

Preparing for Civil Discourse
Presented by VOICE
Virginia Tech Office of Interactive Communication & Empowerment

Preparing for civil discourse is the most important step because preparation increases the possibility of having a discussion instead of a debate. A discussion in the process of exchanging ideas and views while a debate is focused on putting forth opposing arguments. Think of the following steps as “prerequisites” that do not necessarily guarantee the conversation will be easy but increases the likelihood for civil discourse.

Step One: Know Thyself

Examine your values and beliefs and know which topics you are not able to talk about and which topics you might be willing to share and/or learn more about.

Ask yourself:

- What topics are you so cemented in AND strike a chord that you won't be able to talk about and listen to a different viewpoint?(see sample list of *The Three Things We Don't Talk About*)
- What are the values and/or beliefs that you often feel you need to defend?
- Can you remain calm and compose during the conversation?
- Are you open to learning & sharing more with the other individual(s)?
- What's your true purpose in engaging with any other in dialogue?
- What are the specific needs, desires and fears in this situation?
- What's your “exit strategy”? At what point do you disengage from the conversation?
- Are there any assumptions you are making about the intentions of the other person?

Step Two: Physical Safety and Creating the Best Climate

Conversations might sometimes fail, or not even begin, because the correct forum is not in place. Some factors to consider include:

- **Time;** Is this the best time to have this conversation? Why now? Sometimes, conversations fail for the simple reason that others are focused on other matters and don't make the appropriate time to discuss a topic.
- **Place;** What is the most optimal location for a conversation that reflects neutrality and individuals feel physically (not just psychologically) safe? Consider whether in-person, video, a public forum or an on-line chat room is better than the other.
- **Manner:** How is the conversation going to take place? Is it simply 2 individuals or will there be more individuals sharing a certain perspective on one spectrum versus multiples views of the spectrum? Is it a spur of the moment opportunity or has the pre-framing happened where individuals are crystal-clear on what the expectations are going in?

Step Three: Entering the Conversation with New Beliefs

Beliefs dictate how we see a situation and influence our words & actions. Change your mindset from:

- **Winning to Understanding**
 - Understanding does not mean accepting their conclusions or reasoning but comprehending why they believe what they believe.
- **Enemy to Conversation Partner**
 - If the focus is on judging the other person and not on being curious about their beliefs then we see the other person as our enemy and there isn't opportunity to learn and grow. The identities we give others are powerful in that it defines what we think they believe and will do. Being open to seeing them in a different light opens the opportunity to change.
- **Disrespect to Respect**
 - As challenging as it seems, respect for the individual, but maybe not the views, is what is needed. If it seems as if these two concepts can't be separated (the person from the issue) then perhaps a conversation can't (and shouldn't) take place.
- **Blame to Contribution**
 - Similar to seeing the other individual as an opponent and ultimately seeing them from a different perspective it is critical that there be a shift from solely blaming others to opening oneself to the possibility that we are also somehow contributing to the situation.

“When 2 enemies are talking, they are not fighting.” - Daryl Davis

Step Four: Communicate Explicitly Your Goals for the Discussion

In order for civil discourse to occur there must be a firm commitment to the process. Make that commitment explicit. State, for example and in your own words, your goal and intent in having the conversation:

“I'm curious and really want to understand what led to your conclusions about this topic and so want to listen.”

“I'd like to have a respectful conversation about (insert topic here) so that I can better understand your view. I'm committed to not making it personal. Do you think you can share your views with me?”

“I'd like to be crystal clear that I want you to feel you are being treated with respect & dignity and I'd like the same. Are you willing to have this conversation with that intent in mind? In the end, everyone is entitled to their own opinion and so I want to acknowledge that from the get-go.”

“The easy thing to do, and it doesn’t excuse or justify anything though, is to not have a difficult conversation. More rewarding though is struggling with these topics and so thank you if you’re willing to help me better understand.”

Step Five: Ensure You and the Other Person are Willing to Voluntarily Have Civil Discourse

Keep in mind that:

- The other individual might say ‘no’ because they are either not comfortable having a conversation or don’t know how to have civil discourse. Sometimes, individuals don’t want the responsibility of being the “spokesperson” for a whole group. Similarly, they may not think they need to explain, justify or educate others on why they believe what they believe.
- Even if they say ‘yes’ does their body language, words and action seem congruent with that commitment?
- At some point in the conversation, the other person might change their mind and no longer wish to have a conversation and that’s OK.
- At some point in the conversation, **you** might change your mind and it is OK to express that and walk away.

Step Six: Commitments & Boundaries During Discussion

The final step in setting the stage is to make clear, and understand, the commitments and boundaries that you and the other person need to feel dialogue can happen.

- Prioritize respect (possibly friendship) over scoring rhetoric points.
- Make a mutual commitment to avoiding behavior that is destructive during the conversation (see sample list of *Behaviors That Typically Don’t Get You What You Want*).
- Ask the other individual if there is a behavior they would like to request that you avoid doing?
- Agree to politely point out behavior that the other person does that doesn’t help the dialogue.

Resources

How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide by James Lindsay and Peter Boghossian

Turn Enemies Into Allies: The Art of Peace in the Workplace by Judy Ringer