

Better Conversations

Course Handbook



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1. Introduction

1.1 What to Expect

This course comes to you from a dedicated team of trainers and facilitators who have your best interests at heart: to learn and experience the power of better connections at work and home through Better Conversations. We want to make sure the five sessions you experience with us are of a high calibre.

Here's some things to expect:

- Clear and easy to understand content.
- No slides! We will be using flip charts to capture and support your learning we have learnt that this creates better engagement and allows us to adjust the sessions to your needs. This Course Manual is designed to help you revise the content and capture your learnings.
- A sequence of models and exercises that will build on one another, so that by the end, you'll have new skills and awareness of how to have Better Conversations.
- Exercises that allow you to learn and practice both as a whole group and in smaller groups (in breakout rooms).
- Time for reflection on your learning at the end of each session.
- Fieldwork (like homework, only more enjoyable) between sessions to explore and practice the skills.
- A way to be in touch with us and your fellow learners between sessions should you have questions, want to share your insights or need support.
- We may record for our course development purposes; we will always check the group give consent to do this. Discussion in breakout rooms remain private and are not recorded.

1.2 What's Expected of You

This course has been developed to support experiential learning. We keep the theory light-touch and focus on practising skills and reflecting on your experiences. We invite you to:

- Participate and share some of your own experiences related to the course content; we trust that you will share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Be seen and heard during each module – just like you would in a room based course.
- Respect each other's experiences and the need for confidential and safe discussions.
- Keep what you share relevant and of an appropriate amount of information for the exercises we will be using to train the skills.
- Ask questions if you don't understand.
- Let us know if you have any time constraints or other needs that might affect your ability to participate and learn.

1.3 Zoom Orientation

If you aren't used to using Zoom, here are some tips:

- Check your **audio** and **video** setup 10–15 minutes before the call. Zoom lets you join a test meeting to allow you to do this before you need to join a meeting.
- Familiarise yourself with the **Zoom controls** as they appear on your device.
- You can **mute** yourself when not speaking. We might mute you when we're training the models or listening to another participant if we think that there may be some background noise through your audio.
- **Pin** the Zoom window for the facilitator if it is helpful.
- Try the **Gallery** and **Speaker** views – see what view you like the best.
- Try the **Chat** function – we will sometimes use this to collect information from everyone. You can also use it ask questions or share insights.

More information can be found on the Zoom support pages at <https://support.zoom.us/>

1.4 Safe Practice and Confidentiality

We've found that sometimes people can be very enthusiastic with the use of the tools we teach and, at this introductory stage, we'd like to gently caution you. Better Conversations can happen just with the shift in noticing, so start there.

We'll give you straightforward but powerful concepts and tools which will help you have Better Conversations. As you develop new skills using the models and approaches, it is important not to impose your new skills, questions and listening skills on your conversational partners in a way that is too far from what they are used to. We'll teach you ways to practice these skills with a light touch.

We ask that you keep what you see and hear in this course to yourself. Please keep other people's stories, contributions and situations within the group.

1.5 Learning Outcomes

We have designed this course to:

- Increase your awareness of your own state and how this can affect your conversations.
- Support you to notice and get curious about your conversational partner's state.
- Develop your listening, questioning and curiosity skills.
- Build on your existing conversational approaches and experiences.
- Help you determine your own outcomes for Better Conversations and how to achieve them.

1.6 Course Outline

We will run five modules in this course:

1. **State** – how do your thoughts and feelings affect your conversations?
2. **Assumptions** – what are you making up when you are in a conversation?
3. **Context** – how do you make sense of it all?
4. **Listening with Curiosity** – how can you influence a conversation?
5. **Preparing for Better Conversations** – what will make a conversation go well for you?

Each session follows a similar format:

- Welcome and check in.
- Introducing the topic.
- Time for questions or reflections on learning.
- Group exploration and practice in the whole group and in pairs/threes.
- Debrief and learning reflections.
- Next steps (suggested fieldwork) and close.

1.7 Support Between Sessions

Please use these contact details to contact us if you have any questions or need support:

email: help@betterconversations.foundation

phone (UK): +44 (0)1344 288630 x2069

phone (US): +1 978 865 4333 x2069

2. Your learning outcomes

We invite you to consider your learning outcome(s) in Module 1 by reflecting on the following question:

What kind of conversations would you like to be better as a result of this course?

(Please use this space to represent your learning outcome(s) in whatever way you'd like to)

3. State – the (Inverted) Traffic Light Model

This is a simplified model of the interactions of your neurology, physiology, biology and your mental and emotional processes for understanding how you think, feel and act can impact how you communicate.

The traffic lights are inverted to indicate the different levels of our thinking and feeling and hence how we communicate and we can move between the different states throughout the day or even within the course of a conversation. Deliberate thinking and reasoning happen at the uppermost level (green), however all levels are important in keeping us safe and well.



GREEN State – good to go

You're feeling good and connected with yourself and others, and engaged with the world. All your emotional, physical, psychological, social and physiological needs are being met. In this state you can access the best learning and problem solving parts of your brain.

Ways to know you are in a green state include being:

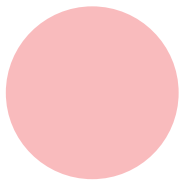
- Being curious and creative
- Thinking logically and rationally
- Communicating clearly and calmly
- Act with courage and take responsibility for own actions
- Compassionate attitude for self and others
- Feeling connected and collaborative



This is the best time to be having all kinds of conversations from the most loving and appreciative, through to the most difficult and challenging ones.

Notes:

AMBER State – proceed with caution



Here you might be feeling a bit disrupted, unsure and a sense of “not ok-ness” in your system. Amber state is mainly about your relationship with others, your social status and how you connect and empathise with others. It’s where some of your different social, emotional or physical needs are not being met and is very much about your psychological and emotional safety. Here you can still think and ask questions, though your questions may be more self oriented.

Common indications of an amber state include:

- Asking yourself questions
 - What are the rules here?
 - Is it ok if...?
 - Where do I fit in...do I fit in?
- Feelings of discomfort in a group or setting
- Not saying anything or talking too much
- Caring about the social order

Conversations happening from amber state can go either way depending on if they go more towards having your needs met (green state) or not, in which case you might find yourself more in the red state.

Notes:



RED state – brake, stop and break

In the red state you're really not ok and feeling unsafe, be it emotionally, psychologically, physiologically or physically. Emotions like anger, fear and distrust can be overwhelming and you might experience fight/flight/freeze in response to these feelings. Also your body's internal monitoring system for energy, hydration, energy and pain might be signalling it's time to rest, eat, drink, move or take a bio break which can be an additional load to your state.

Some ways to know you're in a red state are:

- A strong desire to run away or actually leave a room
- Raising your voice, clenching your fists or gesticulating with a pointed finger
- Feeling stuck or frozen – like a rabbit in the headlights
- An increased heart rate, clenched jaw, a churning stomach
- Change in breathing (deeper, shallower or holding)
- Feeling suddenly hot or cold
- Having an adrenaline rush

Con conversationally it is the time to take a break, stop or not start a conversation.

Note: In red state there is also an “instinctual go” – when you are under what your system is threat to life then this red part takes over and makes some rapid decisions and actions in a bid to get you to safety quickly. You may grab someone out of the path of an oncoming vehicle, or dodge out of the way of a falling object. Sometimes this is down to a genuine life threatening event such as a fire, or a falling tree and can be very effective in getting you to safety.

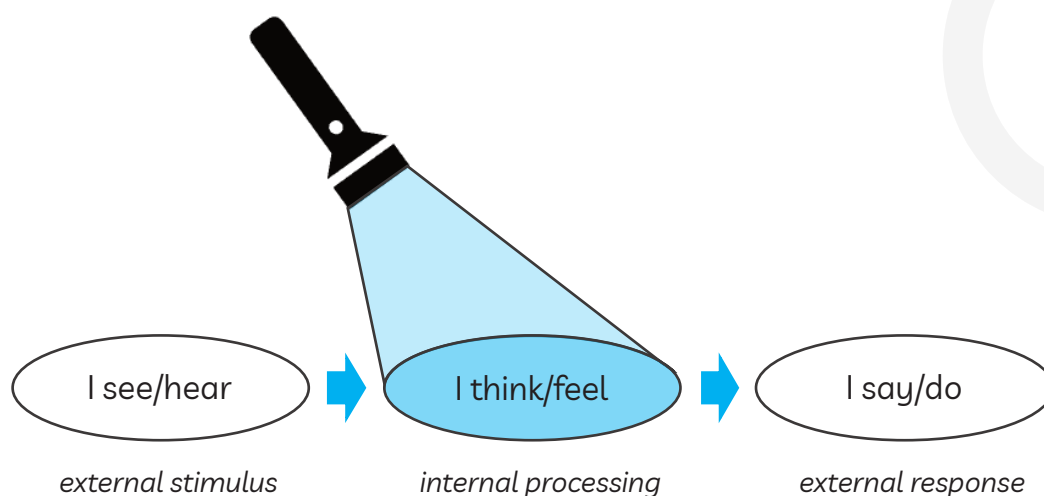
Other times we can find ourselves acting without thinking and later realise that it wasn't actually a life threatening event and feel our actions were a bit over the top for the actual circumstances, which is a quirk of being a complex human being.

Notes:

Notes



4. Assumptions – What are you making up?



When we are conversing with someone, it is possible to describe what is happening to us in three steps: I see and hear what the other person is saying or doing, I will think and feel something based on that, and then I say and/or do something in response.

It is helpful to understand the different types of information or behaviour that are associated with each step, to improve our conversational skills. In Better Conversations, we shine a light on thinking and feeling, and the impact of our internal state on our conversations.

4.1 What we see and hear

Typically we use sight and sound to have a conversation. We can think of this as data into our system. Someone observing the situation will likely pick up the same sights and sounds, *if they are noticing and paying attention to the same things that we are*. Misunderstandings and conflict can arise when each person is noticing or paying attention to different things.

One way to understand what another person is noticing or paying attention to is to ask **“What are you seeing or hearing that tells you this?”**

You can use this question on yourself to understand what might be causing you to behave or react in a certain way. Of course, we are not restricted to sight and sound — any of our senses (including taste, smell and touch) can provide us with evidence about the outside world. Sight and sound are the usual senses we use in a conversation with someone.

4.2 What we think and feel

We can process what is going on around us rapidly and respond instinctively (before we even realise what has happened). This is a skill we have evolved to support our survival as individuals and as a species. We may not be aware of how our thoughts and feelings drive our responses. Sometimes the instinctive or habitual response is not the most

helpful response – for us or for the other person.

Some things that influence our thoughts or feelings are:

- What we notice and pay attention to (we naturally select from data that our senses pick up);
- Our way of making meaning of things, including the language we use and the way we might paraphrase what other people say into our own words;
- The assumptions we have about someone or a situation;
- How we reason or explain something – how we link cause and effect or the stories and scenarios we construct for ourselves; and
- How we make inferences about things, including how we judge things in light of the beliefs and values that are important to us.

Our current state will also impact the way we think and feel. For example, feeling hungry or tired, or being in a happy, bored, angry or sad mood can affect how you think and feel about things.

A question that can shed light on what is happening in this middle, internal step is to ask **“What am I assuming here?”** or **“What am I making up?”** We advise you not to ask your conversational partner these questions, as it may come across as critical or aggressive. Remember, the skill here is understanding what’s going on for you.

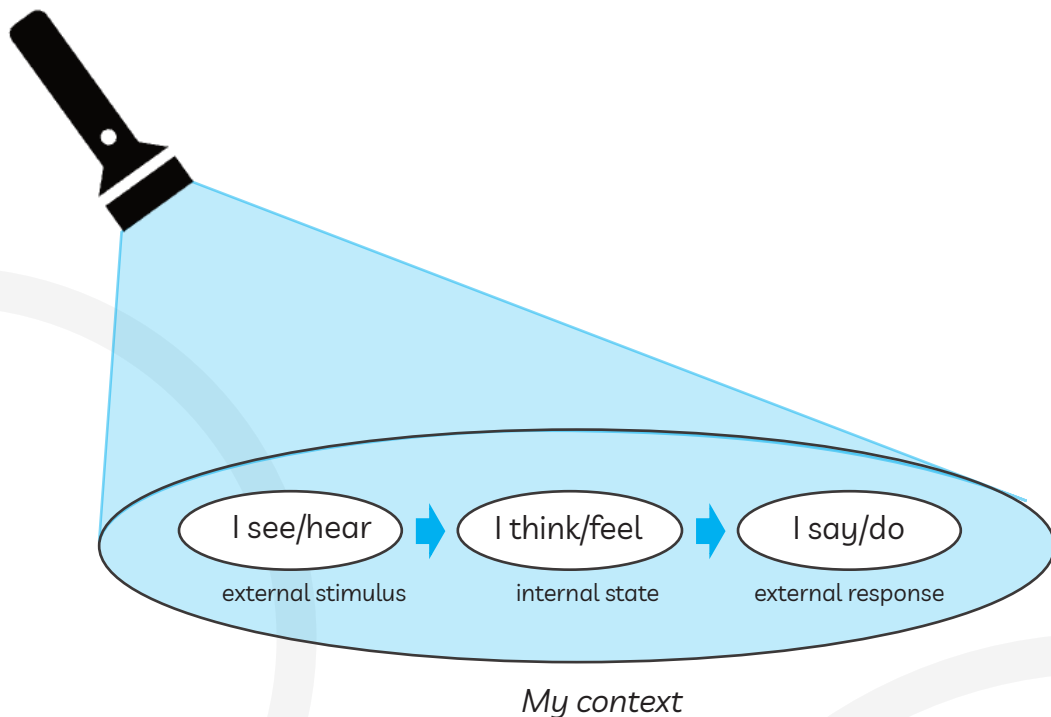
You may experience the effect of what’s happening in the conversation as a change in your state – a new thought or feeling can emerge. Sometimes the impact is to change the intensity of your state – you might feel more or less happy, for example.

4.3 What we say and do

The last step in this sequence is behavioural. After rapid internal processing, we decide to say and/or do (or not do) something. This is our external response or reaction and can be observed by someone else.

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5. Context - How do you make sense of it all?



We can ‘zoom out’ with our light on the three-step stimulus-response model to consider how the context or situation that we are in affects us.

But what do we mean by context? The word comes from the Latin ‘contextus’, meaning “to weave together.” The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as follows:

context (*noun*): the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it.

Context is complex. To better understand what context is, and how it might affect our conversations, we can chunk it down into six different kinds of context:

- 1. Historical:** what has happened in the past, or what happens regularly in similar situations
- 2. Psychological:** our mental and emotional state, including what we want from the conversation
- 3. Social:** the relationships between people
- 4. Cultural:** people’s values and beliefs
- 5. Environmental:** people’s location and surroundings
- 6. Temporal:** the time-related aspects, including what time of day, the schedule, the sequence of conversations

What we sometimes forget is that we carry our own context with us into the conversation, as does the person we are talking to.

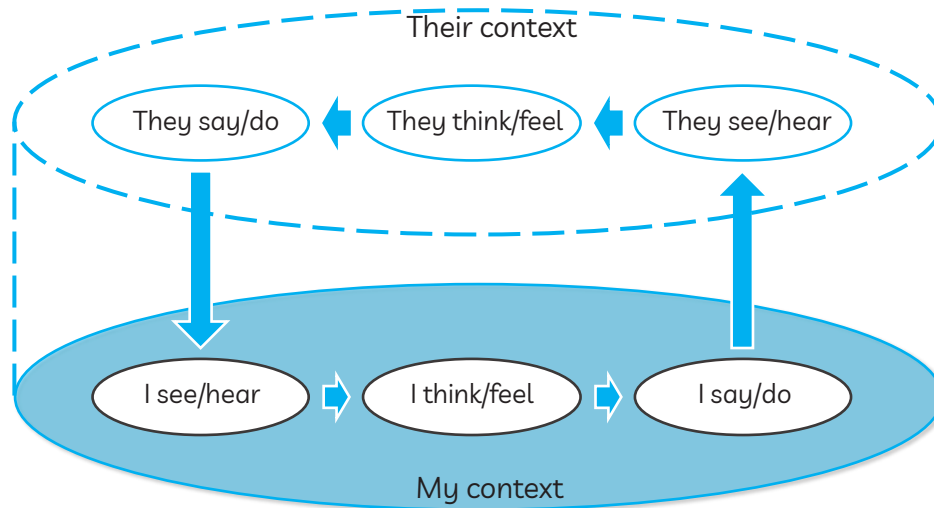
Sometimes, if there is a shared purpose, shared language or shared experiences, the conversation will be easier to have. However, it is impossible to know all of the context that someone else is bringing to the conversation.

This means, not only do we need to be aware of our own thoughts and feelings, values, beliefs etc., we also need to have some awareness of what's going on for the other person. Listening and asking questions helps us do this.

We also need to be aware that we can make inaccurate assumptions both when we don't have enough information **and** when we have a lot of information about the person and their context. It helps to check what you know (or think you know) to understand whether your assumptions are helpful and how accurate they are.

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6. Listening with Curiosity



In this module, we will extend the stimulus-response mode to look at what happens in a conversation between two people.

Each person brings their own context to a conversation, and act within that context. Having good conversations can help us understand each other better, and we create a shared context.

We take our cues (our stimulus) from each other, process that information, add some of our own thoughts and feelings and respond to each other. We have explored how what we sense and how we make sense of it can impact conversations in previous modules.

One reason for a conversation not going well is that one or both participants have misunderstood what the other person means.

Another reason for a conversation not going well is that the participants want different outcomes. Here, their values and beliefs (part of their context) will be affecting the way they think and feel. Misunderstandings and wanting different things can result in conflict between two people.

Due to the context we hold about a person or situation, we may also anticipate having a 'difficult' conversation with them. We might seek to rehearse this conversations or confirm our thinking/feeling with someone else before having the difficult conversation.

Although it is impossible to fully appreciate another person's context, or know their innermost thoughts and feelings, it is possible to discover what is going on for the other person by asking questions which help us to hold our assumptions lightly.

We think of this as creating a container for a better conversation. You might have a different metaphor that works for you.

6.1 Listening without interruption

“The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking.”

Nancy Kline, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*

Listening without interruption and paying attention to what the other person is saying, doing and experiencing allows the other person to think well. The quality of your attention on what you are seeing (including non-verbal signals) and what you are hearing can determine the quality and outcome of the conversation. This type of listening helps improve conversations. It works because the other person has the space to express themselves and think well, and so they are much more likely to be able to manage their own state.

6.2 Listening to accept and to extend your understanding

“While you are listening... you need to separate out what *you're actually seeing or hearing* from the *sense you are making of it*. You're distinguishing what is being presented from what is being inferred.”

Caitlin Walker, *From Contempt to Curiosity*

Recognising that sense making is different to sensing reduces the scope to make unhelpful assumptions, inferences and judgements about the other person. Perhaps surprisingly, when you wholeheartedly focus on what their experience is like for them, you better manage your own state as well.

Listening to accept and to extend your understanding of what the other person wants to communicate requires you to:

1. Pay attention to the words, tone of voice and body language of the other person;
2. Remember some of the exact words or phrases, and gestures that describe what it is they are communicating; and
3. Suspend judgement of what it is they are communicating.

When you listen like this, you can respond in a way that accepts the other person's thoughts and feelings, and respond with assumption-free questions to develop your understanding of what they are communicating.

Your aim here is to notice the meaning of their words and the non-verbal signals that they are giving. Suspending judgement is essential to be open to the other person's knowledge and experience. Assumption-free questions allow you to ask for more information to fill in the gaps in your understanding.

6.3 Questions of enquiry

The questions given below can be used to respond in a curious, assumption-free way to what someone is saying in a conversation. They can also be used for self-reflection. They are powerful in their reach so we advise you to keep it conversational and only ask one or two of these questions to ensure that the other person feels heard and not like they are being interrogated! These questions come from the field of Clean Language, pioneered by David Grove.

Questions to check what information someone is paying attention to

- What were/are you seeing or hearing that lets you know that?
- What tells you it's like that?

Questions to check your assumptions and inferences

- When I hear you say that, I imagine/make up/infer..., is that what you mean?
- Can I just check? When ... , I interpret that as

Questions to check impact on state

- What impact did that have on you?
- What's happening for you right now?
- What happened for you just before ... ?

Questions for finding out more about someone's context

- Is there anything else about that ...?
- What kind of ... is that?
- Where does that ... come from?
- What's important for you right now?
- What causes it to be like that? / What caused you to ... ?
- What were you doing just before this? What else do you have on today?

for setting an outcome or in response to a problem

- What would you like to have happen?
- What happens next?/Then what happens?

Notes

6.4 Responding with feedback

We can choose to respond with information about our own needs and observations by giving feedback to someone. You can use a simple sequence of questions to determine what you are or someone else is paying attention to, what is inferred from that and what the impact of that was for you and them.

The intention you have in a conversation – the sense making that guides your behaviour – is not necessarily received in the way you would want it to be by the other person. The impact on the other person is based on what they perceive and their context. This is true for the other person too i.e. their intention for the conversation is different to how you perceive their behaviour and how you interpret that through your own context, assumptions etc.

Also be aware that it is possible that you may not have paid attention or sensed something in the same way that the other person did.

In summary, intention is not the same as impact.

A useful sequence of questions that tracks the stimulus-response model we introduced in Module 2 is:

- **What I saw/heard was** [state what you were paying attention to, and be specific].
- **What I inferred was** [state what you inferred as a result of what you saw or heard].
- **The impact on me was** [state what you felt or did as a result of your inferences].

When giving feedback, make sure that the context is appropriate for the conversation you are about to have – find the right time and place. After you have given feedback, check in with the other person to understand the inferences and impact they have using some of the questions in the previous section. You are giving them information about how you perceive the situation. The other person is not under any obligation to act on the feedback, or change their behaviour.

When receiving feedback, use some of the questions in the previous section to check your understanding of what the other person is communicating. They may not craft their feedback in a way that is easy for you to make sense of what is going on for them, so take responsibility for asking questions that will give you a better understanding of what they have experienced.

There are three easy steps to preparing for conversations which can be used to prepare for feedback or any conversation that is important to you.

7. Preparing for Better Conversations

For this conversation to go well, how will you set the context for the conversation?

For this conversation to go well, how will you manage your state, before during and after the conversation?

For this conversation to go well, what support and resources will you need?



8. Better Conversations Field Guide



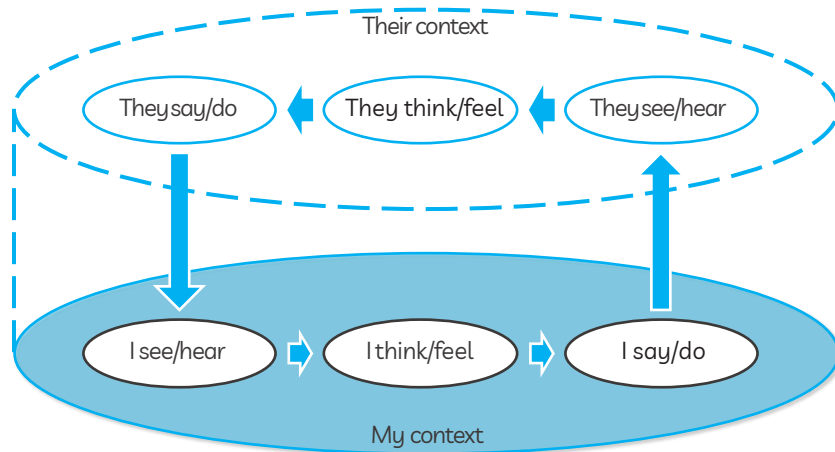
Good to go!



Proceed with caution



Stop, break/brake



Questions to check what information someone is paying attention to

What were/are you seeing or hearing that lets you know that?

What tells you it's like that?

Questions to check your assumptions and inferences

When I hear you say that, I imagine/make up/infer..., is that what you mean?

Can I just check? When ... , I interpret that as

Questions to check impact on state

What impact did that have on you?

What's happening for you right now?

What happened for you just before ... ?

Feedback sequence:

What I saw/heard was [state what you were paying attention to, and be specific].

What I inferred was [state what you inferred as a result of what you saw or heard].

The impact on me was [state what you felt or did as a result of your inferences].

Questions for finding out more about someone's context

Is there anything else about that ...?

What kind of ... is that?

Where does that ... come from?

What's important for you right now?

What causes it to be like that? / What caused you to ... ?

What were you doing just before this? What else do you have on today?

Questions for setting an outcome or in response to a problem

What would you like to have happen?

What happens next?/Then what happens?

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9.2 Master version and further information

The Master of this document together with other supporting information is available at <https://betterconversations.foundation/l/masters>.

9.3 Using this document

This handbook is intended to support participants in a Better Conversations course. If you are reading this outside of a course we hope you find it useful and will consider attending a course!

9.4 Support

If you have questions or concerns regarding this material, how to use it, please contact our help desk here <https://betterconversations.foundation/l/support>