JUST US:
The Guidebook

A Facilitator's Guide to
Human-Centered Dialogue



Written By:
Dr. Ashley Gaddy Robbins

Dedication

This guidebook is dedicated to those who came before us. I thank my ancestors whose bravery allows me to do work that honors our collective humanity.

Table of Contents

Introduction **04**

- Meet Your Coach, Dr. Ashley Gaddy Robbins 05
- Why The JUST US Model Matters..... 06
- How to Use This Guide..... 07

Chapter I: Before the Conversation **08**

- Grounding the Space: From the Inside Out 09
- Key Reflection Prompts 11
- Let's Get Real 13

Chapter II: The JUST US Model **15**

- JUST US Model Overview 16
- The Meaning Behind the Letters 17
  - **J**ourney Through It 17
  - **U**nderstand that Power is at Play 18
  - **S**ee People First 18
  - **T**hink to Yourself 19
  - **U**tilize Mindfulness of Your Own Messages 19
  - **S**hare Care, Community, and Accountability 20
  - Affirmation and Confirmation 21

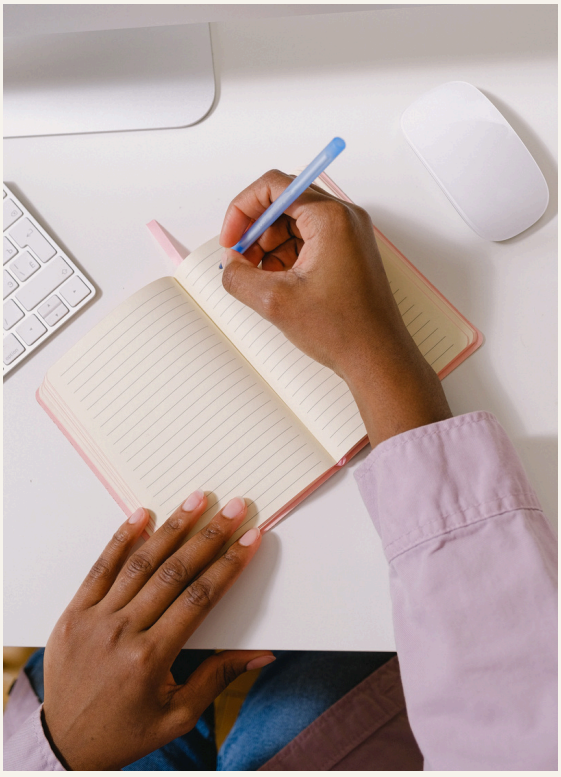
Chapter III: Additional Tools and Resources **22**

- The Facilitator's Checklist 23
- Videos, Books, Podcasts, Oh My! 24
- Thank You & Acknowledgements 25

Introduction







INTRODUCTION

Hello, I'm your coach Dr. Ashley Gaddy Robbins.

Thank you for joining me on this journey. As a scholar practitioner, my work is dedicated to advancing culture through a human-centered, approach. Through my work, I've found that when authenticity is normalized and encouraged, teams become more successful and more fulfilled.

In addition to my work advancing equity, inclusion, and justice, I am also a wife, mother, daughter, friend, and more. I do my best to bring the fullness of my identities into every space, creating room for others to do the same. Her work is grounded, relational, and rooted in care.





The JUST US Guidebook was born out of a need—a tool for individuals and organizations to navigate conversations across difference with intention and integrity.

This model offers an approachable path toward meaningful connection and lasting change. I invite you to take your time, be open, and trust the journey. Welcome!

- Dr. Ashley Gaddy Robbins

INTRODUCTION

Why The "JUST US" Model Matters?

In today's world, there's an urgent need to facilitate discussions where individuals can openly express their realities. While we may grasp theories and concepts, conversing about conflict and identity can be challenging. We know that life isn't lived in abstract terms but through actions. The JUST US Model, is designed to guide teams and staff through conflict resolution rooted in daily experiences.

JUST US transcends the abstract; it humanizes these conversations. It creates a safe space for genuine sharing of how individuals navigate systems of power, providing actionable practices to respond authentically.

Who is The JUST US Model for?

The JUST US Model was created for the guides among us—those who hold space for others with care, clarity, and a deep sense of responsibility.
It's designed for moments when there's a hierarchy of power, or when someone is looking to you for guidance, direction, or clarity. But it's just as powerful for those who are preparing to step into leadership.

Whether you're a supervisor, facilitator, or community leader, this model offers a roadmap for navigating hard truths with care and clarity. It's built for moments when people look to you for direction, but it's just as helpful if you're preparing to step into that kind of role.

And honestly, it's a great tool for anyone who wants to be ready when difficult conversations show up. Keep it in your toolbox and revisit it when you feel stuck. Let it help you lead with intention—no matter the setting.
This model is for right now. And for what's next.

INTRODUCTION

How to Use this Guide:

In the simplest way possible: take what you need.

This guide is meant to be just that—a guide. Not a script. Not a rigid protocol. Years as a scholar-practitioner have taught me that no two spaces are the same. Depending on the needs of the group, the timing, the energy in the room—or the world outside of it—sometimes facilitation has to go where it needs to go.

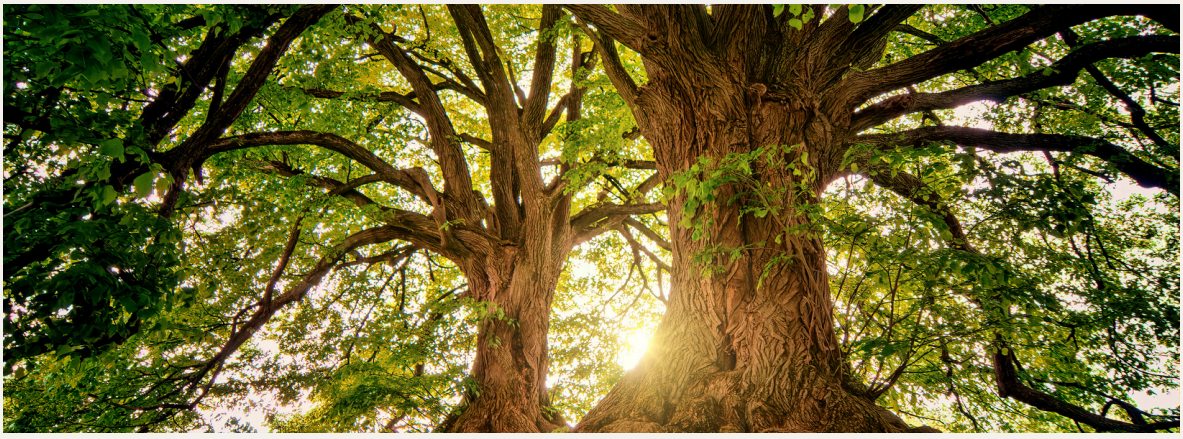
This resource offers a roadmap for facilitating difficult, meaningful, and justice-centered conversations using the JUST US Model. It's rooted in love, lived experience, and a deep belief that dialogue can be a tool for both disruption and healing.

As you move through this guide, I ask just two things:

- Honor the intention behind this work.
- Credit the source—because labor, especially from folks at the margins, deserves to be acknowledged.

You, as the facilitator, are more than a guide—you are a keeper of the space. A cultivator of possibility. A protector of purpose. The outcomes that emerge from your time with a group? Those are up to you.
Whether you follow every section to the letter or remix it to fit your context, know this:

You're not alone. The JUST US Model is here to support you, challenge you, and remind you of what's possible when we gather with intention.
Let's begin!



Chapter I: Before the Conversation







CHAPTER I: Before The Conversation

Grounding the Space: From the Inside Out

What does it mean to ground a space?

Before we dive into any activity, dialogue, or facilitation, we pause. We center. We root ourselves in intention.

Grounding a space isn't just about logistics—it's about preparing hearts, minds, and spirits for what's to come. It's a practice of collective care. Whether you're facilitating healing dialogue, teaching, or just gathering folks in community, this moment of grounding is your invitation to build the container that will hold it all.

This is sacred work. And sacred work deserves a sacred start. We ground so we can show up fully—open to new truths, accountable to our impact, and present enough to both be seen and to witness. In a world that often rushes us past the moment, grounding says: we're going to slow down and do this with intention.

Safe Space vs. Brave Space

Let's be real: the idea of a "safe space" has evolved. Safety is important—especially for folks who carry generational and ongoing trauma. But when we center only comfort, we can end up avoiding the necessary discomfort that growth requires. That's where "brave space" enters the chat.

Both matter. And when we honor them together, something powerful happens.



CHAPTER I: Before The Conversation

A Safe Space Holds

- Cultural respect and care
- Challenge by choice
- Confidentiality
- Making room for different truths
- Stepping up, and stepping back
- Speaking from the "I"
- Permission to ask questions for clarity

A Brave Space Invites

- Honoring impact over just intent
- Speaking from the heart and listening with it, too
- Lean, honest expression
- Courage over comfort
- Knowing that all responses are valid

Safe Spaces

Comfort-oriented, especially important for marginalized folks navigating harm

Confidentiality is honored

Respect is foundational

Nonjudgmental listening

Emotional safety prioritized

"Challenge by choice" encouraged

People can opt in/out

In the Overlap

Use "I" statements (own your truth)

Make space, take space

Listen deeply

Hold multiple truths

Honor our shared humanity

Be mindful of power dynamics

Community care over perfection

Stay engaged—even when it's hard

Brave Spaces

Discomfort-tolerant, especially important for truth-telling and growth

Discomfort is expected

Speak your truth with care

Impact over intent

Accountability welcomed

Openness to being challenged

CHAPTER I: Before The Conversation

Key Reflection Prompts: For Facilitators

Grounding Myself

- What energy am I bringing to the space?
- What do I need to release or center before I begin?
- Am I grounded in my purpose or my ego?

Clarify Intention

- What is the purpose of this conversation?
- What does success look like—not just for me, but for the group?
- Who might be most impacted by today's topic? How am I centering their experience?

Consider Power and Position

- What power do I hold in this space (formal or informal)?
- How might my identities impact how people receive me?
- How am I making appropriate space for all roles in the space?

Cultivate Care

- How will I model care, even when things get hard?
- What boundaries do I need to honor—for myself and for others?
- How will I navigate harm if it arises? How will I repair, not just react?

Is MY STUFF Together?

- Do I have a plan and enough flexibility to shift if necessary?
- Am I clear on the community agreements or ground rules?
- What practices will I use if the conversation gets heavy?

CHAPTER I: Before The Conversation

Key Reflection Prompts: For Participants

These reflection questions for participants can be sent ahead of time or before the facilitation, but after the ground rules invite participants to check in with themselves, emphasizing there is no right way, just honesty, presence, and care.

Checking in with Myself

- What energy am I bringing into this space right now?
- What do I need to feel more present and grounded today?
- What might I need to let go of in order to be here fully?

Knowing My Why

- Why did I choose to show up for this conversation?
- What do I hope to learn, unlearn, or understand differently?
- What would being open look like for me today?

Entering Community

- How can I make space for others to share honestly?
- How can I listen to understand, not just to respond?
- How will I honor this space, myself, and those around me?

Consider Power and Position

- Am I open to being challenged without needing to defend myself right away?
- What does it feel like to sit with discomfort before rushing to fix it?
- If something hard comes up, how will I care for myself?

CHAPTER I: Before The Conversation

Let's Get Real

Based on what you've just explored—about grounding the space, your own research, and your lived experience—I invite you to reflect on the kind of environment you want to create for your group. Take a moment to pause, breathe, and think through the choices ahead of you. Remember, there are no perfect answers—just honest ones. Your intention, not perfection, is what shapes the space.

Here are some questions to guide that process:

What kind of space do I want to create—and what practices will help me get there?

Which ground rules feel most important to incorporate?

Which facilitator reflection questions resonated with me the most and why?

Let's Get Real contd.

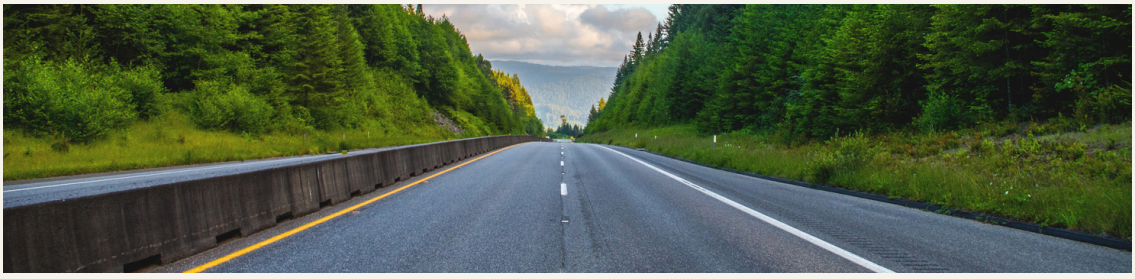
Which participant reflection questions do I want to use, and how might I introduce them?

How much time do I want to dedicate to grounding the space and how does the timing align with the rest of the experience?

What support might I need to hold this space well?

What do I want people to feel, learn, or carry with them when they leave the space?

Chapter II: The JUST US Model







CHAPTER II: The JUST US Model

The JUST US Model Overview

What is the JUST US Model?

The JUST US Model is a framework for facilitating dialogue that centers justice, healing, and collective truth-telling. It's built on the belief that liberation lives in our everyday interactions—and that transformation happens when we gather with intention, curiosity, and care.

Each component of the model invites us to:

- **J**: Journey inward first
- **U:** Understand the weight of lived experience
- **S:** Speak truth with care and clarity
- **T:** Tend to harm, not just intent
- **U:** Uplift community wisdom
- **S:** Sustain the work beyond the moment

This model isn't about perfection—it's about presence. It's a reminder that we don't need to have all the answers to hold space for real, necessary conversations. We just have to be willing to show up. For justice. For healing. For each other.



CHAPTER II: The JUST US Model

The Meaning Behind the Letters

Now it's time to dive into each part of the JUST US Model. You'll find a brief description for each letter—these are written for participants. As a facilitator, your role goes deeper than simply knowing the model. Your job is to connect these concepts to real life—to your story, your practice, and your people.

Use the space beneath each section to reflect and make notes on how you might further explain each letter. What stories, questions, or moments might help others connect? Because facilitation is storytelling. And good storytelling doesn't just teach—it transforms. Let's get into it.

J

JOURNEY THROUGH IT

Do not go in with your answer, your own attitude, be ready to take in information/ knowledge that is new to you, be ready to feel emotions, have thoughts, go in open.

Reflect: As a facilitator, what stories, examples, or experiences will help this group truly understand the meaning of this letter?

CHAPTER II: The JUST US Model



UNDERSTAND THAT POWER IS AT PLAY

Because people hold identities, and systems of power set norms, practices, biases, etc. there are going to be silent expectations and practices that are present in the conversation. Start the conversation by releasing them and speaking to what is real for the person.

Reflect: As a facilitator, what stories, examples, or experiences will help this group truly understand the meaning of this letter?



SEE PEOPLE FIRST

While there may be times that people are talking about an occurrence, incident, decision, etc. be sure that people first language is present. Pay attention, notice who is in the room. Do you know their identities? Is their meta communication shifting? Are they coding?

Reflect: As a facilitator, what stories, examples, or experiences will help this group truly understand the meaning of this letter?

CHAPTER II: The JUST US Model



THINK TO YOURSELF

Do I have lived, theoretical or practical knowledge around this topic, identity group, situation? It's not required to care for people or have conversation, but it does need to be a pause moment. There could be some gaps based on your own experiences. If you do have experience, do not turn it into law, it's not monolithic. Leave room for how the other person experiences it as well. If you feel yourself becoming less present, pause and mention that to the person. Be honest here.

Reflect: As a facilitator, what stories, examples, or experiences will help this group truly understand the meaning of this letter?



UTILIZE MINDFULNESS OF YOUR OWN MESSAGES

Schemas will arise, messages will form, emotions will try to take over. Pay attention to your body, combat messages that send either/or, all or nothing messages and work on not turning them into action. If you feel someone has wronged someone else, ask yourself how you are going to proceed with the relationship WHILE also checking to see where your decision/ actions are coming from. Could be a bias there.

Reflect: As a facilitator, what stories, examples, or experiences will help this group truly understand the meaning of this letter?



SHARE CARE, COMMUNITY, AND ACCOUNTATBILITY

We dismantle systems of oppression through being safe and taken care of. Spaces of care and community are imperative for restoration and resistance. If we want the other person to learn, heal, persevere, slow down, etc. knowing they have person/ space they can go to to be vulnerable and be encouraged to do what is right, helps the overall environment.

Reflect: As a facilitator, what stories, examples, or experiences will help this group truly understand the meaning of this letter?

MORE SPACE FOR ADDTIONAL REFLECTION:

CHAPTER II: The JUST US Model

Affirmation & Confirmation

Congratulations, you've made it through the Just Us Model! You've read, reflected, questioned and prepared yourself to engage in conversations that matter.

This work isn't always easy. It asks you to pause, to sit in discomfort, and to lean into honesty, care, and accountability. You've done that. You've considered your own identities and the power and positionality you hold. You've learned the components of a model grounded in relationships, responsibility, and repair. You've gained language, tools, and clarity to help you enter hard conversations with intention and integrity.

Now, it's time to take what you've learned into the world.

As you prepare to use the model in practice, remember that there's no one "right" way to apply it. The Just Us Model will look different depending on the space, the stakes, and the people in the room. What matters is that you move forward with care, courage, and a commitment to growth.

You are ready. You are capable.

My Affirmation
Use the space below to craft an affirmation that will ground and motivate you as you hold space for dialogue, disruption, and transformation. Return to it whenever the work feels hard or uncertain.

Chapter III: Additional Tools & Resources







CHAPTER III: Additional Tools & Resources

The Facilitator's Checklist

Before the Conversation

- [ ] I've reflected on my energy and purpose for this space
- [ ] I've chosen a grounding practice to open the session
- [ ] I've considered how I hold power in this space
- [ ] I've selected or created group ground rules
- [ ] I've reviewed participant reflection questions
- [ ] I've decided how much time to spend grounding

Journey Through the JUST US Model

- [ ] I understand what each letter of the model means
- [ ] I've reflected on what each letter means to me
- [ ] I've prepared stories or examples for each letter
- [ ] I've written notes to help me explain each concept

During the Conversation

- [ ] I've created space for safety and bravery
- [ ] I'm listening deeply to myself and the group
- [ ] I'm noticing power and energy in the room
- [ ] I'm adjusting based on group needs
- [ ] I'm modeling the values of the model: presence, care, truth

After the Conversation

- [ ] I've reflected on what went well and what didn't
- [ ] I've noted changes for the next facilitation
- [ ] I've planned any needed follow-up or repair
- [ ] I've honored my energy and made space to rest

CHAPTER III: Additional Tools & Resources

Videos, Books, Podcasts Oh My!

Click on the underline to be directed to the resource link

Articles and Books

- "Emergent Strategy" by Adrienne Maree Brown - Awe. Liberation. Pleasure.
- "Radical Candor | Feedback, Training, Coaching & Consulting" by Kim Scott
- "The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves" by Sean Ginwright
- "Harnessing the power of YOU" by Korn Ferry Institute
- "How Do We Find the Good in a Bad Situation?" by Greater Good Magazine

Podcasts

- "Truth to be Told - Advice For and By People of Color | KQED" by Tonya Mosley
- "Unlocking Us - Brené Brown" by Brene Brown
- "For the Love of Work - Podcast" by Deloitte Canada
- " We Can Do Hard Things - The Podcast" by Glennon Doyle, Amanda Doyle & Abby Wambach
- "The B.O.O.S.T. Podcast" by Kelly Leonard

Videos

- **"Legit Leadership" by Dr. Ashley Gaddy Robbins**
- "The Danger of a Single Story" TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- "The Gift of Conflict" TED Talk by Amy Gallo
- "Rethinking Conversations About Race" TED Talk by Jay Smooth

Practitioners to Follow

- J. Dwayne Garnett - Love is a Parable
- Amanda Kuffoh - Social Impact Engineer - Make Shift Happen
- Priya Parker - Priya Parker - Your Guide to the Art of Gathering
- Resmaa Menakem - Cultural Somatics Institute

Thank You For Your Support!



Thank you for your support of this resource and most importantly, thank you for showing up for yourself. May this guide not just live in your downloads folder or bookshelf, but in your everyday choices, conversations, and community.

Keep showing up, Keep centering humanity.

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