



How to Disagree

Deliberation welcomes, rather than fears, productive disagreement and good argument. But anyone who has participated in a conversation that has been designed to productively bring together diverse viewpoints knows that it can feel like any disagreement may disrupt the sense of a collaborative space. However, for a truly productive deliberation, it is often necessary to disagree in order to understand our underlying differences and work towards resolving or transcending them. So, how can we learn to disagree productively?

Once you've looked it over, consider sharing this document in advance of gatherings of family or friends in which contentious conversations may arise. Any and all of these tips might help everyone contribute to a more rewarding and productive conversation than anyone might expect, particularly during these tense and troubled times.

Start by Listening

In order to engage in a productive disagreement, you must first learn to actively listen to perspectives that are different than your own. Active listening in deliberation requires that you not pay attention to a speaker in order to seize upon and refute a specific fact or comment, but rather that you pay attention to the values, personal experiences, and worldview that underly what that person is saying. The next time you are in a conversation, see if you can complete the following statements based on what the person you are talking to says:

"I'm hearing that for you, _____ is an important value in the immigration debate."

"Do I understand correctly that you believe _____?"

"I'm hearing that your experience in _____ has impacted your opinion on this topic"

Acknowledge Perspectives

People are much more likely to respond productively to disagreement if they feel they have been heard and their perspective acknowledged. Before inserting your opinion or stating your disagreement, try first acknowledging what the other person has said. This can be accomplished through "I hear you" statements or paraphrasing. Think of it as "yes, and" rather than "yes, but." For example:

"That's not true and here's why" → "I hear your concern, and I have a different idea."



“Yes, but you don’t understand” → “Yes, and I have a different understanding of that.”

“So, you think rule of law is irrelevant” → “So do I understand that for you, rule of law is not as important as other considerations?”

Use “I” Statements

By using “I” statements, speakers communicate their personal opinions and perspectives without attributing their statement to another person or a group. Considered differently, “I” statements can be the difference between nuanced comments that address personal disagreement and speaking in absolutes. For example:

“After the election, this will happen” → “I am concerned that after the election...”

“That’s just the way it is” → “I see things in this way...”

“You are wrong” → “I do not feel the same as you because...”

“Women agree on this” → “In my experience as a woman, I have found this to be true.”

Share Personal Stories

Similar to using “I” statements, sharing a personal story about *why* you disagree on an issue can help the conversation continue productively despite difference. Often, we focus exclusively on the words that someone says rather than seeking to understand what life experience or unique worldview might be informing those words. When expressing disagreement, try to identify the experiences shaping your perspective and share a personal story for context:

“Growing up in a rural area, I experienced _____, which is why I believe _____.”

“My family has a history of military service that has shaped my opinion that _____.”

“I was taught _____ about the justice system, which is why I think _____.”

“I was introduced to this theory in graduate school and I think it’s relevant to this topic.”

“As an anthropology major, I have learned to view things in this way which is why I ____.”

Preface Strong Opposition

If you fundamentally disagree with something that has been said, consider acknowledging the extent of your disagreement before speaking. Reactionary or emotional responses may be unexpected to the other person and it can help to signal your disagreement before expressing your opposing view. For example:



“This is very personal to me because _____, and I have very strong feelings about it.”

“It may not surprise you that I have a completely different opinion on this.”

“This topic makes me emotional because _____.”

“Because of my experience with _____, I see this in a completely different way.”

Avoid Derogatory Language

It's easy to get frustrated with ideas that you disagree with or claims you think are just wrong. But derisively dismissing them tends to harden people's defense of them and prompt them to dismiss you instead. Try to treat your fellow deliberators as you yourself would like to be treated – without name-calling and demeaning attacks on ideas you might hold.

“That's the most ridiculous idea I've ever heard.” → “I don't think that is a very realistic idea.”

“Whoever thinks _____ is crazy and fooling themselves.” → “I don't understand the basis of _____.”

“If you believe _____, you must be a socialist/fascist/communist/racist.”

→

“I am concerned that the idea that _____ may lead to/has traces of socialism/fascism/communism/racism.”

Complete Your Thought

We live in a world where disagreement can be quickly signaled by a retweet or brief comment, but never fully explained. If you want to disagree productively, you should try to complete your thought. Avoid offering an accusatory comment or zinger in an attempt to have the final say or express contempt. Use “I” statements, personal stories, and details to move beyond one-off statements into a fuller explanation of your disagreement. For example:

“Clearly that's just wrong.” → “I disagree because...”

“I mean, we all know that misinformation is everywhere, including in this conversation.”

→

“I think we should talk about the sources of information being brought up in this conversation because I feel like it's causing confusion.”

“The facts are the facts.” → “Based on my expertise in _____, I believe _____ is true.”

“It's absurd that we're even talking about this.” → “I'm concerned about the turn this conversation has taken because...”



If you would like to learn more about productive disagreement, listening with strength, and other skills for difficult conversations, we recommend the following resources:

- [OpenMinds](#) – An interactive learning platform that fosters openness to diverse perspectives
- [Braver Angels](#) – Workshops and events for building conversation skills to bridge divides
- [Deepak Chopra](#)'s work on disagreement

