

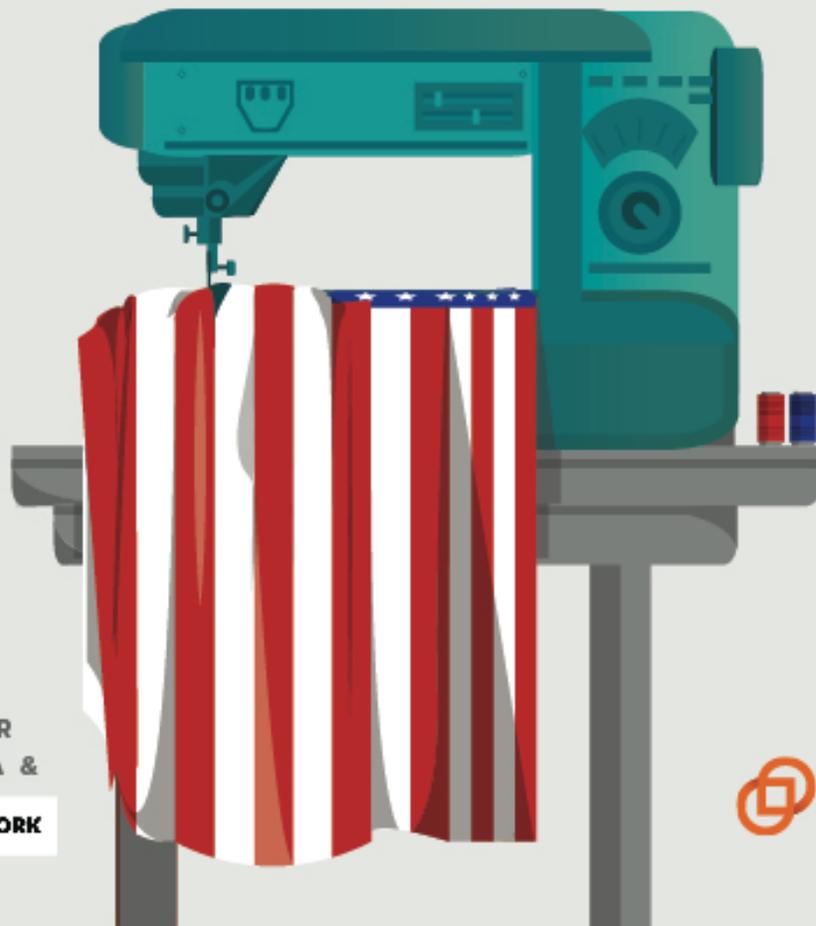
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REACHING ACROSS  
THE RED/BLUE DIVIDE



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# *Introduction*

This guide will help prepare you to speak about what is most important to you in ways that can be heard, and to hear others' concerns and passions with new empathy and understanding even if — especially if — you continue to disagree.

The guide offers a step-by-step approach to inviting another person — someone whose perspectives differ from your own — into a conversation in which:

You agree to set aside the desire to persuade the other and instead focus on developing a better understanding of each other's perspectives, and the hopes, fears, and values that underlie them;

You agree to be curious and to avoid the pattern of attack and defend;

You choose to ask questions and move beyond stereotypes and assumptions.

# *The Challenge*

## **Why is this conversation so difficult?**

Talking about politics this election season is difficult because politics is one way we express what we really care about – our hopes, our values, our deepest concerns. It is about our jobs, children’s education, religious commitments, sense of justice, the future of the planet, our standing in the world, our personal sense of safety and health – or all of the above. That’s no small matter. It’s no wonder that when we talk about one candidate or the other, things can get difficult - we are really talking about the things we hold most dearly. Someone challenging our hopes or belittling our fears can put us instantly on the defensive, and provoke us to attack or shut down, which in turn provokes the other person to attack or shutdown – and then where are we? Where we are now – divided. But it doesn’t have to be this way and this guide is here to help.

## **Why bother? Why is it so important? What is at stake?**

Most of us have at least one important relationship that has either been strained by painful conversations about political differences or silenced due to fear that it could get ugly. Bring it up and fight about it or avoid the conversation – and sometimes the person – altogether. Both options limit who we can be together as friends or family and limit what we can accomplish in our communities.

What alternatives are there?

You can let media pundits and campaign strategists tell you that polarization is inevitable and hopeless.

Or you can consider reaching out and taking a journey with someone who is important to you.

With some tools to support your best intentions, you can actually learn about what motivates other people and understand how they’ve come to believe the way they do. Connecting across our differences is both possible and necessary.

# *How to start*

## **Are you ready? Are they? Ask yourself:**

- Why do you want to connect? What do you want to learn?
- Are you ready to resist the strong pull toward getting angry or frustrated?
- Is just trying to understand each other enough, or will you feel the need to persuade them to concede certain points?

What can you do to prepare yourself to listen without interrupting and to speak with care?

Your conversation is most likely to go well if you:

- 1) share the same hopes for the conversation,
- 2) have some good agreements about how to talk and work together,
- 3) and have some good questions to start you off.

## ***Choosing your spots: Is the time and place right for a good conversation?***

Do you need a place that is private? Can you find enough time and be free from distractions? Where is the place that brings out the best in you? Might a good cup of coffee or tea help? Hospitality goes a long way to creating a good conversation.

# *Extending the invitation*

**How to invite the kind of conversation you want to have and be clear about the purposes:**

*Try this:*

“I really want to be able to talk about this with you. Do you think we can have an honest conversation about this – not just an argument? Can we try to hang in there and listen even when one of us says something the other really doesn’t understand?”

If they say “no” – then you have to accept that. But who is going to say “no” to an honest request like that? It’s worth a try anyway.

**Agreeing on HOW to talk:  
Creating some agreements to follow so that you can listen**

Having a good conversation can be a lot like driving – it’s amazing how people are able to navigate around each other if they have a few rules of the road. Make them simple and easy to remember:

*Try this:*

“It’s going to help me bring my best self if we can agree to three simple things:

Let’s:

- *share the time*, let’s not interrupt each other and no one person goes on too long.
- *speak for ourselves*, from our personal experience, and not try to represent or defend an entire political party.
- *respect each other’s differences* by avoiding being too critical or dismissive, aiming simply to understand and not to persuade each other.

“Do those work?”

*Sometimes:* In relationships where these conversations have proven to be difficult in the past, you may need more structure. In our dialogue work around the most difficult issues we actually have people take turns speaking for three minutes and ask them to hold to that limit – it’s easier to listen when you know someone isn’t going to go on and on and on and on...

### **Start with a good question:**

If you ask a yes or no question, you will get a yes or no answer. But if you ask a question that invites people to talk about what is important to them, what issues are most complex to them, you will be half way to a productive and civil conversation.

*Try this:*

- What is at the heart of your political beliefs?
- What hopes, concerns and values do you have that underlie your beliefs?
- What is it in your life experience that has led you to believe the things you do?

*Once people have been able to talk about the things they really believe in and care about, they may be more willing to talk about what is complex and difficult.*

*Try this:*

- In what ways have you felt out of step with the party or groups you generally support, or in what ways do those groups not fully reflect what’s important to you?
- What aspects of the other party or advocacy groups do you admire—or at least see as reasonable counter-balances to the groups you generally support?

*One important possibility is for someone to define him or herself and step away from stereotypes they feel are placed on them.*

*Try this:*

- During political debates, are there ways that your values and perspectives are stereotyped by the “other side”?
- If so, what about who you are and what you care about makes those stereotypes especially frustrating or painful?
- Are there some stereotypes about you that you feel are somewhat deserved—even if they are not fully true?

# Getting Back On Track

## Bringing it back when the conversation has been hijacked, sidetracked, and lost in translation:

When things get really tough or the disagreement is profound — and there is a good chance that will happen — remember your purpose is to understand, not persuade.

**Tune in:** Are you really listening? Are you listening to understand or to find fault? When you hear something that just doesn't make any sense to you or that you really disagree with, make sure you have heard the person and let them know you are trying to understand.

*Try this:*

“Let me make sure I understand what you mean. You are saying that this is important to you because \_\_\_\_\_ and that you really wish \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?”

**Get Curious:** When you are most frustrated is when you have to get most curious. First about yourself — why is this so difficult for me? And then about them.

*Try this:*

- How did you come to believe that? Is there a story there?
- Why is that really important to you?
- Do you ever feel conflicted about it in any way or have questions or uncertainties?

**Take a Break:** It's one of those things we learned in kindergarten, right? Now we know it takes about 20 minutes for the chemicals in our body to get back to normal when we have gotten really upset. Name your desire to continue, and suggest a short break.

**Appreciate each other:** Name what you learned and thank your partner for the experience.

# How to be our best

# on social media

## Some guidelines for how to remain positive, curious, and open on social media:

Social media is a super difficult place to have a good dialogue. First of all, it is hard to hear tone, impossible to see faces, and sometimes you have no connection to the person in question. Given all that, the first thing is to assess whether or not you want to enter the conversation at all:

*Ask:*

- Can I bring a perspective that might inform someone else's understanding? An insight or an experience that might help someone shift the way they are thinking?
- Is this already an argument with an attack-defend dynamic or are people really listening to each other?
- Are there things I would like to learn from people whose viewpoints are different than mine?

If the answer to any of the above is YES, then by all means proceed.

The best way forward follows this simple formula:

- **Repeat** what you heard – naming what you hear is most important to them.
- **Name** what is most important to you.
- **Ask** an honest question about how they came to their beliefs or why this is so important to them. Or ask how they can hold one belief and also another seemingly competing one?

Things to avoid:

- Belittling other people's hopes or fears – it only invites the same in response.
- Relying too much on statistics to “win the argument.” Statistics and facts are important to explain why you have come to the conclusion you have, but there is a good chance that someone who believes something differently has another set of stats to back it up.
- Generalizing about “people like you...” Each one of us is an individual and it only pushes people further away when we clump people together.

If you want to start an online conversation that you will invite people to, make sure you: Send a conversation guide (like this one!) ahead of time, including:

- A hashtag, if relevant
- Some questions ahead of time for reflection
- A statement of the purpose of the conversation
- Basic communications agreements that will dictate how people engage
- Ask questions that invite personal storytelling

**Trolls:**

Trolls will most likely come in and out, if at all; focus on engaging with the people who are genuinely eager to embrace the rules for conversation and ask them follow up questions.

**Question the format:**

Social media itself should be part of the conversation: how does the format serve or not serve the conversation? What doubts or concerns do people have about engaging in the conversation publicly?

# *Do's and Don'ts in the office*

The workplace can be tricky for conversations across political differences. Except in rare occasions, having a particular set of beliefs should not impact your role and standing at work. In order to make sure that is true, civility and caution should be a priority. Think of people with different views as a resource rather than roadblock. What can you learn from them about how other people think and experience the world?

| <b>Don't:</b>                                    | <b>Do:</b>   |
|--|--|
| <b>Tell them they are wrong</b>                  | <b>Ask them what value led them there</b>                      |
| <b>Ask how they could ever believe something</b> | <b>Ask when that belief first started for them</b>             |
| <b>Interrupt people</b>                          | <b>Give a moment to make sure they are done</b>                |
| <b>Instead of “yeah, but, what about...”</b>     | <b>Try “Huh, interesting, tell me more...”</b>                 |
| <b>Assume you know their motives</b>             | <b>Ask about their goals and hopes</b>                         |
| <b>Blame them for your anger or frustration</b>  | <b>Explain your frustration and take responsibility for it</b> |

## **Credits & more information:**

**Special Thanks to the USA TODAY NETWORK**

**By Maggie Herzig & John Sarrouf**

**Essential Partners, Inc.**

For more context and knowledge about the issues affecting this election season, visit the USA TODAY NETWORK's Election 2016 coverage:

<http://www.usatoday.com/section/global/elections-2016/>



**About Essential Partners:** Essential Partners has worked for more than 25 years to facilitate conversations and equip people to communicate using Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), a method which relies on preparation, structure, questions, facilitation, and reflection to enable people to harness their capacity to have the conversations they need to have.