

Tips for Contentious Conversations

From the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

Many of us recognize the value of breaking out of our ideological silos and discussing contentious topics with people we disagree with. But we also may not be sure where to start and feel a little anxious that these conversations will not go well. Based on its experience hosting difficult discussions on a wide range of challenging issues, Davidson College's Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) has some tips on how best to engage in these conversations.

Deliberative Dispositions

The DCI has identified several "deliberative dispositions" as critical to the success of efforts to discuss tough topics across our political and social divides. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. They include a commitment to egalitarianism, openmindedness, empathy, charity, and attentiveness, among others. A list of these dispositions and how we can bring them to life is provided below:

- **Egalitarianism:** Make the robust involvement of each participant possible.
- **Humility:** Appreciate one's own cognitive and experiential limitations, embrace the possibility one might be wrong, and recognize the intellectual contributions of others.
- **Openmindedness:** With a curious spirit, try fully to understand deliberators' stories, arguments, and other remarks in their richness and variety.
- **Empathy:** Treat remarks made by others with openness and compassion, and approach disagreements with generosity and good will.
- **Charity:** Assume the best—and not the worst—about the values, intentions, and meanings of one's fellow deliberators. Avoid hasty judgments.
- **Attentiveness:** Patiently and with full attention, make listening as active as one's speaking.
- **Anticipation:** Expect to qualify, amend, or change one's position in light of good reasons. Anticipate fresh ideas, new beginnings, novel approaches.
- **Evidential Emphasis:** When possible, use evidence (experiential, factual, emotional, descriptive) to support positions and elucidate generalizations.
- **Communal Orientation:** When possible, notice patterns and commonalities among deliberators' stories, arguments, and other remarks. Identify transcendent perspectives, values, and commitments.
- **Action Inclination:** When possible, recognize opportunities to generate creative resolutions to disagreements and move from intentional deliberation to collective action.

Conversation Agreements

These dispositions orient us away from trying to “win” the argument and towards better understanding each other’s arguments. They also serve as the basis of the Conversation Agreements outlined below that provide more specific suggestions for you and your conversation partners that can help you engage productively and respectfully with one another. Despite how much you may disagree, we all want to respect each other’s inherent human dignity, and these agreements can help you do that.

In entering into a discussion on a contentious topic, participants can, to the best of their ability, each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgements
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

While not foolproof, these tips can help you engage on difficult topics with your friends, family, classmates, and colleagues. The DCI’s [Guide to How to Disagree](#) and [Guide to One-on-One Conversations](#) also provides some useful ideas for how to approach these conversations. The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative also regularly hosts [Deliberative Forums](#), [Deliberative “D” Teams](#), and other programs guided by the [DCI’s trained facilitators and fellows](#) that create opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, and members of our wider community to engage with one another on contentious issues facing our community and society. To learn more about these programs, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.