Conversations with purpose

An initiative by **common**purpose

Foreword

Conversations are important.

Conversations can strengthen relationships, foster understanding between people and build bridges across different cultures (… at least, they can when we do them well). We believe that if we are going to heal some of the divisions that have formed in this world, we need to get better at having conversations. And not just any conversation – conversations about the big issues that affect many different people, which don't always have neat solutions. We call them 'conversations with purpose'.

Conversations with Purpose is more than just a research project. Yes, we want to better understand what happens when people engage in difficult, purpose-driven conversations. And we hope the findings in this report are a valuable resource for people and organizations considering this issue. But we also want to find practical, scalable ways to support people to have better, more effective conversations.

So, in a way, Conversations with Purpose is really an invitation. An invitation to you – to everyone – to be involved in this work and help us get the world talking.

Adirupa Sengupta, Chief Executive, Common Purpose Charitable Trust

More than just a *difficult conversation*

Most of us instinctively know what it means to have a difficult conversation. It's also likely we know what it means to avoid a difficult conversation. Choosing to engage – or not engage – in certain conversations is a balancing act – where we weigh up our **motivation** and the **risk**.

Motivation is what drives us to have the conversation in the first place. Whereas risk causes us to slow down, alter our approach, or avoid the conversation completely. When we go to work, hang out with friends, or speak to our family, we're constantly calibrating this risk vs reward.
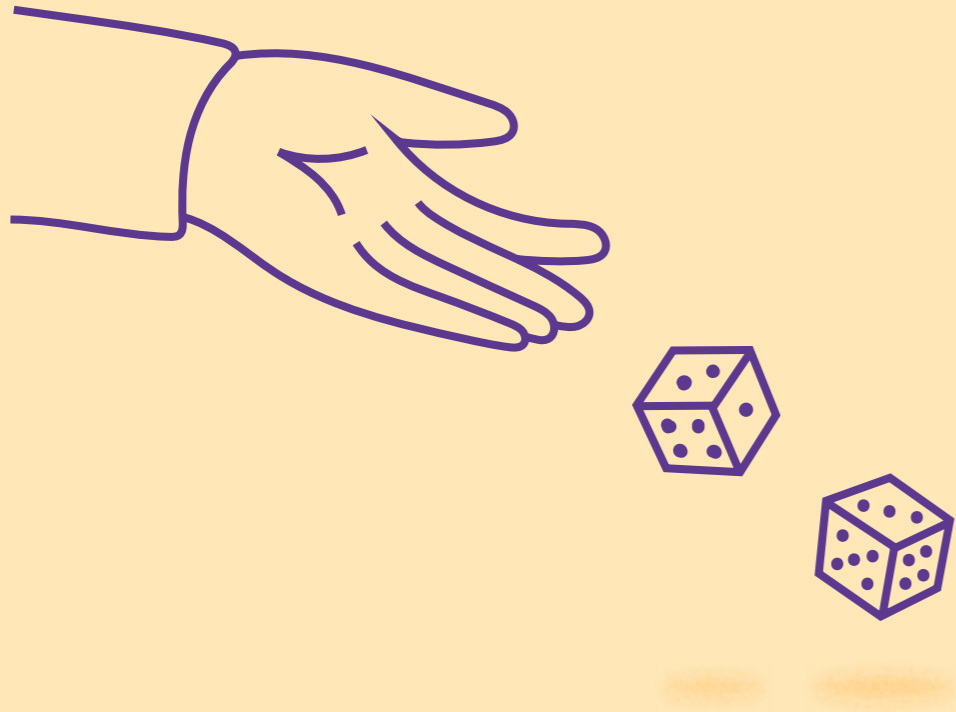
The risks we might attach to a difficult conversation are too numerous to name: there's the risk we might be misunderstood, alter a relationship, damage our reputation, hurt someone's feelings, use the wrong words, or even shut down the opportunity to have the conversation again. As the saying goes: words are like toothpaste; you can't put them back into the tube. So we find ways to mitigate the risks. We mitigate risk through the manner in which we have the conversation, the words we use, our timing, but mostly, we mitigate risk over time, by deepening relationships and building trust with other people. We can get so good at calibrating and mitigating these risks that we sometimes forget they are there – that is, until we get it wrong. Then, we become acutely aware that an ill-judged or badly managed conversation can have destructive effects.

Motivation, too, takes many forms. However, we can group motivation into two categories: outcome-driven and purpose-driven.

Outcome-driven conversations are about things within our control – conversations, which, at least in theory, we are able to resolve with the people around us. Whereas purpose-driven conversations are about issues that are much bigger than ourselves – much bigger than any one person. We're motivated to have the conversation because, on some level, we know it is important, but the immediate outcomes can be unclear, incremental, or elusive. This distinction often goes unacknowledged but it is crucial – because the approaches that are effective in one type of conversation are not necessarily effective in the other.

At Common Purpose, we are much more interested in this second type of difficult conversation – conversations with purpose. We believe they are an important feature of both healthy democracies and successful, resilient organizations. We also believe that we need to get much better at having them. That's why we have conducted this research, which aims to understand, better, why we have purpose-driven conversations and what happens when we do.

Before we delve into the research and our findings, let's spend a little more time exploring what distinguishes purpose-driven conversations from outcome-driven conversations.
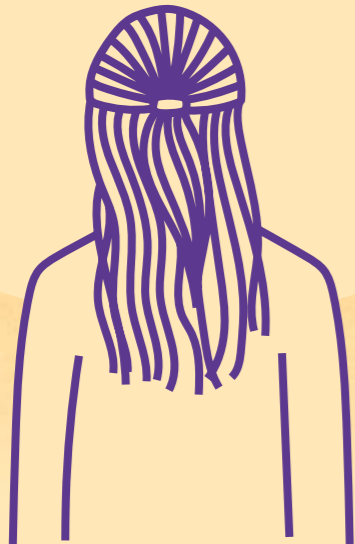
Outcome-driven conversations

"I need you to improve your poor performance"

"I want to break up with you"

"We need to renegotiate the deal"

"I want a pay rise"

"Your behaviour has been disrupting the team"

Outcome-driven conversations tend to be orientated towards resolution. We hesitate to call these 'small' conversations because when you are in them, they can feel anything but small – sometimes they are life-altering conversations. However, the intended outcomes are clear and quantifiable - they either happen or they don't.

The outcome itself may be a personal goal, or an outcome you pursue on behalf of your organization. This doesn't mean achieving a resolution is easy (or even inevitable). It takes skill and we can often fail to do this.

Take a look at the examples on the left. We can immediately spot some of the likely outcomes, responses and counter proposals. When we end the conversation, we might have a good sense of whether or not we have been effective; at least, we would know if we have been effective very soon, by observing what happens next. Therefore, we approach these conversations with the aim of resolution – one way or another. As individuals, the ability to be effective in these types of conversations is hugely important; we would struggle to achieve our goals otherwise.

It is also an important quality within organizations. Organizations function, to a large degree, because of decision-making, systems and processes. When issues are left to hang, unresolved, they have the potential to bring the gears to a halt. Typically, the difficult conversations that spring to mind in this context relate to performance management. However, they can – and do – happen across the organization – or even up and down the verticals of hierarchy.

For many years, organizations have invested in developing people who can broach these types of difficult outcome-driven conversations. Naturally, this type of training and support focuses on helping people work towards resolution, whilst reducing personal risk.

Purpose-driven conversations

"Stop eating meat – you're destroying the planet for future generations"

"I think our company should do more to combat racism"

Traditionally, these are the types of conversation we imagine taking place in the village square or the town hall; however, they can take place anywhere – around the dinner table, by the school gates, or on WhatsApp. Increasingly, they are taking place in offices and across organizations. We might have them with friends we've known all our lives, or with strangers we've just met. They touch on subjects like social justice, personal rights, politics, public health and safety, the environment and culture. On one level, when we engage in these conversations, we are really discussing the direction of society as a whole.

These are all still examples of difficult conversations. They carry all the usual potential risks (reputational risk, risk of damaging relationships, etc) and despite the risks, we can still feel motivated to have them. But unlike outcome-driven conversations, we rarely expect clear and quantifiable resolutions – we have to take a longer view. To put it simply, we're motivated less by the immediate outcome and more by the bigger purpose.

"Your religious beliefs are not compatible with a free society"

"Our industry treats women with contempt"

"Political correctness infringes on my freedom of speech"

What's more, some of the techniques and approaches that help leaders have better outcome-driven conversations can even have detrimental effects here. Setting out to 'resolve' the unresolvable risks making matters even worse.

In other words, you may find yourself trying to dam a river when you would have been better served building a bridge.

So why do we need Conversations with Purpose?

A stronger social discourse

In many societies, we are becoming more polarized. Trust in institutions is declining and both new and old media seem to be intensifying the social divisions. If we want to rebuild our shared understanding of the world – our shared discourse – we're going to have to do it ourselves, one conversation at a time. We need conversations with purpose, not because we need everyone to hold the same point of view, but because we need to build bridges between people who do not – to foster a greater sense of social cohesion, tolerance, and collective responsibility for the issues that affect society as a whole.

Organizations don't operate in a vacuum

Most organizations recognize the need to create more inclusive, purpose-driven cultures where employees can 'bring themselves to work'. However, the consequence is that organizations are increasingly becoming spaces where there is an expectation, even a need, to facilitate open conversations about difficult issues. 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement showed what can happens when organizations either embrace – or try to abstain from – these types of difficult purpose-driven conversations. If badly managed, the conversations can even have negative effects.

Because we want to…

Many individuals recognize the importance of these conversations, and they feel an intuitive sense of responsibility for having them. One of the things our research showed was that when people do not feel they can engage in these conversations, for whatever reason, they experience feelings of frustration, guilt and inertia.

Our research

Ultimately, at Common Purpose, we want to develop a more effective approach for people to have conversations with purpose. For over 30 years, Common Purpose programmes have provided a rare neutral space, where people from many different backgrounds can have conversations about the bigger issues. However, we've also observed that that leaders often require further support to continue having these types of conversations in their own organizations and in their personal lives. Our ambition is to create accessible, practical techniques, which leaders can use to have better purpose-driven conversations.

But before we could do this, we knew we first needed to gain a greater understanding of what actually happens when people are presented with these types of conversations. What are our default positions? What common approaches do people take? What external factors affect our approach?

The result is this research, which aims to provide some of the answers to those questions.

Our methodology

We devised a survey that presented subjects with a series of situations that potentially necessitated some kind of difficult, purpose-driven conversation.

We asked them to pick the examples with which they could most relate. We then asked them to reflect on the situation and describe their emotions, their thought process and how they would or would not respond in that situation. As much as possible, we tried to ensure the responses were as representative as possible of real-life scenarios. In order to achieve this:

1.
We presented subjects with specific, evocative situations, designed to prompt recollection of similar situations they have experienced in their own life

2.
We included examples that explored three different social dynamics:

- Conversations with people from a different social group
- Conversations with people inside their own social group
- Conversations where significant power dynamics are involved.

3.
We encouraged them not to answer hypothetically, but to relate their answer to similar real-life experiences

4.
All answer formats were open-text, meaning we did not presuppose the types of approaches they might take.

The responses

We shared the survey with Common Purpose alumni – a global community of leaders from different sectors, geographies and generations.

393

responses recieved in total

90,000+

words of verbatim responses

Respondents by gender

Male	123
Female	256
Non-binary	3
Not given	11

Respondents by age

18-24 years	38
25-34 years	65
35-44 years	65
45-54 years	90
55-64 years	103
65-74 years	30
75 years +	2

Respondents by country of origin

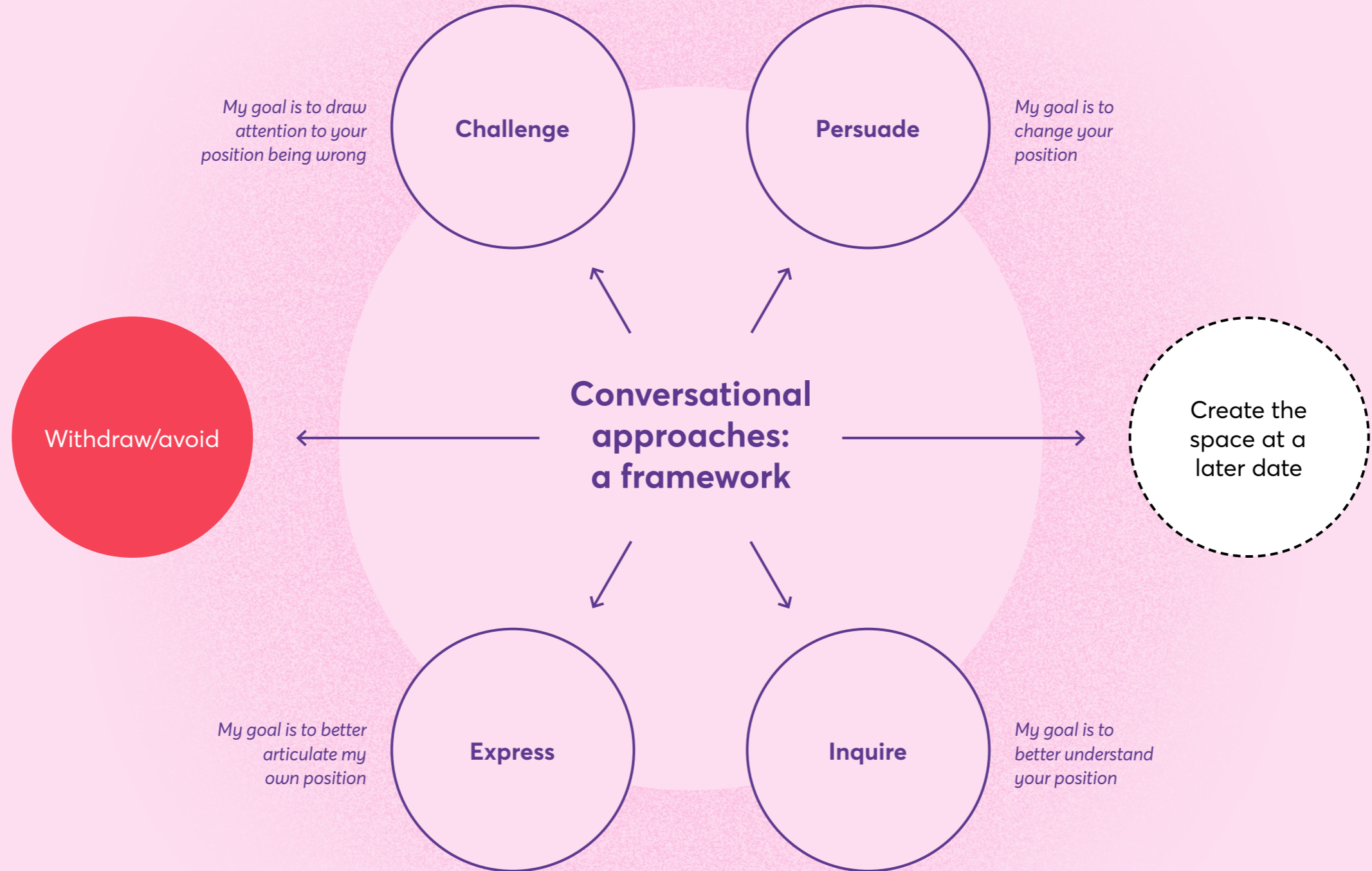|					
Australia	9	India	16	Portugal	1
Bangladesh	1	Indonesia	1	Sierra Leone	1
Belgium	1	Ireland	56	Singapore	5
Botswana	2	Jamaica	1	South Africa	32
Brazil	3	Kenya	4	Spain	2
Cambodia	1	Madagascar	2	Swaziland	1
Cameroon	2	Malawi	1	Thailand	1
Canada	2	Malaysia	2	Trinidad and Tobago	1
Chile	1	Namibia	1	Turkey	4
France	1	Netherlands	1	Uganda	1
Germany	15	New Zealand	1	United Kingdom	174
Ghana	4	Nigeria	9	United States	10
Greece	2	Pakistan	2	Vietnam	2
Hong Kong	3	Philippines	5	Zambia	3
Hungary	2	Poland	1	Zimbabwe	2
Iceland	1				

Analyzing the responses

The responses we received totalled over 90,000 words of verbatim, with most respondents describing their actions and thought-processes for each situation in detail. Immediately, we saw there was a great deal of nuance and complexity in how people approach the different situations. A close reading of the responses provided a wealth of insight into the different considerations people have when considering when or how to engage in certain conversations.

However, in order to dig deeper into the factors that affect people's responses, we explored how we could group the data so we could compare statistical differences between different situations. We considered a number of frameworks to group the data. For example, we explored grouping the data simply according to whether people engaged with – or avoided – the conversation. However, this proved to be too reductive when distinguishing between the nuances of how people chose to engage.

Eventually, we observed that the most meaningful way to group the data was according to a combination of action and intent, which indicated an overall conversational approach. Essentially, we discovered that, when presented with a potentially purpose-driven conversation, nearly all respondents approached the conversation in one of five ways – they would withdraw, express, inquire, challenge or persuade. In addition, some people chose a sixth option – to create the space to have the conversation at a later date.

This framework meant we could code each response in one of six ways, by noting the action they said they would take, the reasons they gave for this and the overall outcomes they indicated they were working towards.

My goal is to draw attention to your position being wrong

Challenge

Persuade

My goal is to change your position

Withdraw/avoid

Conversational approaches: a framework

Create the space at a later date

My goal is to better articulate my own position

Express

Inquire

*My goal is to better understand your position*

# Examples of different conversational approaches

Challenge

"Yes I would engage. I would be feeling angry and thinking that they are racist and narrow-minded. I would sternly tell them what they said was not OK."

Here, the overall intent is to draw attention to the other person's position being wrong; the respondent does not consider how – or if – their challenge might change the other person's view.

Persuade
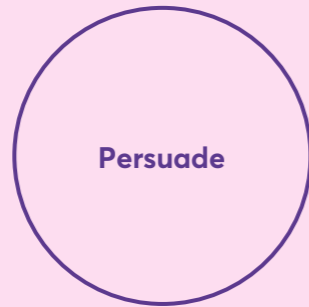
"Yes, I would correct them and explain the decisions they make are based on a qualification they have taken the time out to do. I know the sector well and would feel I can educate them enough for them to maybe change their view."

Here, the primary consideration is about how they might change the other person's views.

Inquire
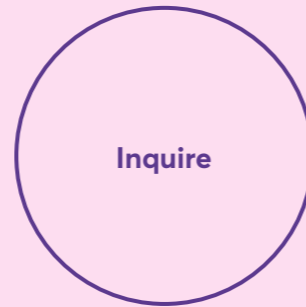
"Engage - I wish to understand why that person feels that way and why it is linked to age."

There is still conflict present in this scenario, as in the previous two examples, but the primary focus is on how they can better understand the other person's position.
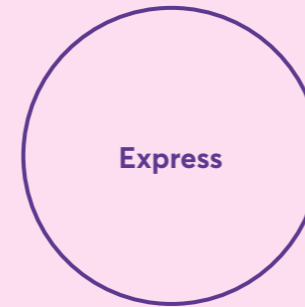
Express

"Yes I engage. I trust and love these friends so feel safe enough to express my views. I risk annoying my friends but I am as entitled to a view as they are."

Here, the primary consideration is about how they can articulate their own views, without necessarily trying to discredit or change the other person's views.

Withdraw/avoid

"I would probably not say anything. I'd feel frustrated with myself for not speaking up and challenging the 'joke' and the ideas behind it, but would be anxious not to come across as difficult. I'd also be wary of starting a big debate in which I would then not be articulate about my views and not able to defend them."

The respondent indicates they would not engage in the conversation at all.

Create the space at a later date
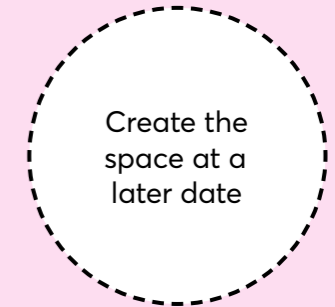
"As soon as the team is back in the office, I would immediately instigate a formal structured plan to educate any members of the team (possibly all of the team) on the organization's policy on equality, discrimination, bullying, etc. including sending people for training days as necessary."

The respondent plans to convene the conversation later.

As in life, some respondents stated they would take more than one of these approaches (i.e. I would first do X, then later I would do Y). In these instances, we coded the response by either the first approach they take, or by their overwhelming approach, if this could be inferred. We did not code responses in which not enough information was given to infer an approach.

Coding the responses this way allowed us to consider the factors affecting people's approach in a more holistic way, particularly when observing drivers behind different approaches. We should be careful not to view this framework as a reductive tool. Our research is still primarily qualitative, reflecting the nuance of conversational approach. However, combining the framework with a close reading of the responses allowed us to uncover several key findings, which we will explore over the following pages.

The findings

Over the following pages, we will explore ten trends we observed across the responses. We would encourage you to consider them as starting points for further testing and experimentation – not conclusions.

Finding 1

The challenge-withdraw dichotomy

A common trend we observed is that in situations where there is little psychological safety, and/or a lack of relationship between the subject and the other person – people often act according to a 'challenge-withdraw dichotomy'. They see their only two options as being to challenge and 'call out' the other person, or withdraw completely.

Furthermore, when we examined the reasons people gave for why they would challenge, many chose to frame it around a personal goal – i.e. 'I do not want to feel guilty for not challenging'. In other words, they found a way to turn this into an outcome-driven conversation – where the challenge itself is the outcome. On the whole, there was little discussion of what they hoped that challenge would achieve. However those who did explore this tended to focus on how they were contributing to an overall culture of what is acceptable, rather than how they might change the other person's view.

Situation A

"You're in a supermarket. You see another shopper in what appears to be a noisy exchange with a member of staff, a Sikh.

The shopper turns away, and as they pass you they audibly criticize the staff member on the basis of their ethnicity."

Challenge	43%
Express	1%
Inquire	6%
Persuade	9%
Withdraw	41%
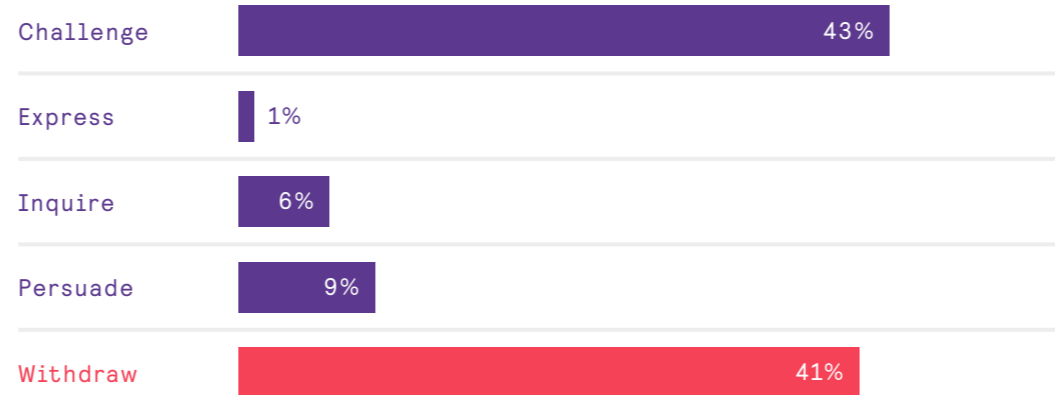
"Absolutely engage. The depth of racism must be confronted at any source and the engagement will depend upon both the situation and level of open racism displayed. You are complicit if you say nothing, which means you need to be able to voice an opinion."

"I would like to engage and correct someone and often will. But it depends on the situation and the type of person that is making the comment. If I am with my young children at the time, do I risk a confrontation? Sometimes personal self-preservation can get in the way of bravery or a moral stance."

"Yes I would have to say something to the shopper to call out their actions towards the staff member. I would feel like I needed to not stay quiet as it would be an acceptance of their act."

"Sometimes I would engage, step in, speak out to separate the distress of the issue, from the ethnicity of the staff member. The two are not linked. Sometimes I would not....the major factor would be the rush of tears and pain in me rendering me speechless. Injustice rushes through my body like fire....and I sometimes freeze (if that's not too much of a contradiction!). Sometimes I manage to unfreeze after a few moments and in this scenario might step in a few moments later to stand alongside the staff member and support them, but I would have missed the moment to challenge the view of the customer."

Situation B

"You're at a football match, which is being officiated by a woman referee, who has just made several errors. The person sitting next to you turns around and says, 'Typical! That's why they shouldn't be allowed to referee'. It's not a view you share."

Challenge	45%
Express	12%
Inquire	10%
Persuade	7%
Withdraw	25%
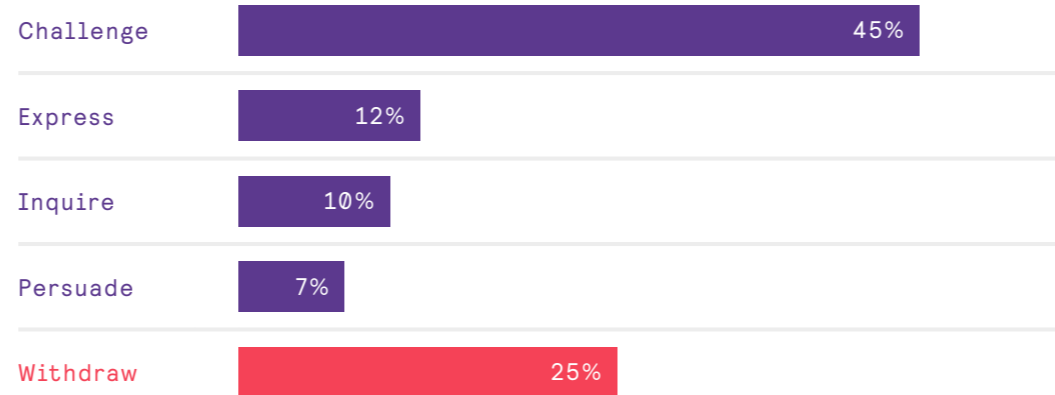
"I choose to engage, I think I would feel frustrated as many times criticism is plentiful but volunteers or solutions are conspicuous by their absence and behaviours need to be gently challenged."

"I would engage. I have encountered similar situations in the past. If such statements go unchallenged they will be seen as acceptable and will continue and magnify. In general I hesitate to engage in conversations like this with strangers, especially if it's in a public setting like a football match. Sometimes I think I shy away from hard conversations because I think I won't be able to get the other person to understand my point of view."

"I chose not to engage. I would be angry with the remarks, however I will avoid having the conversations because I will be under the impression that it will take me a long time to help the other person understand my views. I will also avoid the conversation because of the possibility of a negative response."

Finding 2

# The presence of a relationship / psychological safety

We can compare Situations A and B with the following Situation C, in which the situation specifies an existing relationship and a degree of psychological safety.

Once again, most respondents described a moral imperative driving their response, and once again, responses that sought to 'challenge' were by far the most popular. However, the nature of the challenges were quite different. In this situation, respondents were much more thoughtful and tactful in how they delivered their challenge, giving more thought to what happens next. For example, some indicated that they would challenge their friend in private. Others explained how they would try to trigger empathy in their friend by revealing more of their own personal experience.

Furthermore, unlike the previous examples, we see more respondents choosing to express their own point of view, rather than challenge the other person, a trend we will revisit in the next section.

Situation C

"You're at a work party. As part of a group discussion, one of your colleagues who you typically get on with well makes a comment as part of a joke that you feel is very offensive. Everyone else in the group laughs, seemingly finding it funny. You feel passionately that this point of view is wrong and are surprised that other colleagues appear comfortable with the comment made."

Challenge	42%
Challenge (in private)	12%
Express	17%
Inquire	3%
Persuade	9%
Withdraw	17%
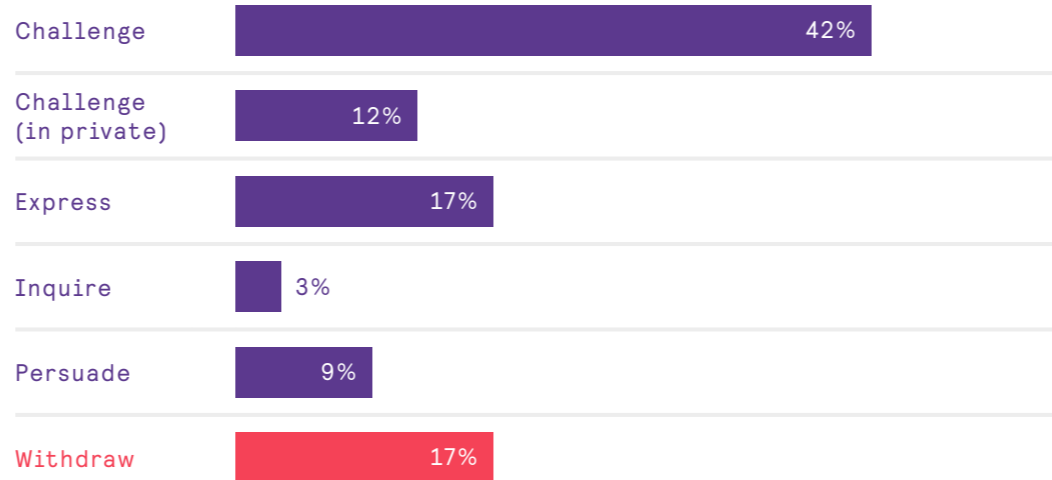
"Do not engage the matter in the group setting. I would feel touched due to insensitive nature of the colleague and most probably take it personally. I would pull the colleague to the side and explain how the comments made me feel and going forward I will engage and that the behaviour is unacceptable. I believe in giving people a platform to redress their previous wrongs but not in a public setting."

"I have been in this situation and I would actually raise the issue with them, hopefully in a way that we could have a conversation about the issue. I would explain why I found the joke offensive. It may be that they would still find it fine to talk like this and they are entitled to their opinion and their sense of humour – but just to let them know that for me, it is offensive and to explain why – and with the hope that perhaps in future they might think about what they are saying and that not everyone thinks exactly the same way as them on every subject. What I wouldn't do is let it slide without saying anything. I would always defend the right to free speech, but there should always be room for having other perspectives raised and challenged, including my own – and you can agree to disagree."

"If this was a one-to-one scenario, I would call them on it as this view shouldn't change our friendship. However, if I was in a group where everyone appeared to be on 'their side' I probably wouldn't as I wouldn't want to be ganged up on."

Finding 3

Can a space become too safe?

In the following situations (D, E and F), we see a continuation of the trend we explored in the previous finding. Here, there are higher levels of psychological safety, and/or an existing relationship. Respondents indicated that they were much more likely to focus on expressing their own position, trusting the other person to listen, empathize and engage. Furthermore, in the following situations, we did not see the same moral imperative driving people to 'challenge' and focus on establishing what they believe is and isn't acceptable.

Situation D

"You're part of a WhatsApp group of school friends. One of the members has just shared a post attacking a celebrity for something they tweeted about the Black Lives Matter movement. Almost everyone in the group has joined in but you don't agree. You think the celebrity was right to say what they did and you feel quite strongly about this."

Challenge   6%
Express   54%
Inquire   3%
Persuade   8%
Withdraw   29%
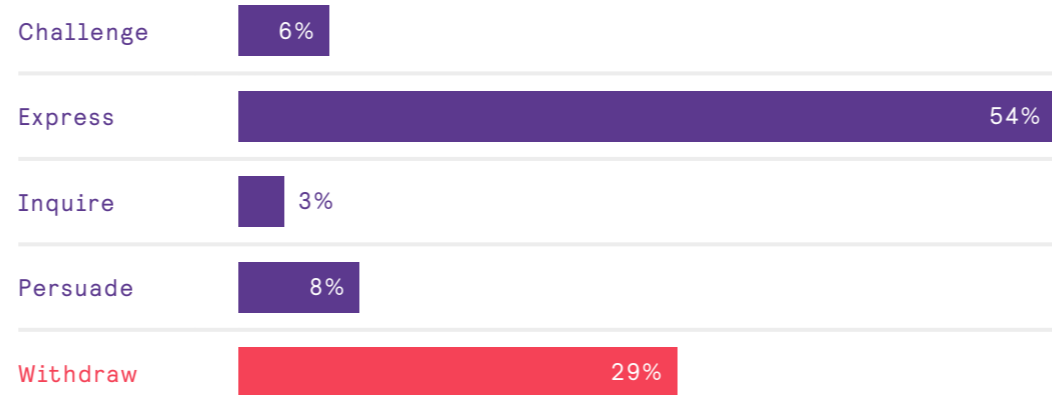
"I would choose to Engage. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. We may not always agree but we are to be respectful of each other and our opinions and beliefs. We are all different and unique and that's what makes the world beautiful. Therefore I would respectfully agree and enlighten them as to all our difference in opinion."

"Engage. Letting the friend know I agree with the comment and why. I wouldn't make my friend feel silly but I think it would be important to get across the point of the movement to them. It's okay if we don't agree as long as we listen to each other."

"Maybe, I think my silence will be noticeable. WhatsApp is also a difficult medium to have a proper discussion – nuances are lost. Might make a short comment that everyone should have a voice, and leave it at that."

"I wouldn't engage with this one. Social media conversations never convey all of the nuances and non verbal communications you get in a face-to-face conversation, so comments are often misconstrued and things get unnecessarily heated. I'm influenced by the desire to maintain friendships and may pick up the issue when face to face"

Situation E

"You're at a gathering with friends and the conversation turns to climate change. All of your friends are complaining about people who have large carbon footprints. It's just occurred to you that this week you've bought a new dishwasher and booked a family holiday to Australia."

Challenge	0%
Express	75%
Inquire	5%
Persuade	10%
Withdraw	10%
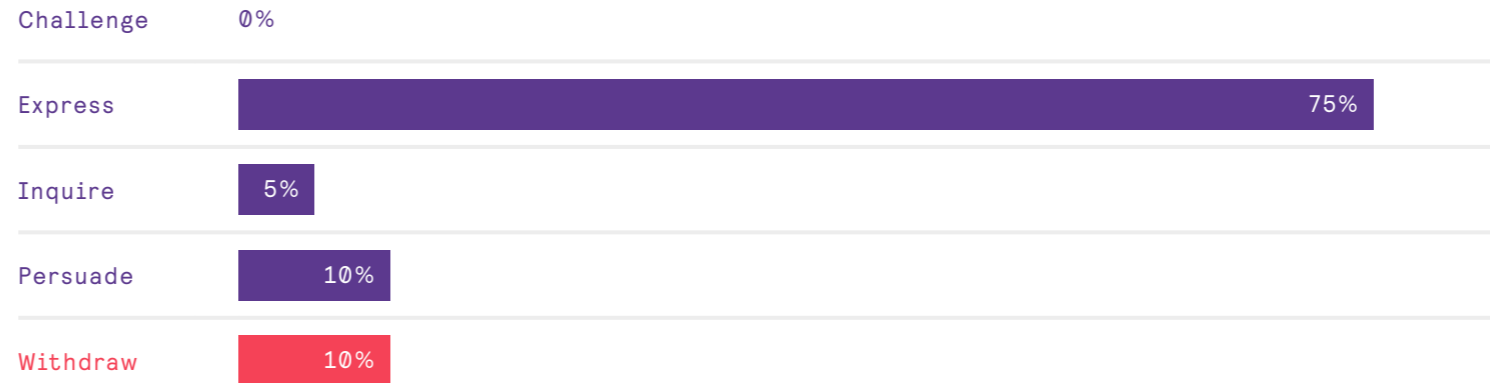
"I chose to engage. As much as what we do impacts the effect of climate change we cannot just stop our actions overnight. I would like to explain the thought behind my actions and the future plans of curbing my exposure."

"Something like this did happen to me recently. I chose to tell everyone. I got a rather muted response. I chose to disclose because to not do so would be hiding too much about myself from people that I respect and love, and I didn't want our relationship to be based on falsehood or concealing parts of my life."

"I will choose to engage. I will honestly tell them that I did what I did and I am part of the problem. I would ask them how are they doing things differently and learn from them what I could do. Equally share with them how I do my share by doing others things, let them also know that I care about the issue."

Situation F

"You are participating in a virtual 'town hall' meeting at work with the entire organization. These have been a regular feature since COVID-19. The conversation turns to the government's handling of the pandemic and everyone begins to criticize them – as usual. In contrast, you actually support this government and always have done. You feel this is yet another example of how you can't share your political opinions at work without standing out."

Challenge	0%
Express	56%
Inquire	8%
Persuade	8%
Withdraw	28%
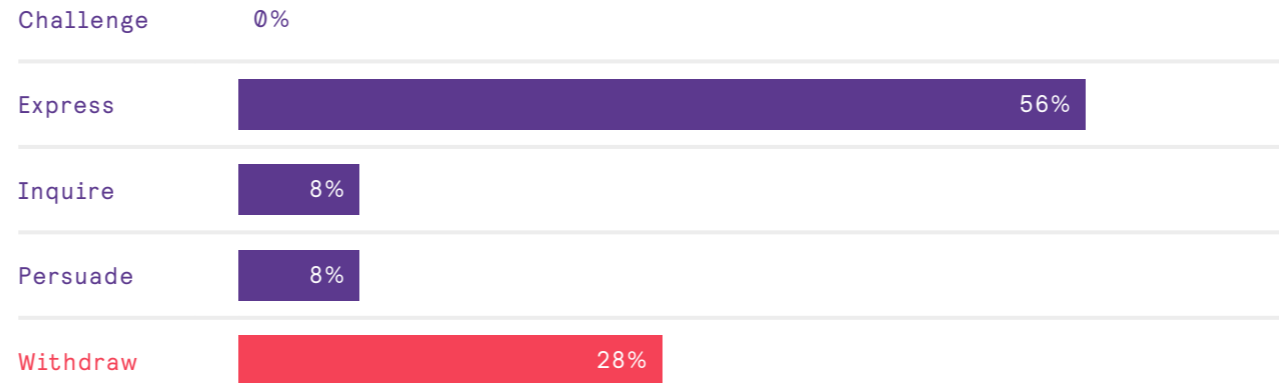
"Yes – I would want to ensure that they understand that not everyone holds the same views that they do. I would be uncertain as to whether I would be heard, but it's important to stand up for your own beliefs too, otherwise they assume by your silence that this is your view too. I would not be aggressive or confrontational as that's not my style, but would be assertive in saying, I think they've done a great job actually. Usually someone is just waiting for someone else to speak up first."

"I would engage as I have strong arguments that the government had done good things. I would start to explain my point of view, no matter whether the others agree or not. I like to hear both sides of the story."

"No, I'd keep quiet for fear of damaging my relationship with my staff going forward."

Finding 4

Holding the minority view

Situations C, D, E and F are all notable because the respondent is in the minority – everyone else laughs at the joke… everyone else seemingly shares the same view….

For the most part, the respondents who chose to express did not directly refer to their minority position as being a factor, with most referring to the importance of multiple viewpoints, or the trust they have in their friends and colleagues to be respectful of their views. However, we should consider that being in the minority does represent significant conversational risk, and may have resulted in some respondents softening their approach.

We do know this was a factor for many respondents who chose 'withdraw', who directly referred to the fact they were in the social minority as an influencing factor. We should also consider that one of the common objectives given for 'challenge' (in Situations A and B for example) was to contribute to social norms; clearly this difficult if you are in the minority. This is perhaps why we saw more respondents chose to challenge in private in Situation C.

"I would engage but only after a lot of hesitancy on my part. I would contact the person who posted the comment directly, not via the group, and tell them that I disagree strongly with what they said, but a group forum is not the place to have a debate/row, as people jump in and it can escalate. I would try to remember that we are friends for a reason, and if this is the first time it has happened, I would want to forgive and forget. However, if a similar incident was to happen again, I would think that we couldn't be friends anymore, and would end the relationship."

"No – too much potential backlash and very little chance of changing anyone's views."

"I would typically engage but in this case I may let the issue pass if it's not too significant and I know a simple reply would result in me being isolated, eg the climate or government scenarios. Often easier to avoid tackling group think and work on individuals one by one...or try and land a reply that is amusing or is 'banter' to make the group realize what they are thinking."

"I do not engage, as this is not a one-to-one situation where the balance is equal. There are many of them and only one of me. If these are all members of my team it is especially difficult, because if they disagree with what I might say then: 1) my working environment could become unpleasant if they begin to treat me differently, and/or 2) I could lose my support network at work. I would rely on my team to have my back should I encounter any sort of discrimination/prejudice at work, and if I speak out here about something they don't see as a "major" issue, it could lead to them ignoring me/chalking me up to being a "drama queen" if a similar issue happened in the workplace against me."

Finding 5

On the wrong side of a power dynamic

Unsurprisingly, we observed that in situations where the respondent was on the lesser side of a power dynamic, they were much more likely to withdraw from or avoid the conversation entirely. Respondents to the following two situations (G and H) also pointed to social norms driving their decision not to respond.

Much like Situations A and B, we see that the lack of psychological safety leads to a challenge-withdraw dichotomy; however, in these examples, withdraw is a much more popular approach compared to the earlier examples.

Situation G

"You have been dating someone for a few weeks and they have invited you to their parents' house for dinner. Their father has just made a joke, not realizing that this is highly insulting to you and your own family's background. Your partner senses that you are uncomfortable but does not react."

Challenge	24%
Express	3%
Inquire	5%
Persuade	3%
Withdraw	62%
Create space	3%
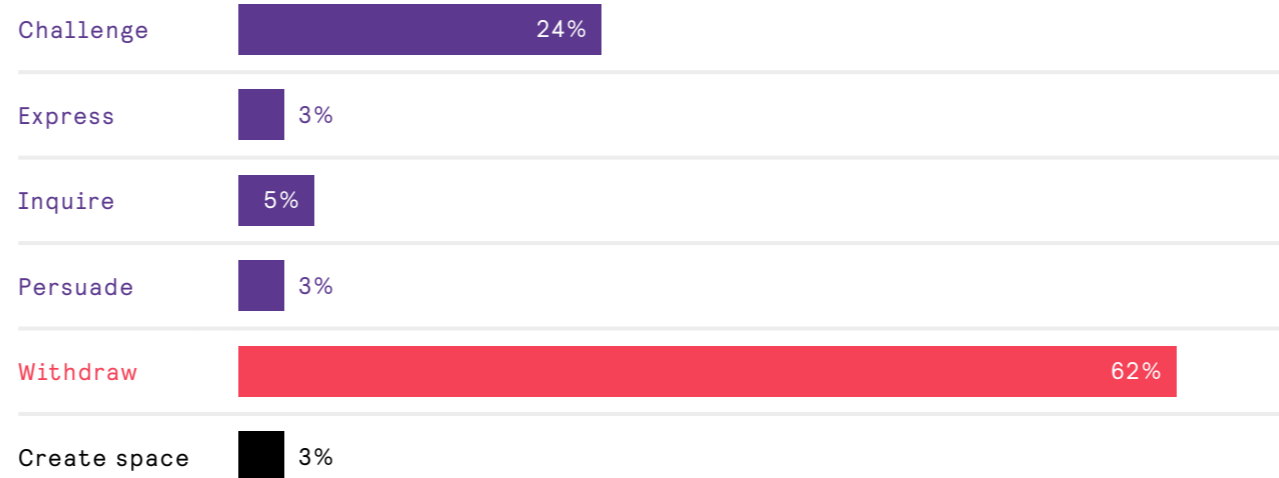
"I would not engage in this scenario (and I have been in it many times!). I don't think it is my job to pick a family fight with someone else's family. I would wait to see if my date said anything when we were alone together and, if she did, I'd be clear that I found the comment upsetting. If she didn't, I would probably try to raise it with her at some point. Obviously, it would depend on how keen I was on her how far I would push matters, but I think I'd want her to know that the comment upset me. If I was feeling bold (which I might not be!) I'd probably ask her to mention the incident to her father and explain that it had been a problem for me."

"I would not react. If someone is so insensitive I see no point."

"Not every person realizes sometimes their jokes might be offensive. About my boyfriend, I wouldn't expect for someone to talk for me regardless the time we are together. Of course you can understand from the beginning if a person will be there to support you even in the short term or long term, but I would still be able to reply myself. I would be able to reply to his father in the kindest way and I would try to explain him how impolite his joke was. Hopefully he would understand so something like this would not be repeated in the future."

Situation H

"You are drinking alcohol with some friends in the park (this is against park rules and you know it). A police officer tells you in a curt – almost aggressive – manner, to move on. You notice he did not address the family drinking wine with their picnic, a short distance away. You assume his behaviour is motivated by something about the way you look (perhaps your age, race or choice of clothes)."

Challenge	23%
Withdraw	77%

"I wouldn't engage in this conversation. In my biased experience, police are not willing to admit then they're wrong and the 'power' often goes to their head. I'd just move on through fear of getting into a heated debate and things escalating."

"I would feel very angry but I suspect because I know he has power over me I would say nothing. I would moan about it afterwards, and cite it in conversations."

Finding 6

When you have the power

In one of the situations, we placed the respondents in a position of power.

Interestingly, we saw that this caused a number of respondents to focus their approach less around how they would respond in the moment and more on how they could 'create the space' to revisit the conversation at a later date in a different setting – using their position of power to facilitate this.

We also saw a number of respondents who tried to resolve the conversation in the moment, by choosing persuasion as an approach.

Curiously, the following example is the only situation where there was a statistically significant difference in approach between genders. The most popular approach by women was to 'create the space' whereas the most popular approach by men was to persuade their colleagues and resolve the situation in the moment.

Situation I

"At a work-related social occasion a conversation with your new team reveals that many of them have a very strong anti-immigrant bias. You are about to bring on a new employee who will work directly with these people – and she is an immigrant who fled a threatening situation in the Middle East. It is not too late to reassign her."

Challenge	26%
Express	1%
Inquire	12%
Persuade	23%
Withdraw	9%
Create space	28%
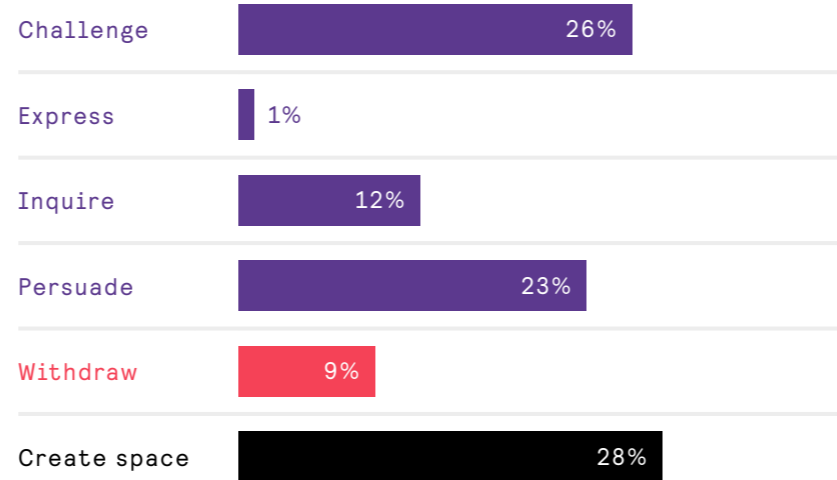
"I wouldn't engage the conversation in that very moment. I think it's important to at times plan what needs to be said in a conversation and I may not say things how I would want them to be said in that moment. I'd be toying between doing the right thing and not re-assigning the colleague just because of other colleagues views and also making sure that the new colleague is in the right environment to flourish. I'd also like to tackle their anti-immigrant bias. My approach would be for us to get back into the office and have an open discussion with the team. Playback the conversation with them and explain to them that a new colleague will be starting. I'd like to see how they respond to that situation and how I might be able to help them educate themselves prior to the new colleague starting so that we can support her – it sounds like she's already had a really tough time and she doesn't need that."

"I would engage as I would feel disappointed in my team as I myself am an immigrant. Alternatively, my team would know that we are open and diverse and that keeps us motivated as a team. Assuming I just met the team, I would engage with them to explain the merits and drawbacks of migrants and how economies have been built on migrant contribution – also pointing out the lack of choice migrating presents."

"I'll engage and tell them to focus on her abilities and remind them of the contribution of immigrants in the UK."

Finding 6

Turning purpose-driven conversations back into outcome-driven conversations

Across many of the situations, we observed respondents who sought to resolve the conversation there and then by persuading the other person.

Situation J is notable because we saw that the presence of a short-term outcome (in this case, a particularly time-sensitive and high-stakes outcome), caused most people to sidestep the wider issues involved and take a more direct resolution-based approach. It was also interesting to note a degree of confidence shown by the respondents across these responses.

Situation J

"A colleague is very sick, they will not consider going to the doctor. You want to advise them, but you also know that their decision not to seek medical help is based on strongly-held religious views, which you disagree with."

Challenge	0%
Express	5%
Inquire	16%
Persuade	63%
Withdraw	16%
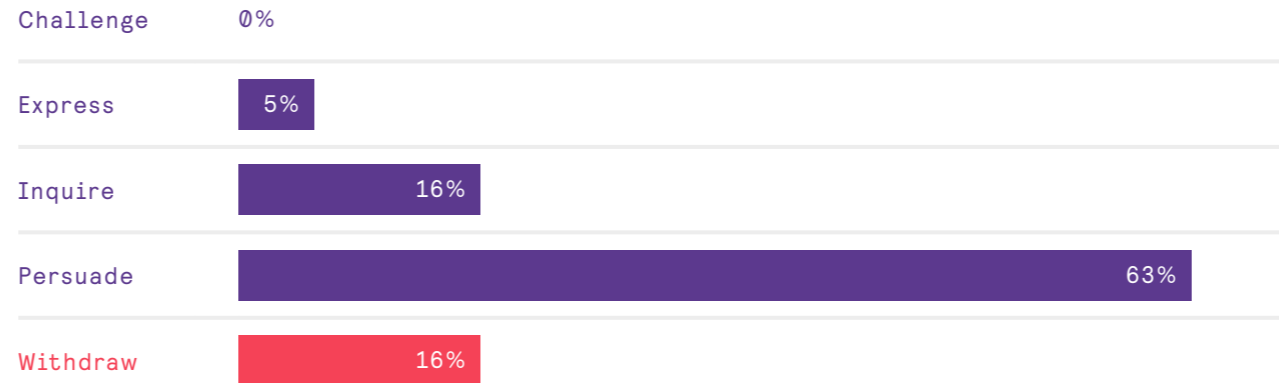
"In this scenario I would make my colleague aware that I have the utmost respect for their religious beliefs, however I will let them know that I care about them and their well-being, and on this basis, gently advise them to see a medical professional as I would hate to see their physical condition decline any further."

"I would be practical in my persuading them to seek help. Show that I understood their position. It would of course depend on how they respond. It would also depend on what symptoms they showed. My nursing background would influence my questioning and tactics. I would hope to persuade them to be checked out."

"I think I would chose to not engage with the person in this scenario, as it relates to them and their choices. I would be sad, as I believe that modern medicine could probably help, but I don't believe I could change their mind, as it's a conversation they will have had many times, and I would not be able to influence them any differently."

Finding 7

A lack of inquiry

Across all situations (apart from one) we observed that inquiry was not seen as a go-to approach. In fact, the only situation in which inquiry was the most popular approach is the next one (Situation K). Generally, the respondents demonstrated curiosity, however this curiosity has been triggered by external challenge. It's notable that respondents demonstrate much less curiosity in all other examples – the desire to challenge, express or persuade nearly always wins out.

Situation K

"You are at a birthday party of a childhood friend where you strike up a conversation with somebody you have never met before. During the conversation, quite dismissively, they correct you on a term that you have used to describe a group of people. You feel confused as you still don't know why what you said was wrong."

Challenge	3%
Express	4%
Inquire	81%
Persuade	1%
Withdraw	10%
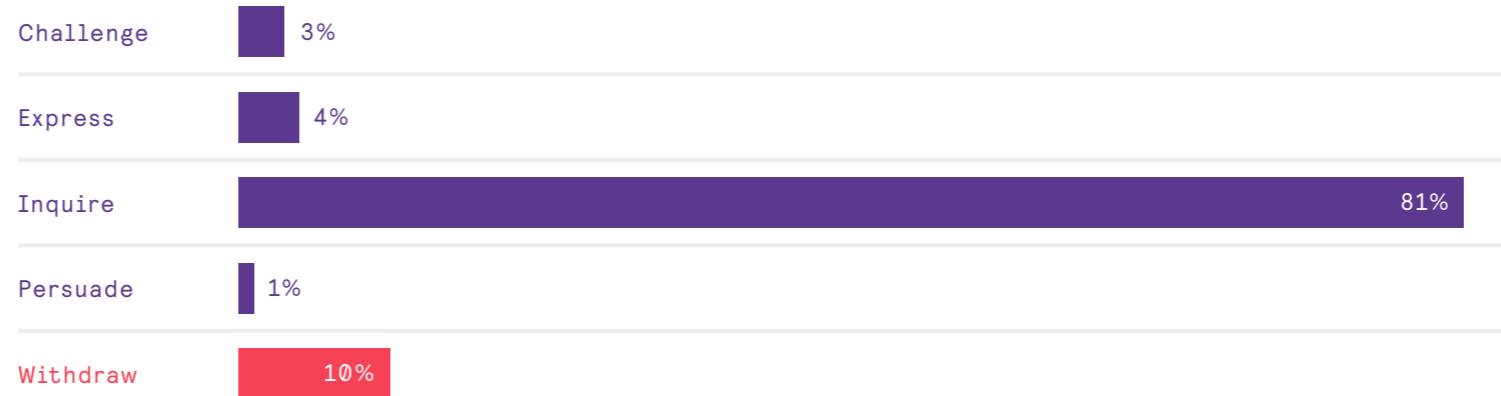
"I choose to engage with this person. Likely, I feel a mixture of embarrassment and confusion. I would politely ask the person to explain why he/she thought that the term I had used was incorrect. As long as they are reasonable and polite, I'd carry on this conversation and try to learn why they think I erred. However, if they continue to remain dismissive, I'd excuse myself and step away from the situation. My actions are influenced by my upbringing, both at school and at home, which has taught me that in times of public embarrassment, the best thing to do is to stand your ground, stay polite and try to engage in conversation."

"I would probably feel either in disagreement or maybe shame. I chose this one as I would be keen (and anxious) to learn not to be racist or prejudiced against a group. I would want to learn. If I thought their view was unfair I would explain why I said what I said. It would also depend on how open the others were to discussion."

Finding 8

Many ways
to challenge

We noted that 'challenge' was perhaps the most diverse approach in terms of style. People described many different ways in which they would challenge including

- Harshly
- Softly
- Privately
- Publicly
- Using humour
- Using non-verbal cues, such as a glance or stare

"I do engage and explain my point view and sometimes scold when I feel that they are morally wrong. I think doing this, though, has made me look like a 'know-it-all' or 'holier-than-thou'. And sometimes people catch themselves after they've said something and apologize quickly to me. But it is more that they know I stand for things I believe in and they don't want the criticism, rather than being sorry or understanding."

"If I knew the person I would choose to engage, and try and use humour to highlight the ridiculous and incorrect premise of their statement. If I did not know them I might shoot them a dirty look."

"Yes, I'd likely be annoyed and, as a woman at a football match, feel defensive of the referee. It's an environment where banter is the norm - and part of what makes the experience enjoyable - so I'd probably make a pointed, 'jokey' comment."

"I would engage. I would be feeling uncomfortable, and disappointed in and surprised at my colleague I would challenge what they said, tell them why I found it offensive and ask them to respond. I am not afraid to stand up for what I believe in."

Finding 9

Many reasons to withdraw

We also saw that respondents avoided or withdrew from conversations for a number of reasons.

Effectiveness

- There is a lack of relationship, and I see this as a pre-requisite for conversational effectiveness
- I do not believe I can change the other person's view, so I won't engage in the conversation at all
- My emotions are preventing me from having the conversation well
- I may be drawn into a conversation I cannot maintain
— E.g. by inquiring or challenging, I may be asked to express my own views which I may not be able to do in the moment
— E.g. By engaging softly (such as inquiring or expressing), it may be seen as challenge – and therefore the conversation escalates into conflict.

Personal risk / high stakes

- The potential negative consequences are too great to risk having this conversation
- I do not feel psychologically or physically safe enough to have the conversation

Apathy

- I don't care enough about the issue
- I genuinely don't feel the need to have the conversation

"I chose not to engage. I would be angry with the remarks however I will avoid to have the conversations because I will be under the impression that it will take me a long time to help the other person understand my views."

"No, I'd keep quiet for fear of damaging my relationship with my staff going forward."

"Probably not. I would want to say something, but worried about getting involved in an altercation, so most likely just keep quiet. "

"I would like to engage but I probably wouldn't as I'd be unsure how to go ahead without sounding aggressive and confrontational, which don't think solves anything."

"I rarely take the initiative to talk because I'm afraid to be corrected even though I know what I'm talking about, I'm really insecure and have low self confidence due to other people cutting my ideas or ignoring me blandly."

"I would be feeling frustrated. Possibly judged by a younger generation - and honestly , I'm just weary, tired and bored with justifying my own values."

"If the person has not sought my opinion I probably wouldn't offer it."

"I don't engage because a) colleagues have just made a joke, that's all, and it's not the end of the world; b) just because I find something offensive doesn't automatically give me the moral high ground and make me right and c) people who make a performative show of offence-taking don't know how to read the room. So I maintain a sense of proportion and a diplomatic silence, and the conversation moves on to other topics."

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to address the question – 'what do people do during purpose-driven conversations?' Thanks to the many detailed, thoughtful responses we received from our global alumni community, we've uncovered some important insights.

Power, relationships, psychological safety – these are all things one would assume affect the nature of conversations, but now we can see with greater clarity how they affect them. The situation informs how we choose to frame the conversation, and our framing dictates the approaches we consider.

But are they the right approaches? The research showed that, where possible, we are often drawn into framing the conversation around potential short-term outcomes, without necessarily being able to relate those outcomes back to the wider purpose. If we are motivated to have the conversation because of a wider purpose, how do we know if we are supporting or detracting from that purpose?

Moreover, the research demonstrates that we regularly make assumptions. Sometimes we avoid conversations because we assume we will have no effect. Sometimes we assume that a conversation will have an entirely positive effect without any evidence to back this up. Do we spend enough time challenging these assumptions?

Then there is the question of the conversations avoided (over a quarter of all responses). In nearly every situation, there were a number of people who felt they could not engage. And not just because of personal risk, but because they did not feel they had the tools to manage the conversation in the right way. A quarter may not feel all that high until you consider that the sample is made up of Common Purpose alumni – self-identified leaders who are likely to have more experience of difficult conversations. So how do we support people to navigate conversations they otherwise feel they cannot broach?

If the aim of this research was to ask – 'what do people do?' – the next question we need to ask is 'does that work?' and 'what could people do instead'? At Common Purpose, these are the questions we are really interested in. For us, the work continues, as we develop and test practical models that leaders can use to have better conversations with purpose.

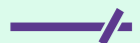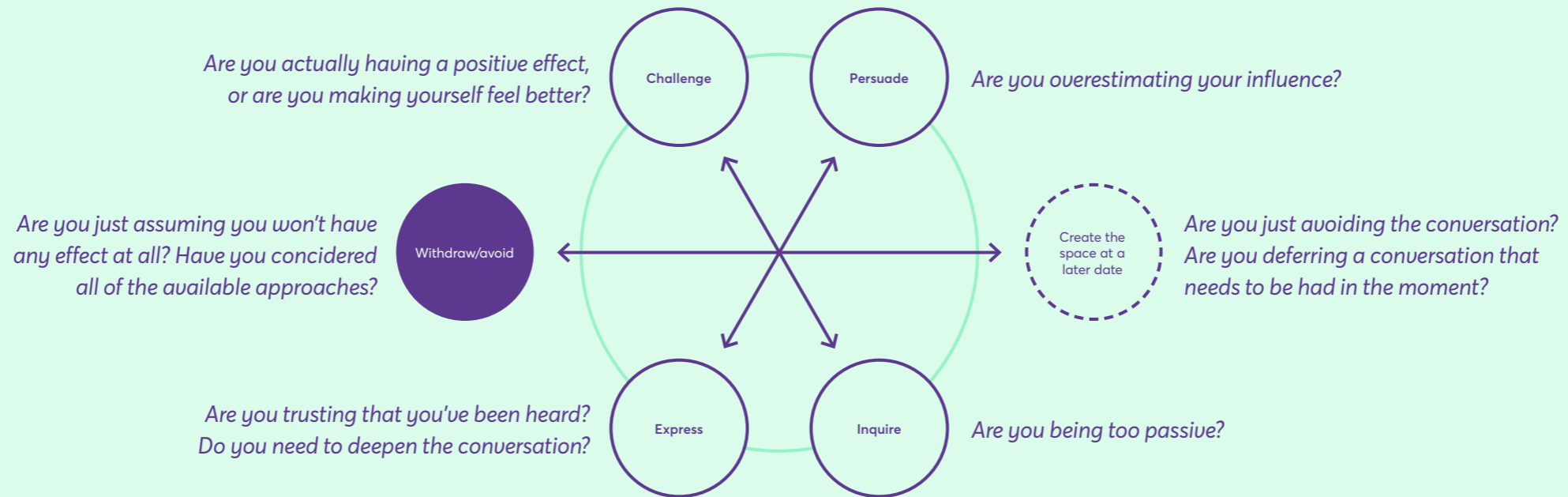If you would like to be part of this work, get in touch.

Appendix 1

Challenging your default approach

We know that when we engage in purpose-driven conversations, we are likely to use one or more of six approaches. Indeed, there is no right or wrong approach – each may well be legitimate in different situations. However, each approach does have its potential drawbacks.

Take a look at some of the common pitfalls associated with each approach. Have you ever fallen into any of these pitfalls?

Are you actually having a positive effect, or are you making yourself feel better?

Are you overestimating your influence?

Are you just assuming you won't have any effect at all? Have you concidered all of the available approaches?

Are you just avoiding the conversation? Are you deferring a conversation that needs to be had in the moment?

Are you trusting that you've been heard? Do you need to deepen the conversation?

Are you being too passive?

Challenge

Persuade

Withdraw/avoid

Create the space at a later date

Express

Inquire

Appendix 2

Lifting the conversation

Having better purpose-driven conversations can seem like a slightly abstract and daunting goal. Instead, try breaking it down into three practical areas:

- How can I be more responsible during conversations?
- How can I be more curious during conversations?
- How can I be more courageous during conversations?

Here are some questions you can ask yourself, to help lift your conversations.
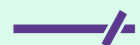
Responsibility

- What power do I have? Am I using it to bring in voices or shut them down?
- Who's observing this conversation? What will they take away?
- Is it possible that others have a greater emotional stake in this conversation than me?
- Have I genuinely tried to see things from the perspective of others?
- How do I maintain the conversation, even when it becomes uncomfortable?
- How can I listen fully and show I am listening?
- How can I encourage conversation to become practical action?

Curiosity

- Have I even asked a single question?
- Am I listening to what's being said, or just waiting for my chance to speak?
- Have I given up, just because I won't change their mind?
- Have I asked them *why* they think what they think?
- Am I asking open questions or closed questions?
- Have I turned this into a win/lose debate?
- Can I resist the urge to fixate on quick wins and resolutions?

Courage

- Am I staying quiet because I think I'm in the minority?
- Am I using my lack of power as an excuse?
- Do I have to wait until I've articulated my thoughts perfectly, before speaking?
- Have I considered: what if I'm wrong?
- Have I considered: what if I'm right?
- I've made a mental note to bring this up later – but am I kidding myself?
- How can I keep having the conversation, even if nothing changes straight away?