



Bridge-Building Conversations: Five Questions to Ask

Bridge-building conversations can be essential in helping those in unhealthy church cultures begin to see the light. Realizing that something's not right takes immense courage – and is almost impossible without the support of those willing to see along with you.

Your availability to develop caring connections with members and key team players, even in a limited way, will go a long way toward building a bridge to truth, light, and freedom for those in an unhealthy church environment who have difficulty recognizing or acknowledging those realities for themselves. Even brief connections where you show genuine interest and care, talk about the church culture (both the good and bad), and listen to their needs serve as a reminder that someone cares for them—and could pave a path for future conversations and disclosures that could prove to be life-saving. (Be sure they have your contact information for the future.)

Whether you're an overseer, denominational leader, or a friend, building bridges opens the door for people who may feel stuck. In intentional, yet casual, conversations ask these questions, giving space for real answers (and remember, you're not conducting an interview, you're practicing curiosity and kindness!):

- 1 How is your serving role (staff role/volunteer role) going?
- 2 Ministry is complex; is there anything about your serving role that brings up challenges at home or in your marriage?
- 3 What's the climate around the church/office like when something goes wrong?
- 4 What does your Sabbath look like? How often does work/prep or the pastor or church's needs spill into your down time?
- 5 How many hours a week do you work/serve?

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professional development question

BONUS:

Where do you see yourself in five years (and how are we helping you get there)?

Wrapping Up:

(expressing gratitude and offering an open door)

- We are so grateful for all you do.
- If you ever have any concerns that you don't feel comfortable talking with your supervisor/team leader/pastor about, I'd love for you to reach out.

The Heart Behind Bridge-Building Conversations

Why are Bridge Building Conversations Needed?

Those who have become trapped or enmeshed in an unhealthy or toxic church culture have a difficult time seeing or acknowledging anything negative about the organization without feeling guilty. Loyalty to the mission and to the church are paramount. Direct or confrontative questioning can come across like an attack on the mission and the Kingdom of God, evoking defensiveness and self-protection.



Wisdom, gentleness, and compassion create inroads that may help open your friend's eyes.

How to Approach Bridge-Building Conversations

Bridge-building conversations must be stewarded with love and compassion, and be bathed in prayer. Any sense of interrogation or confrontation runs the risk of shutting the conversation down. Approach your friend with curiosity, asking questions that OPEN the doors of conversation, rather than raising defenses.

Nothing will shut down a conversation faster than the sense that you don't understand or are not *for* the mission. **Validate anything positive that you can.** If you act like they're crazy for being a part of this church or following a leader too closely, they *might* respond—but it's more likely they'll shut down and shut you out. Validating their desire to follow Jesus, especially, will help lower defenses, allowing them to listen without raising the internal alarms and defenses that are typically present around unhealthy/abusive cultures.

Ask specific questions related to the individual themselves - like how many hours have you worked this week? Or wow...how long did that project take you?! Have you ever felt uncomfortable with the level of familiarity around the office? Has the pace of ministry brought conflict with your spouse or family? What's the hardest part for you? These questions don't push them to be disloyal to someone else, you're just asking about *their* feelings and experiences. Still—someone in an abusive culture may just feel unable to tell the truth without being disloyal. They may have been groomed and their loyalty cultivated (and equated with loyalty to Jesus). They may even be trapped in adult clergy sexual abuse.

An Open Door

Being present, compassionate, and gentle goes a long, long way. When the person you're reaching out to knows that you care about them and are there for them in these complex waters, the likelihood that they'll feel safe in coming to you when questions begin to stir within them is greatly increased. You'll be a safe and loving companion to help them find solid ground.

Pray that the eyes of their hearts will be opened:

.And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes.

- Kings 6:20b