

Empathy Circles

A guide to creating more diverse and equitable spaces

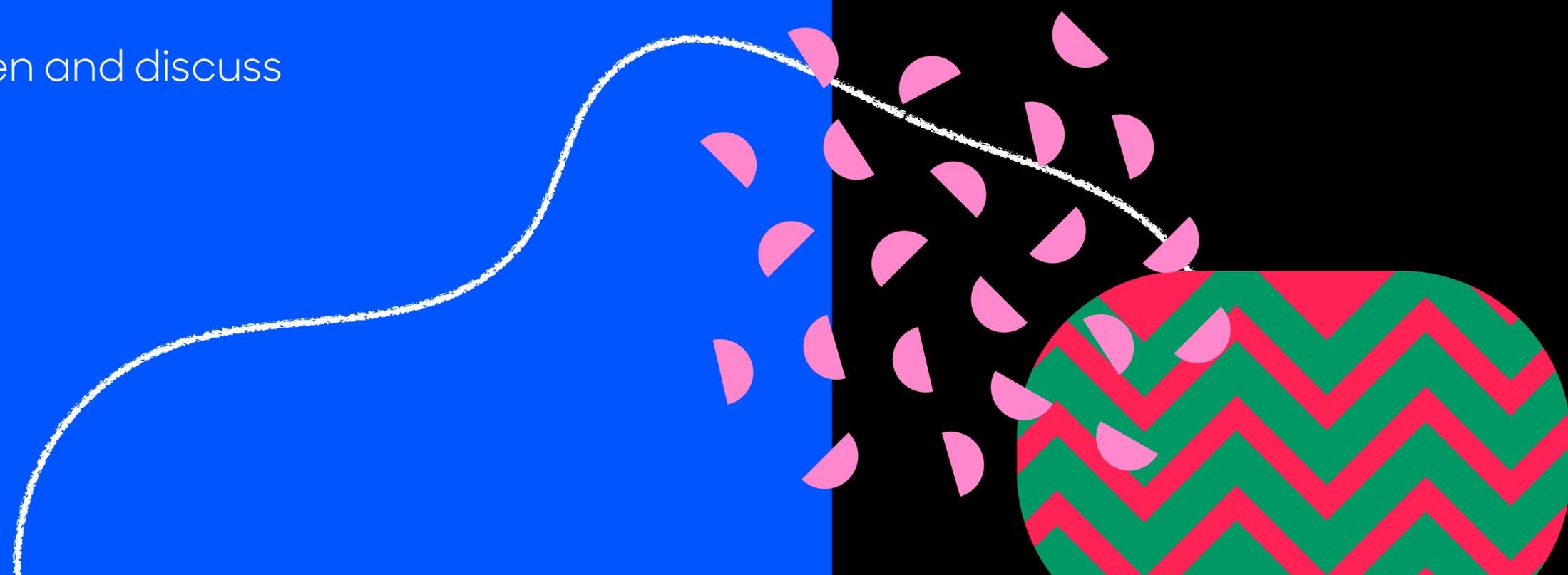


Empathy Circles

- 1 Define your purpose
- 2 Choose your theme
- 3 Set agreements
- 4 Listen and discuss

Beyond the conversation

- 5 Practice allyship
- 6 Demand change



AUDRE LORDE



“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid, so it is better to speak.”

Writer, Feminist, Womanist, Librarian,
and Civil Rights Activist

Empathy Circles are conversations on our lived experiences. They're exchanges of personal stories, feelings, and ideas on a theme: racial injustice, gender bias, or beyond.



A launch pad for change, Empathy Circles are a small but meaningful way to amplify conversations that matter. In sharing our experiences, we build compassion and understanding. We spotlight the issues impacting our communities. And we pave the way for positive change.

All Empathy Circles are grounded in honesty and non-judgment. The listening and learning of unique experiences may be affirming, restorative, disarming—even difficult. This means that everyone in the room must feel welcome, and everyone must commit to experiencing discomfort.

Though we start with empathy, the exchange of experience is only a beginning. We need to continually reflect on biases and systems—thoughtfully, urgently, and in the long-term.

1

Define your purpose

Empathy Circles are grounded in the idea that conversation sparks understanding, and understanding sparks change.

Here's how.

CONVERSATION





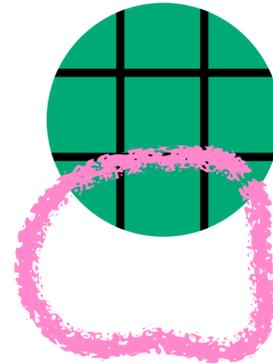
Make everyone heard

Invite participants to share experiences, feelings, and ideas in a safe and non-judgmental space. This builds connection and reduces echo chambers within organizations.



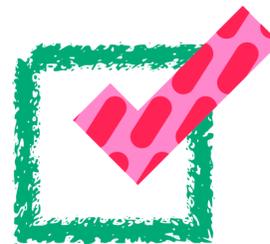
Water active empathy

Empathy goes beyond tokenism. By sharing and listening, participants develop compassion and meaningful curiosity, which can serve them long-term and beyond professional life.



Unite allies

Open sharing is an entry point to allyship. When all participants are invited to steer the conversation, we magnify lesser heard voices, and leaders become allies.



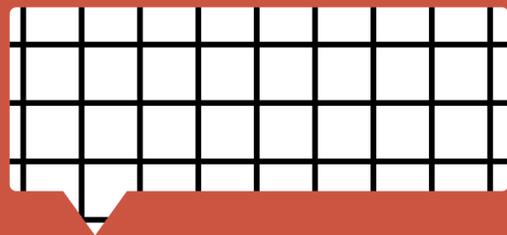
Be accountable

Empathy Circles provide an avenue to continue the important conversations. They build trust across levels and help create goals for more equitable outcomes.

Define your purpose

Choose your theme

PICK A THEME



Host an Empathy Circle on any theme you wish to shine a light on. You simply need a group of people, of any size, committed to coming together to talk about what matters.



Together, you could discuss

Racism and micro-aggressions

Understanding neurodiversity

Cultural complexities

Political and historical injustices

LGBTQ+

The role of intersectionality

Mental health and well-being

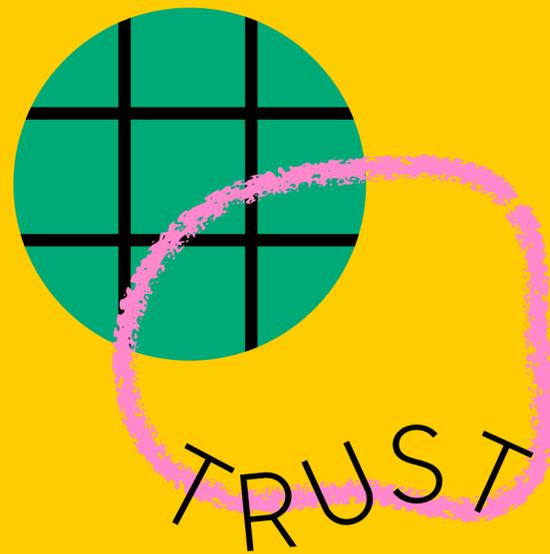
Gender expression

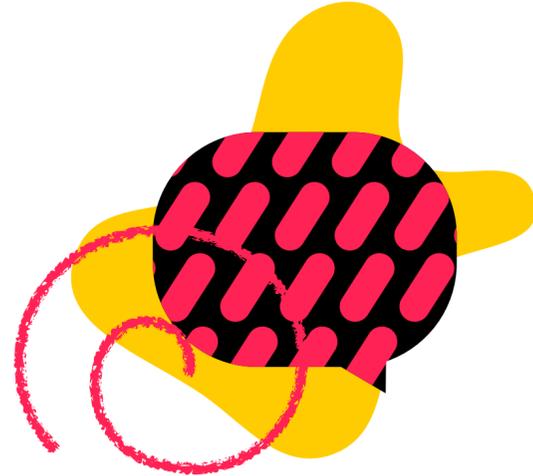
Amplify the conversations that matter to your organization or community. Build affinity and support. Create bridges for shared experiences, and grow understanding of diverging opinions.

Choose your theme

Set agreements

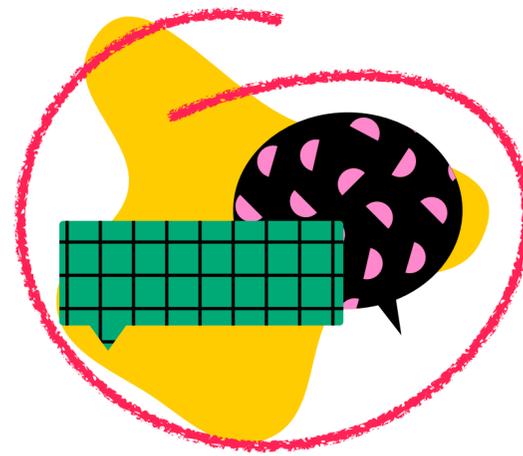
Empathy Circles are built on trust. At the start of every session, invite all participants to commit to shared agreements. These can include:





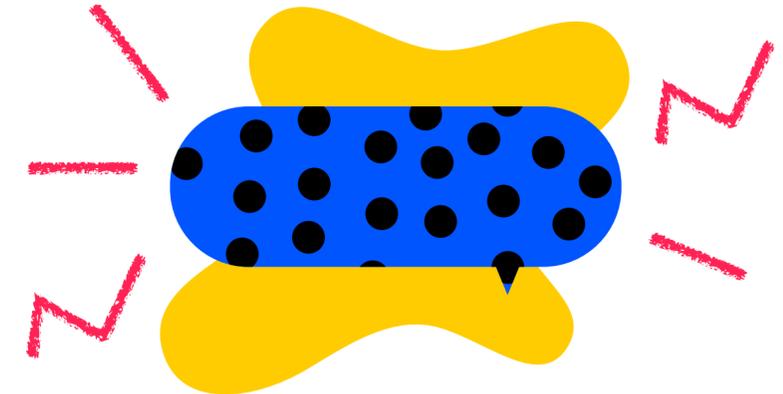
Respect

Everyone will bring their unique perspectives. As a listener, be engaged. As a speaker, share your truth responsibly.



Confidentiality

Everything that's said here, stays here.



Discomfort

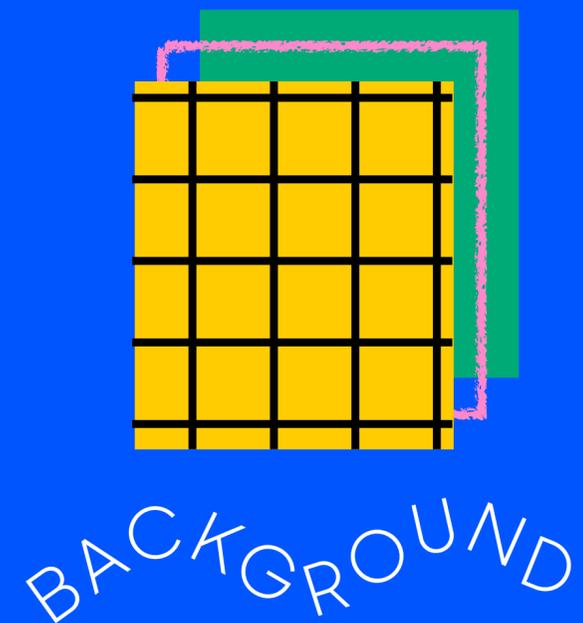
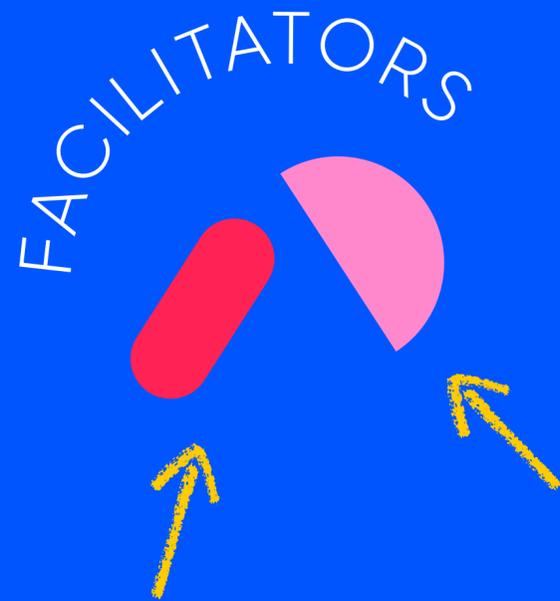
Get comfortable with discomfort. Be open to thinking differently.

Set agreements

Listen and discuss

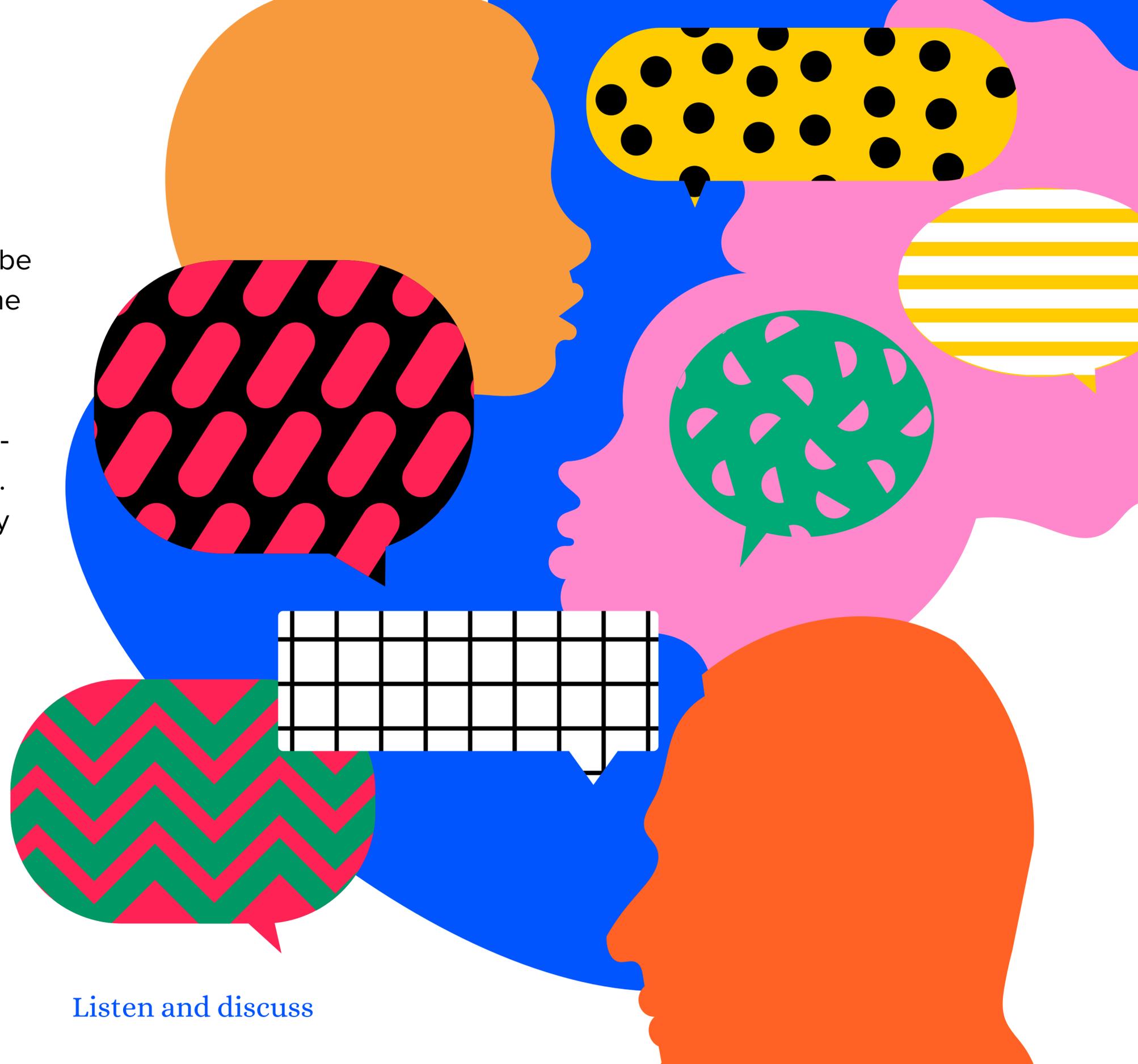
First, set the context. Participants will join with their unique lens, so it's helpful to create shared ground.

We recommend a pair of facilitators open the discussion with historical background or factual news. They can share personal stories or motivations to set the tone and create group trust.



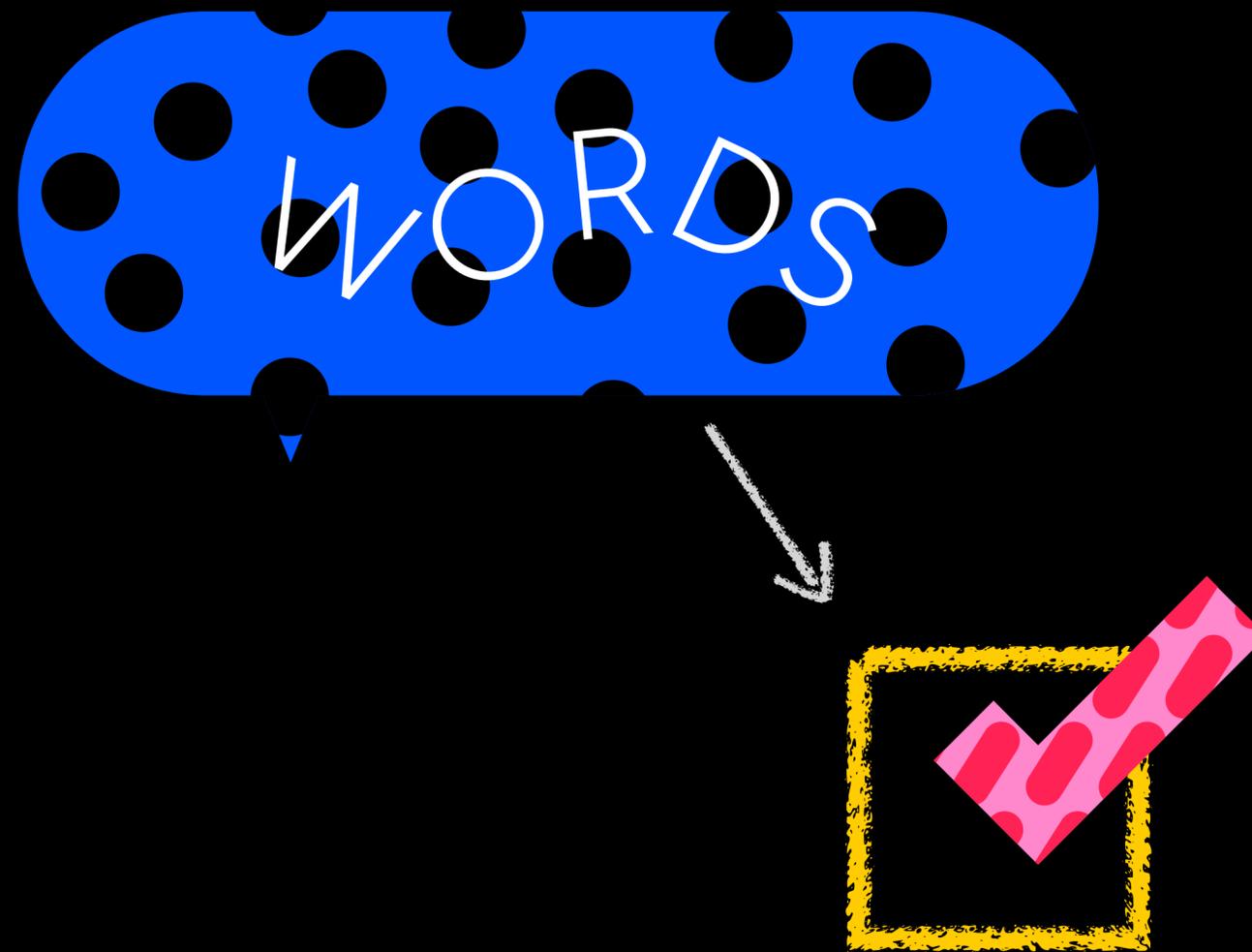
Next, open the discussion. Empathy Circles are typically unstructured, with participants freely contributing to the conversation. This happens organically. Stories, feelings, and ideas shouldn't be mediated, but facilitators can ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate.

There is great power in open dialogue. As the environment is built on non-judgment, an agenda-free conversation can flow with ease and respect. Though difficult feelings are guaranteed, empathy should triumph. In this way, we open doors to powerful change.



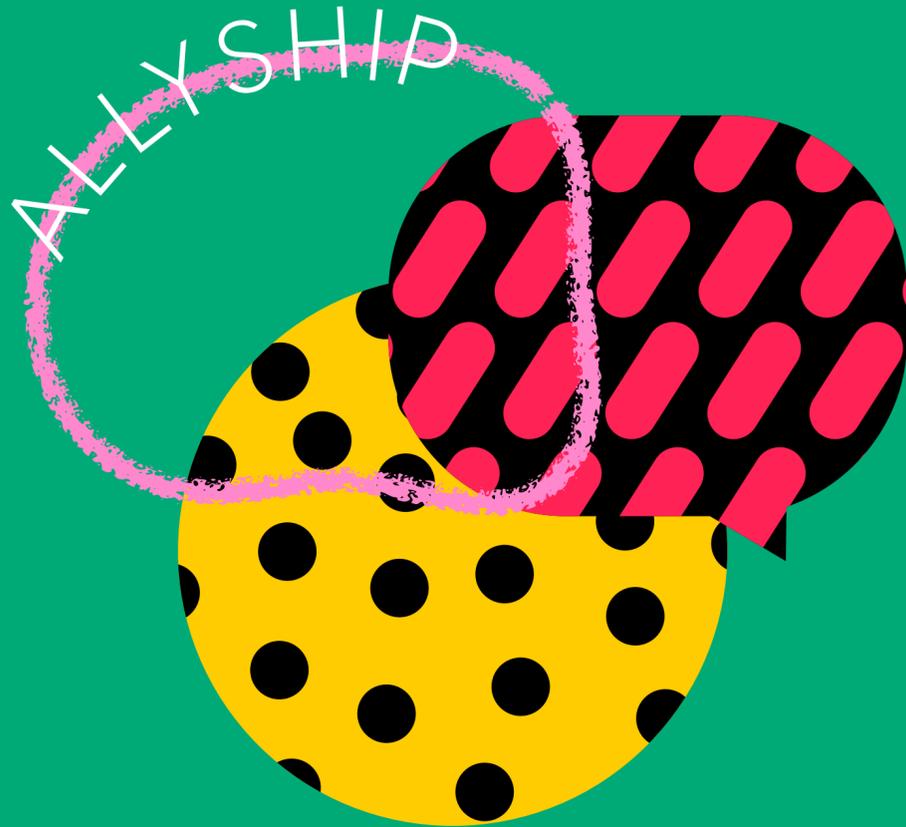
Listen and discuss

Beyond the conversation

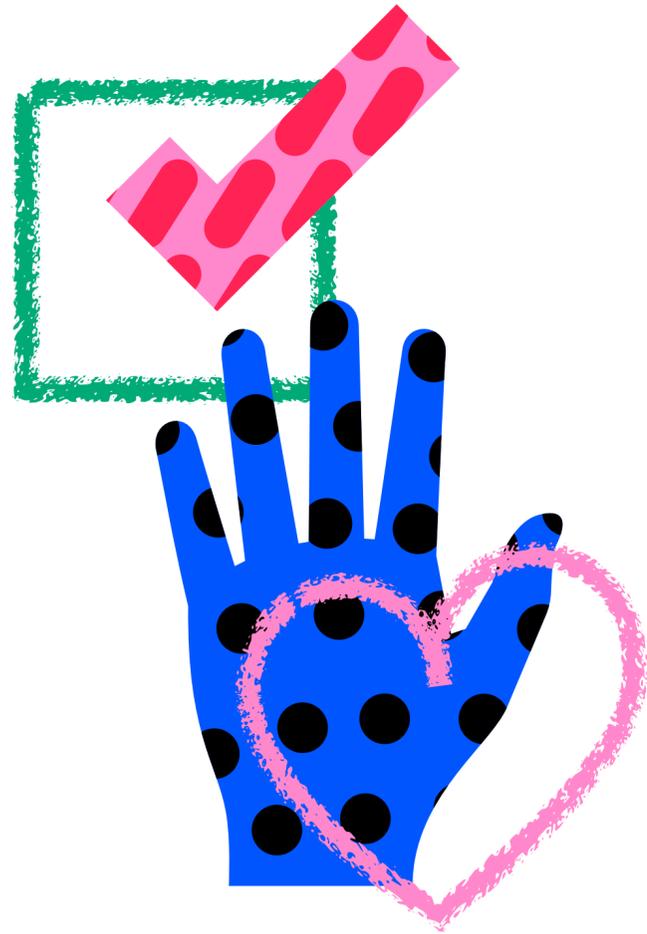


Practice allyship

Empathy Circles create allyship, but they're only part of a solution. In order to create meaningful change, allies must commit to lifelong work.



As an ally, I will

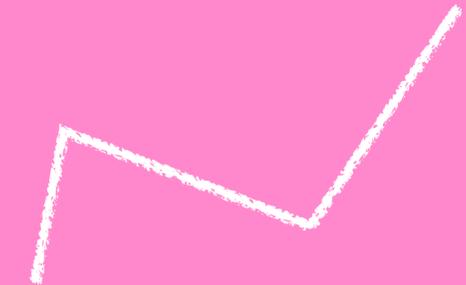
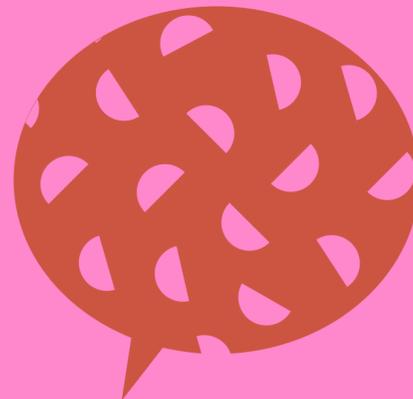
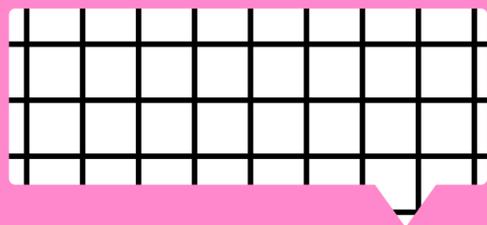
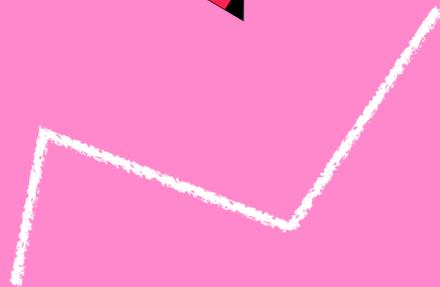


- 1 Listen to understand
- 2 Check my assumptions in order to unlearn biases
- 3 Speak up against inequitable comments and actions
- 4 Take steps to make my workplace equitable, safe, and welcoming
- 5 Advocate for historically marginalized people to lead change, instead of assuming I know what's helpful for them

Practice allyship

Demand change

Allyship must show up in every facet of our lives. In collective ways, we make an impact.



Lead by example

Be mindful of how you're showing up—in your workplace, wider community, and with friends and family. Your daily language and actions matter, as much as the public movements you're turning up for.

Seek out unconscious biases

Call out discrimination and inequities when you see them. Remember, silence is complicity.

Advance equity, not equality

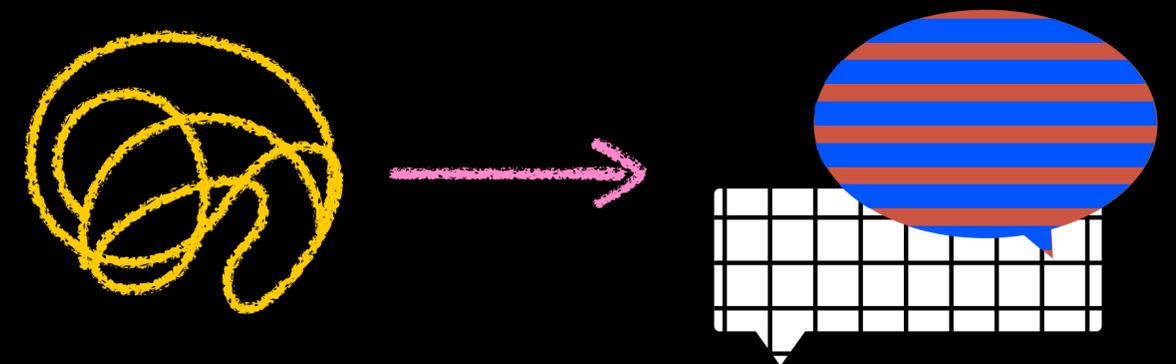
If we treat everyone the same, injustice prevails. Equity is providing support and advocacy relative to where it's needed. Pay attention to the individual needs of those around you, and work to dismantle systemic barriers.

Be empathetic

Create safe and welcoming spaces for difficult conversations. Be proactive about acknowledging impactful events happening in the world, and offer support.

Use your sphere of influence

Wherever you have voice or power, leverage it. Within your organization, commit to a goal focused on diversity, inclusion, and equity—and recognize their valuable impact on business. Go beyond being supportive; give others a seat at the table.



Demand change

In April 2020, Zendesk started hosting internal Empathy Circles, as a response to the inequities amplified by COVID-19, and protests against systemic racism. Our Empathy Circles have been recognized by UC Berkeley's Center for Equity, Gender, and Leadership. We encourage any organization or group to run their own Empathy Circles to catalyze important conversations.



This resource is made by Zendesk. You're welcome to spread it far and wide.

GDEI@zendesk.com

