

Strategies for Healthy Disagreements

We all live and work in a diverse society. As a result of our vastly diverse characteristics, we all think differently. This is known as Viewpoint Diversity. When we live and work around people who think differently, we eventually experience conflicts and disagreements.

Disagreeing and difficult conversations are normal and can even be healthy. Disagreements allow us to express our beliefs and better understand each other. They drive creativity and innovation. When managed well, they leave us feeling more engaged and connected with friends, family and teammates.

So, how can we have difficult conversations without damaging our relationships?

1. **Shift your focus from winning to understanding.** View others as potential partners and collaborators who have something to teach you, rather than someone you need to beat in a debate.
2. **Show you care about the other person.** You won't influence others until they trust you have their interests in mind.
3. **Listen and understand first, deliver messages second.** You may be eager to make your point. But slow down and set the stage through listening and demonstrating understanding.
4. **Empathy first, then facts and data.** Many views are derived from emotion and experience. When presented to those who are emotional, data can be used as a means for counterargument, increasing the conflict and leaving others entrenched in their position. People will be influenced by data once they are calm, feel understood and are ready to integrate new information.
5. **Model the behavior you want.** We all want to be understood, valued and respected. So do people with different views. Listen patiently. Tell them you are trying to understand. Admit when you might be wrong. "I don't know" is a powerful phrase that shows you are open to new information.
6. **Ask questions.** Ask with genuine curiosity. Drill down for more detail. Say, "Tell me more." Then listen. Pay close attention to verbal and nonverbal communication.
7. **Slow down.** We are prone to let our emotions control our behavior. Think carefully before you respond. Place a little space between what is said and how you choose to respond.
8. **Take responsibility for miscommunication.** If there is a misunderstanding, pause to clarify. Ask questions. Don't allow a little confusion to drive a lot of emotion.
9. **Avoid "call outs."** Call outs are when we get emotional and let someone know they have crossed a moral line. The conversation stops. Unless an opinion is a "deal breaker" for you, work to contain emotional responses. When emotions rise, take a deep breath and just listen.
10. **Instill some doubt.** Most people don't like to have their views challenged and don't want their minds changed. Sometimes the best we can hope for is to give them some new information to consider. Before making your case, ask yourself, "was I invited to share this information?" Sometimes a little new information goes a long way.
11. **Avoid blame.** Blame ends goodwill and stops conversations. If behaviors are in question, talk directly about the behaviors. Avoid making broad statements about character or guilt.
12. **Use "I" and "and," not "but."** Start by talking about yourself, using "I" statements (e.g., I have a different opinion) instead of "you" statements that can put people on the defense (e.g., You are wrong). Using "but" negates everything that was just said. When possible, affirm what has been said by using "and" statements to add to what was just said.
13. **End on a good note.** Don't walk away. Try to deescalate the conversation. Agree to end the discussion and come back to the topic if needed. Affirm everyone's good intent. With friends, family and co-workers, sustaining your relationship should be the primary goal.