



University of Nevada, Reno

Finding Common Ground: How to Deliberate “Wicked Problems”

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COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN CHRONIC CONFLICT

- People on one side do not listen to those on the other side.
- Fixed opinions about the other side are common. Open-mindedness is uncommon.
- Fixed and simple convictions are demonstrated. Complexity, ambivalence, and inner conflict are concealed.
- The most extreme leaders of the opposition are assumed to be representative of the whole group.
- Blaming the adversary is common. Taking responsibility for problems is uncommon.



SHIFTING COMMUNICATION PURPOSE TO ADDRESS WICKED PROBLEMS

Debate	Dialogue	Deliberation
Oppositional: various sides oppose each other and try to prove others wrong.	Collaborative: working together to find shared understanding of issues and perspectives.	Collaborative: working together to weigh alternatives and make a decision together.
The goal is winning. We listen to find flaws, refute, and counterarguments.	The goal is exploring common ground and differences. We listen to understand the beliefs and concerns of others.	The goal is to make informed and reasoned decisions. We listen to gain information and evaluate evidence presented.
Questions are asked as rhetorical challenges or disguised statements.	Questions are asked from a position of genuine curiosity in the purpose of shared inquiry.	Questions are asked to understand impacts, trade-offs, and ensure all perspectives considered.
Debate ignores feelings and relationships. Success is finding the right answer and ending discussion.	Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person. Success requires the exploration of the complexities of issues and perspectives.	Deliberation prioritizes public consensus over private power in decisions. Success is resolution to problematic situations in ways acceptable to all impacted.

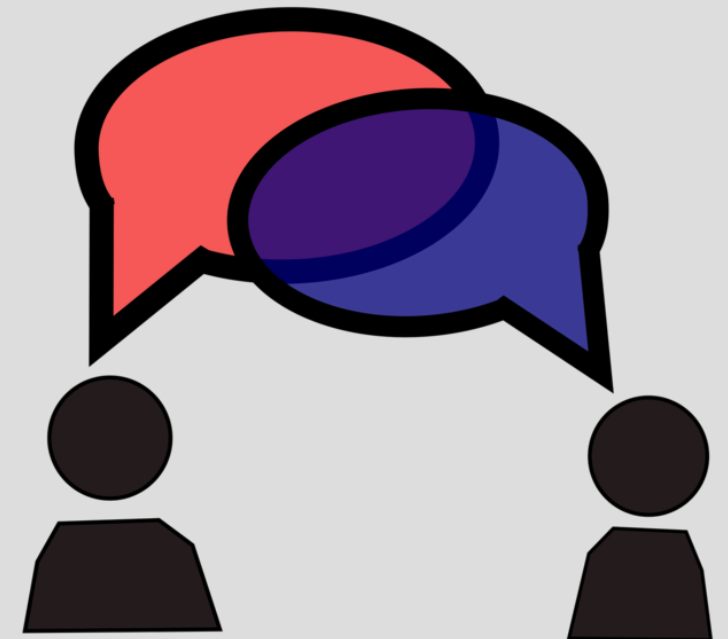
LET'S WORK TO SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE



- **Reframing Disagreement:**
 - Often disagreement is from ignorance of another's experience or perspective
- **Ask them:** What's at the heart of the matter for you? How did you come to understand the issue in this way?
- **Sharing stories helps us understand the point of view of those we engage with**

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR DIALOGUE

- **Principle #1:** Connect Before You Try to Convince or Persuade
 - **Skill:** Active and Deep Listening
- **What this LOOKS Like:**
 - Nodding, smiling, eye contact with the speaker
- **What this SOUNDS Like:**
 - **Paraphrase what others have said:** “It sounds like...is that what you meant? I heard you express...did I get that right?”
 - **Acknowledge feelings or validate contributions:** “You sound upset, is that accurate?” I see how you got there... I imagine that was a difficult situation for you...
 - **Summarize Key Themes:** I think I heard two key points we are most interested in...does that capture it?



PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR DIALOGUE

- **Principle #2:** Focus on Conversation Drivers, Not Blockers
 - **Skill:** Keeping conversations going with open-ended and follow up questions
- **What this Sounds Like:**
 - **Open-Ended Questions:** Can you tell me more about...What do we think about...How have you experienced this?
 - **Follow-Up Questions:** Can you explain...do you have an example...are there things we are uncertain about?
 - **Bring others into the conversation:** Anyone else agree? Does someone have a different view?
- **Blockers include:**
 - **Hostile Questions:** You don't really believe that, do you? Don't you realize how bad that is?
 - **Hyperbole** (nobody ever says that!); **Insults** (Well, that's stupid...); **Disconfirmation** (you're just saying that because of who you are...)



PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR DIALOGUE

- **Principle #3:** Lean into Hard Conversations, but with Civility

- **Skill:** Be mindful on HOW we convey our perspectives

- **What this Sounds Like:**

- **Make strong arguments:** Qualify your claims, use multiple reasons and types of evidence, acknowledge objections or drawbacks to your position.
- **Be clear on your purpose and intention:** I want to understand your perspective or interest in this issue; I want to engage you more on where I see the disagreement in our positions...but also I hear some common ground...
- **Monitor your own feelings and know your boundaries:** This is hard for me to hear, I need a moment...notice if you are “filtering” what someone says through your bias
- **Celebrate moments of connection or understanding:** I never knew that, thanks for sharing...I appreciate being able to talk this issue through



WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

Read More:

Danisch, R., & Keith, W. (2024). *Radically Civil: Saving democracy one conversation at a time*. Routledge.

Kaner, S. (2014). *Facilitator's guide to participatory decision-making*, 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mirivel, J.C., & Lyon, A. (2023). *Positive communication for leaders: Proven strategies for inspiring unity and effective change*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Resources to Have Better Conversations with Others:

- **Essential Partners:** <https://whatisessential.org/>
 - Nonprofit organizations that assists in facilitating community dialogues, offers workshops and trainings, and has free/downloadable guides and resources to facilitate your own dialogues.
- **Living Room Conversations:** <https://livingroomconversations.org/>
 - Offers resources and discussion guides on a variety of topics (from policy issues to topics that build social connection with others).
- **National Issues Forums:** <https://www.nifi.org/>
 - Nonprofit organization providing training, resources, and support for community and educational groups to deliberate social and political issues. Issue guides and materials are developed for different age and education groups, including historic guides for K-12 social studies curriculums.