

TALKING ACROSS THE POLITICAL DIVIDE

SKILLS FOR DIFFICULT PERSONAL CONVERSATIONS

Goals for these Conversations

- You learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you politically.
- You have a sense of satisfaction about how you conveyed your own perspective, feelings, and experiences.
- You discover some common ground if it's there.

Expectations to Abandon

- That you can persuade the other person to change core attitudes and beliefs.
- That facts will be agreed on and logic followed consistently.
- That your conversation partner will match your openness.

Core Principles

- Respect, curiosity, and openness tend to elicit the same from the other person.
- Everyone needs to save face—no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving, or bigoted.
- Most people in a relationship have some common values and concerns that can be unearthed.

The Four Skills Domains

1. Setting a constructive tone.
2. Listening in a way that the other person feels heard.
3. Speaking in a way that helps the other person hear you.
4. Handling difficult moments.

Cautions

- Timing is key. Start at a calm moment and not after someone has fired off a verbal shot or is in mid-rant.
- Only try this approach with someone you think might want to hear your point of view.
- Practice one to one first; group conversations are harder.
- Not intended for use online.



SKILLS

Tone Setting Skills

- 1. Letting the other person know that you want to understand other perspectives better.**
(Example: “I’m finding myself curious these days about the views of people who are different from the people I tend to hang out with.”)
- 2. Asking permission to pose questions.** (“Can I ask you something about politics and your views on something?” or [to an out of town relative] “Can I ask you what people in your part of the country are saying about what’s going on in Washington these days?”)
- 3. Acknowledging your general political stance**—liberal, conservative, etc. (“As you probably know, I’m a liberal Democrat/conservative Republican, so that’s the perspective I come from.”)
- 4. Offering something critical of your own side and crediting something positive about the other side.** (Blue example: “I think that Democrats have been out of touch with a lot of people in rural communities and Rust Belt towns. Trump picked up on that.” Red example: “I think that conservatives can sometimes come across like they don’t care about minorities. Liberals have done a better job of connecting with minority groups.”)

Listening Skills

- 1. Paraphrasing what the other says**—to make sure that you understand and the other person feels heard. (Blue: “So you’re saying that you don’t trust the federal government on health care—they will mess it up” or “You wish Trump wouldn’t tweet so much, but he’s there to shake things up in Washington.” Red: “So for you, Trump is a big threat to the country” or “You’re saying that Obamacare needs fixing but should not be thrown out.”) Don’t go farther than the person said by suggesting implications of their view. (Not: “So you’re saying that the character of a President doesn’t matter” or “You’re suggesting that Trump can’t possibly learn on the job.”) Be prepared to be corrected about what the person really meant, and look for “Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”)
- 2. Asking real questions of understanding (versus loaded questions).** This is hard to do. (Blue: “I’m curious about what you make of Trump’s words about women, like what he said on the Hollywood Access bus video” versus “Why did you vote for a sexual predator?” Red example: “Do you see Black Lives Matters helping or hurting things in our cities?” versus “Do you see attacking the police as the solution?” It can be helpful to ask how the other person came to their view on an issue, especially if it’s strongly held. (Blue: “I’m interested in how you came to see the federal government as more the problem than the solution,” or Red: “I’m interested in how you came to believe in single-payer health care.”) Then acknowledge the experiences behind the person’s views.
- 3. Listening for underlying values and aspirations, and acknowledging them.** Blue or red example: “I’m getting that for you, fairness is a big issue when it comes to immigration.” (For reds it might be fairness to those who have to wait for years to immigrate legally, and for blues it might be fairness to the “Dreamers” who were brought here as children or to their parents who have worked hard and contributed to society.)



Speaking Skills

- 1. Using I-statements (“This is how I see it”) more often than truth-statements (“This is how it is”).** (Blue: “It sure looks like Trump fired James Comey to short circuit the Russian investigation” rather than “Here’s why Trump fired James Comey....” Red: “I think that Trump’s business experience is what the country needs right now because professional politicians have messed things up” versus “What this country needs is a good business man in charge.”)
- 2. Using “I’m concerned/worried/troubled” expressions rather than definitive “This is what will happen” statements when referring to the future.** (Blue: “I’m afraid we’re going off a cliff on climate change and that there will no coming back” versus “We’re going to have to evacuate coastal cities before this century is over.” Red: “I’m worried that the national debt keeps going up, we’ll be bankrupt, and there will be no Social Security before I retire.”)
- 3. Mentioning an area of similarity or agreement (if you see one).** (Blue: “It sounds like we both agree that the health care system needs a lot of fixing” or “Trump appears to have tapped into real concerns of a lot of people.” Red: “Seems like both of us see the media as dividing us more than informing us right now” or “I think we agree that gerrymandering is adding fuel to the polarization we’re seeing these days.”)
- 4. Before expressing a disagreement, saying some version of “I hear you” (if you do).** (Blue: “I hear you that you don’t trust the federal government to do the right thing on health care or on much of anything. [Pause] What I want to say is that I think that only the federal government has the resources to guarantee good health care for everyone in the country. The market isn’t going to do it, and some states are just too poor to support health care.” Red: “I hear you that you think that federally-backed health care is the way to go. [Pause] From my point of view, the federal government has a really bad track record of running domestic programs, and I can’t see it doing a good job on something as complicated as health care. I prefer a market approach with states helping people who can’t afford insurance.” Going back and forth between acknowledging the other’s feelings or viewpoint and then stating your own is generally more effective than just restating your position. It’s like a dance: two steps one way, one step back, and repeat. Aim for “yes, and” rather than “yes, but.” (I hear you, and here’s what I think about this.)
- 5. If you feel very strongly about an issue, saying something about what life experiences have led to you to be passionate about it.** Stories humanize issues and make passionate political people come across as human beings who care. General example: “I’ve worked in health care my whole career, and I’ve seen things that have disturbed me a lot.....”
- 6. Softening flat-out disagreements by signaling first that your perspective is very different.** (“It probably won’t surprise you that I see this completely differently.”) Or if you get really emotional on a topic, signal that as well: “This one is very close to home for me, and I have very strong feelings about it.”

Skills for Difficult Moments

- 1. Staying focused on a topic when the other person jumps around from issue to issue.** (“Can we stay with immigration for now?”)
- 2. Not answering baiting questions—instead, just restating your viewpoint on the topic.** (Blue: When asked, “Do you think we should let foreigners just pour into this country illegally and then become citizens?” you might respond, “I think we need a responsible



immigration policy that protects our borders and is also welcoming in the way it was for my grandparents and lots of others.” Red: When asked, “Do you think we should just round up undocumented immigrants and throw them in concentration camps?” you might respond, “I think we have to find a way to make sure that our immigration laws mean something—by enforcing them.”)

3. **Not returning provocative statements in kind.** (Blue: When you’re talking about health care and the other person exclaims: “Obama was a fraud on health care like he was on everything else!”--instead of defending Obama’s integrity or attacking Trump in kind, you can ignore the outburst and say something like, “Obamacare needs fixing for sure, and I think the Republican alternative will make things worse.” Red: When someone blurts out, “Trump will go down in history as the worst President we’ve ever had,” you might respond, “For now, he’s the President and I want to give him a chance to succeed”—rather than saying, “Do you think that Hillary would have been a modern-day Lincoln?”)
4. **Instead of beating entrenched differences into the ground, agreeing to disagree.** (“We both have strong feelings about this, and I don’t think we are going to convince each other at the moment.”)
5. **If the other person is upset and no longer listening, exiting the conversation in a low-key way.** (Examples could range from humor: “Well, we sure figured that one out!” to concern: “I don’t want to keep going and end up with bad feelings between us,” to simply exiting stage left: “Gotta go. To be continued.”)

Finishing Up

Unless you end completely polarized, express appreciation for the conversation and share something you learned or some hope for the country.

