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## Can We Talk? Tips for Respectful Conversations in Schools, Workplaces and Communities



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Being able to have respectful and civil conversations is the bedrock of any relationship—whether those connections take place at home, school, work or in communities. However, when controversy or conflict arises, the discussions can quickly become polarized, heated and personal, making it very difficult to have a conversation where different points of view are aired and discussed. These conversations can be about something controversial like politics, current events, moral dilemmas, parenting styles or about something seemingly neutral.

In order for us to talk across divergent opinions, broaden our own thinking and identify areas of common ground, we first need to learn how to talk with each other so we can hear and understand our different perspectives. The following tips and strategies can provide a framework for respectful and thoughtful conversations and can strengthen relationships.

## **1. Decide on some ground rules.**

Whether it's a one-on-one conversation, group discussion or an ongoing dialogue of a working group, it's helpful to get some **ground rules** on the table before the discussion begins. This can be done a few days before with a pre-meeting chat or the group can decide at the beginning of the meeting to determine their ground rules. Some helpful ones to include are: active listening, stick to the issues and don't attack other people, one person shouldn't monopolize the discussion, confidentiality. You can determine the ground rules by asking, *What do we need to feel safe and respected? What does respectful discussion look, sound and feel like?* Record and post the ground rules for all to see. If a ground rule is broken during the course of the conversation, address it directly and reaffirm the rule and its importance.

## **2. Listen actively.**

Active listening is listening in order to understand. This means that while someone is speaking, you are not silently constructing your response or rebuttal. You are not interrupting. And you are putting your judgments on the back burner and not jumping to conclusions about the person or what they're saying. You are hearing their words, trying to comprehend the intent and meaning behind them and, if you don't understand, clarifying by asking "What did you mean?" or "Did I get this right?" For even deeper active listening, ask follow-up questions. In addition, as you listen to what someone says—particularly those with whom you disagree—try to find the parts of their position that you do actually agree with. Mention those at the beginning of your response. It helps to establish some common ground and let the person know they were heard.

### **3. Communicate to be understood.**

The flip side of active listening is speaking clearly in order to be understood. Sometimes people speak to vent, sound more knowledgeable or “grandstand” because it feels good in the moment. However, communicating to be understood means being as honest and open as possible, speaking from your own point of view and not saying everything you think all at once. It also includes an being open to hearing the different perspectives that exist and a commitment to better understand the perspective of those with whom you are speaking. Getting into their mindset also helps to build empathy and understanding and could lay the groundwork for finding common ground.

### **4. Reject all name calling, belittling, stereotyping and bias.**

Name calling and bias has no place in civil discourse. And yet, we fall prey to these in subtle and overt ways quite easily. This should be incorporated into the ground rules (see #1), and we need to hold ourselves and others accountable for watching our language for bias and belittling. When we feel others have used stereotypical or biased language, it is important to [challenge it](#) head on. We should be mindful that some people may inadvertently hurt others with certain words, expressions or connotations. At the same time, not everyone is aware of the constantly evolving language of diversity and may make mistakes. We need to educate others about these mistakes and also be able to move on. Those who are using biased language need to challenge themselves to learn from this.

### **5. Pay attention to your feelings and your triggers.**

Sometimes we get emotionally triggered by a particular person, style of communication or a particular topic for which we feel strongly. We can't always think logically when we are in that state of mind, so it's helpful if to identify your triggers ahead of time. If you can do this, you will be more likely to separate your strong feelings and triggers from what that person who pushes your button is saying. If you need to, excuse yourself momentarily to take a breath, walk or chat briefly and privately with someone else. It is perfectly natural to have feelings and

triggers—we all do—but be aware of them and separate those strong feelings from the discussion at hand.

## **6. Consider the relationship.**

When you are in the midst of a disagreement that is getting animated, it's helpful to be mindful of the relationship you have with the people in the room. Assuming this is a person you care about or a group of people with whom you want to continue to live, work or collaborate, it's important to ask yourself whether taking it to a negative level is worth it. This doesn't mean you have to cave to their point of view, but it does mean being mindful and careful with what you say and keep the relationship in the forefront. Assuming good will is a useful attitude. Also, having a little compassion and empathy goes a long way towards others being open to what you're saying. As you engage in conversations with people with whom you differ, it's always a good idea to remember that they come to those positions with their own unique history, background, perspective and experiences and that is ultimately what is driving them.

## **7. Be mindful of the power issues.**

Whether it's in the workplace, a community meeting or around the dinner table, there are often power dynamics that take place during conversations. These can be based on social identity groups, where dominant groups may have power over marginalized groups. They can reflect the power dynamics at work, whether it's a direct supervisory relationship or those with more status in the organization compared to those with less. Power issues can also play out in family relationships where the elders in the family have power and status that younger people don't have. Regardless of where the power dynamics originate, it is important to keep this in mind when engaging in difficult conversations. It will help you better understand the power of each person's words and may inform how much to say and not say. Sometimes it can be helpful to name the power issues, but that might not always be the safest or wisest decision, and therefore should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

## **8. Agree to disagree.**

In the end, sometimes we just absolutely do not agree and we need to say that.

“Agree to disagree” is a cliché people throw around a lot but what does agreeing to disagree actually mean? It means this: *I have worked hard to find common ground; I have listened and communicated well and we still do not agree. I can live with that and respect you.* Agreeing to disagree is a civil, respectful and honest way to acknowledge your disagreements and invites the potential for picking up the discussion at a later date.