relationship.
- Listen deeply to your counterpart, and seek to understand before you rebut. Build positive reserves with your counterpart by making sure they know you are listening—restate what you hear, check for understanding.
- Look for opportunities for repair or reset when things get off track. Use humor, or vulnerability, or a well-placed break, or honesty to help reset when possible.



# ENVIRONMENTAL PREPARATION CHECKLIST MINIMIZING OBSTACLES TO CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Research tells us a lot about the conditions that are more conducive to constructive, open minded engagement—and those that tend to lead to negative escalation and shut down of conversation. Before you engage in a tough discussion, try to *minimize* the following factors that can lead us to be more myopic in our thinking:

## MINIMIZE YOUR OBSTACLES

- Time constraints:** They add pressure and tension; drive us to make more mental shortcuts in the interest of time that include leaning more on biases, stereotypes, and assumptions; and tend to heighten the stakes of the conversation.
- Cognitive overload and distraction:** If you or your counterpart have a lot of other tasks or pressures on your mind that are draining you, you may not have the mental or emotional bandwidth to listen honestly and engage constructively with one another. Our brains literally only have so much processing power, and if we're taxed with other things, this conversation is less likely to go well.
- High anxiety or defensiveness:** When you or your counterpart are feeling anxious or threatened, you tend to go into “fight or flight” mode, and you are no longer able to take in information in a thorough, open, or clear-eyed way. If you notice defensiveness mounting in you or your counterpart, it might be a good time to either acknowledge and unpack it—or take a step back.
- Accumulated negativity:** If you have a long history of bad interactions that left one or both of you with a very bad taste in your mouth and negative expectations for future interactions, you'd be wise to find ways to cultivate more positive associations with one another before diving into the contentious topic.