

A way into a real conversation

The Four Questions Framework behind Conversation Guide, as one continuous read.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS, IN ORDER

First, listen. Ask all four, one at a time, before you say where you stand.

- 1 What do you think?
- 2 What's shaped your thinking on that?
- 3 How are you feeling about it?
- 4 What would make it better?

Follow through. After each answer, do at least one of these before you move on:

Say it back. Put what you heard in your own words.

Ask one more. One follow-up question, out of real curiosity.

Then respond. Answer the same four yourself, shaped by what you heard. After that, keep the conversation going.

Why this exists

Good conversations are getting harder to start. And most people are busy all the time, with no room for a lengthy seminar on how to talk to each other.

What if there were a simple method anyone could learn in minutes and use the same day to start having better conversations? Conversation Guide tries to be the answer to that question. It is four questions, used twice: first to understand the other person, then to make your own point.

Two parts, in order

Help the other person make their point before you make yours. That is the whole method. Listening first does two things at once: the other person feels understood, and you learn something that makes your own point land better. For example, if you find out in the first five minutes that your colleague's objection to the new schedule is really about school pickup, your case for the schedule changes, and so does its chance of being heard.

The first question: What do you think?

This is the opening. You invite the other person to put their view on the table, in their own words, before anyone argues. Ask it and get out of the way. The point is not to set up your rebuttal but to let them lead, and to resist reacting to the first thing they say. For example, a neighbor says the new bike lane is a disaster. The reflex is "it's actually reduced accidents." The method is "What do you think?" and then silence until he has finished.

The same invitation can be "Where do you land on this?" or "How do you see it?" And sometimes the best opening has no topic at all. "What's on your mind?" hands the other person the whole conversation. They choose what matters, and you learn what they want to talk about rather than what you assumed. For example, you sit down expecting to discuss the budget and hear instead that they are worried about a colleague. "What do you think?" then follows on its own, about the thing they chose.

Follow through

Follow-through is the name for the move you make after each answer, for all four questions. It comes in two forms, and one of them is enough. The first is saying it back: put what you heard into your own words. "So what I'm hearing is..." or simply "It sounds like..." You don't have to get it exactly right; the point is to show you were listening and to give them a chance to correct you, and the correction is often where they say what they really meant. For example, "So the problem is the cost?" gets "No, the cost is fine. The problem is nobody asked us."

The second is asking one more: a single follow-up out of real curiosity, something their answer made you wonder about. For example, if they mention it has "been like this for years," ask when it started.

The second question: What's shaped your thinking on that?

The first question gets an opinion. This one goes underneath it, to the experiences and influences that put it there. The phrasing matters. "What's shaped your thinking?" invites the story behind a view, not a defense of it. "What makes you say that?" sounds similar but it can make people feel they are on trial. The "shaped" wording stays warm, and it works whether

the person has firsthand experience or simply strong convictions. You can also ask "Has there been a moment that stuck with you?" For example, "I just don't trust the process" usually has a year behind it, the one when their input was asked for and then ignored.

The third question: How are you feeling about it?

This reaches past the argument to the emotion underneath it. Someone's position tells you where they stand; how they feel tells you why it matters. Naming a feeling is also how people make sense of a tangle of experience, so the question helps them find their own clarity. Ask it gently, and don't push. Sometimes "How are you feeling about it?" is exactly right. Sometimes "What's your gut on it?" lands more easily, for example when the relationship is a formal one.

Watch for the verdict in disguise. "I feel like it's a mess" is an opinion wearing the word "feel". Ask once more, kindly: "And how does that leave you feeling?" One word is enough. For example, "tired" tells you more about a board member's relationship to a project than twenty minutes of her critique of it.

The fourth question: What would make it better?

The forward-looking question turns the conversation from the problem toward a way through, in their eyes. Ask it with no agenda of your own yet: it is an invitation to picture a better version, not a negotiation, and people are often softer and more constructive here than anywhere else. "What would a good outcome look like?" works too.

When the subject went well, the question still works; it changes tense. "What would have made it *even* better?" keeps the good news intact and still invites more. For example, after a successful launch someone will say "honestly, one more week of testing," and that is the most useful sentence of the debrief. And when the answer is a fix, ask one more: "What would that give you?" For example, "they should just resign" becomes "a board that actually reads the materials." The fix is where people disagree. What it would give them is where they usually agree.

Then respond

Now the second half is yours: the same four questions, answered by you, for them, shaped by what you heard. You are not trying to win. You are saying where you stand, having earned the right to be heard.

Say what you think, plainly. "Now that I see where you're coming from, here's where I come down." Because you listened, you can make your point without bracing for a fight, and you do not have to pretend the disagreement away.

Then say what shaped your view: the experience or story that put you where you are. "Here's what got me thinking this way." An opinion is easy to argue with; a story is harder to dismiss, and offered in the same spirit as theirs it is a piece of the picture, not a counterattack.

Then say how you feel about it, honestly. This is often the most disarming thing you can do. After hearing how they feel, naming your own feeling keeps you two people rather than two positions. "Here's how it sits with me." Don't perform an emotion you don't have. For example, "a little embarrassed I never asked" is worth more than any argument that follows it.

Finally, offer your own sense of what would make things better, shaped by what they said. "Here's what I think would help." This is where the two halves meet. Very often there is surprising overlap even after disagreeing about everything else, and that shared ground is where the conversation keeps going on its own.

After that

Once both halves are done, the conversation usually carries itself. There is no step five. And the questions are a route, not a script: if you recite them, people hear the recitation. Nor is this a technique for winning.

The research behind the approach

People open up, and soften, when they feel genuinely heard rather than argued at. The strongest evidence is Broockman and Kalla's 2016 field experiment in *Science*: a single ten-minute, nonjudgmental conversation that drew out a person's own experience produced a measurable drop in prejudice that held for at least three months, and a 2020 follow-up across seven locations found the same. Itzhakov, Kluger and Castro showed in 2017 that high-quality listening lowers a speaker's defensiveness and loosens rigid views, and Eyal, Steffel and Epley showed in 2018 that asking someone what they think beats guessing. A note on honesty: no study has tested this specific four-question tool. The research validates the principles underneath it, listen first, draw out experience, stay curious. Conversation Guide is consistent with that evidence, not proven by it.

The workshop

The workshop began with a request that turned a sales call on its head. In 2025 Marc was talking with T  r  se Coudreaut, who heads human resources at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in Miami, trying to interest her in more persuasion workshops for Knight's grantees. She was not sure about persuasion. What she asked for instead was something about conversation: something that helps people understand one another in difficult situations. He said yes. Knight commissioned the result and piloted it in June 2026 with its entire staff, about seventy people, at its all-staff Home Day. It was well received, and it surfaced the challenge that has shaped the work since: people need a way to remember the method when it counts. The song, the home-screen guide and the three-week follow-up game all come from that.

The Better Conversation Workshop is that pilot grown up: a 90-minute Zoom session where a team sees the method on a real disagreement, then practices it on situations they are actually navigating.

About Marc Fest and EST

The framework, the guide and the workshop come from Marc Fest, founder of EST Communications at est.io. Marc is a German-American communications professional and entrepreneur whose career spans journalism, technology and corporate communications. He was Vice President of Communications at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and at the New World Symphony. Through EST, formerly ElevatorSpeechTraining.com, he has trained more than two thousand leaders at organizations including the Ford, MacArthur, Carnegie and Knight foundations, in single sessions over Zoom. He is the founder of MessageHouse.org, a free messaging toolkit used by thousands of organizations, and of Elvay, an AI-powered persuasion tool, and the author of Elevator Speech Training and The Message House Method.

To host a workshop or learn more, use the contact page at est.io or call (202) 548-7000.