

How to Hold Conversations Across Differences

WHAT:

Techniques developed by Braver Angels to hold productive conversations across political differences.

WHY:

Because we encounter people every day - on social media, at our kids' soccer games, on family phone calls, and, certainly in our advocacy - where we adamantly disagree politically with the other person. Political polarization, and the political violence that follows, is reaching dangerous levels in America. This provides some tools for engaging productively across political differences.

HOW:

Listening v talking

Holding productive conversations involves much more listening than talking. When you DO talk, it should be calm, polite, and respectful, but you should aim to listen twice as much as you talk. Listen actively, with curiosity, not judgment. It has been said that rudeness is the weak person's imitation of strength. *Your command of your demeanor in a provocative situation is the key.*

SO:

When having conversations on a political subject where you and the other person adamantly disagree...

Set Your Own Expectations Accordingly:

- You should NOT expect to convince the other person that you are right and they are wrong
- Seek to sincerely understand their position and how they came to it
- Know that THEY are unlikely to follow any of these techniques, so it is up to you to do the hard work of remaining calm, respectful, and collaborative.
- Remain calm. Yelling and screaming (even if that's how you feel) isn't likely to bring understanding, connection and consensus

First, Create Connections

Chit chat - kids, weather, sports, celebrities, movies, whatever - find something you both like or agree on.

Acknowledge and Appreciate

Acknowledge the other person's position and appreciate them coming into conversation with you.

"Hey, I hear you, if you're concerned about _____ that can be really emotional. I appreciate you sharing these thoughts with me."

The key here is that you don't have to agree with the other person's position, you're simply acknowledging that it is an important subject to care about and that you are interested in talking with them about it.

Listen with Curiosity Not Judgment

It's very easy to listen for flaws in someone's arguments so you can correct them and demonstrate that they are wrong and you are right. Instead, think like an investigator. *"Tell me more about that?" "How long have you felt this way?" "Is there something you've experienced personally that makes you think that way?"* Resist the temptation to editorialize as they speak. Eye rolls and their verbal equivalents should be replaced with concern and interest.



Restate the Other Person's Argument to THEIR Satisfaction

This is perhaps the most critical technique of building understanding and trust. You have to listen carefully enough to be able to restate the other person's position without distortion. And without derogatory commentary.

"Wow, ok, that's a lot. Tell me if I'm understanding you correctly.... You are concerned with the number of illegal immigrants coming into the country and think the government isn't simply ignoring the problem, they are doing things to make it worse. You have met many immigrants that you like personally, but as a policy for the country, you think that we need much tighter controls over who is admitted and who isn't. Is that accurate? Am I leaving out any key parts?"

Find Places of Agreement

It's easy to find places where you disagree, but try to shift that mindset to "what is this person saying that I DO agree with?" even if it is a small, tangential piece of their argument. *"Well, I certainly agree that we don't want to make it easy for terrorists to get into our country undetected"* Try to be specific about a particular point the other person raised, but you can always go more general, *"well, I agree with you that the current immigration system is a mess and should be addressed in a comprehensive way"*

Share Your Perspective

After you have found some pieces of connection, listened to the other person's perspective, asked questions to find nuance and motivation, restated their position in your own words to *their satisfaction*, and found a point of agreement, THEN you can *ask* to share your perspective.

CLOSING

Thank the person again for sharing their thoughts, restate the places that you have found agreement, and state what you intend to do with the information they have shared with you. It can be anything from *"you've given me a lot to think about"* to *"I'll look into that podcast you mentioned"* to *"I really appreciate your perspective and our conversation. I'll work on thinking about this issue through the lens you suggested"*

ATTRIBUTION:

These techniques are borrowed from Braver Angels, which works to bridge differences and reduce polarization on divisive issues across America. They offer a variety of free workshops to develop these skills further.

Learn more at www.BraverAngels.org

When sharing your perspective, some tips to keep in mind so the other person can hear you with as few preconceptions as possible.

- Use "I" statements "This is how I see it" "From the things I've read, I come at this a little differently" "I actually have some personal experience in this issue that makes me think...." Note the difference from "That's not true, here's what's actually going on" "You clearly haven't read what the experts have to say"
- Try to incorporate some point the other person made to demonstrate connection to their position. *"You mentioned the cost of public services for illegal immigrants, and I'm concerned about costs too. I'm thinking of it from the perspective of "what is the cost of XYZ..."*
- Avoid generalizations and derogatory language. *"All democrats are brainwashed with wokeness and can't see the reality of how these immigrants are destroying our country."* isn't the best lead in for a productive conversation.
 - » Don't argue that ALL members of a group think, believe, or behave in a certain way.
 - » Avoid hyperbole
 - » Avoid "always" and "never" statements
- Ask for feedback. *"How does that strike you?" "Any of that that you can agree with?"*