

A Guide for Civil Discourse

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Reading Time: ~ 11 mins.

The *national conversation* in America—the lively, noisy exchange of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and aspirations—is a crucial part of the way our Republic operates. This never-ending discourse shapes the way we think, the things we value, the things we do, the choices we make, and the people we choose as our leaders. The hallmark of a healthy democratic republic is a healthy national conversation where all voices are respected.

In recent years, especially with the advent of 24-hour television, instant news, and the inescapable influence of the internet and social media, ***our national conversation has become increasingly strident, adversarial, intolerant, extremist, and profane.***

One of the key purposes of this platform is to model and advocate a more respectful and thoughtful pattern of conversation that can help us discuss, analyze, and understand our issues and problems more clearly, see more interesting possibilities for solving them, and gain greater consensus for action.

What Can We Do?

Each of us can make a positive contribution to the national conversation by learning, adopting, and practicing *four key habits of expression*. Let's explore each of them.

1. Show Respect

Respect means treating the person you're conversing with as an equal, a legitimate peer, and not an adversary to be defeated. It's easy to be polite and considerate when we're talking with someone who agrees with us on almost all aspects of a question. But what do we do when we disagree significantly?

Let's think for a moment, about why we even participate in conversations to begin with. There seem to be four main motives that we humans have for conversing:

Motive 1: to pass the time. We make small talk with strangers in order to relieve social tension and "be nice." We don't try or expect to solve the world's problems.

Motive 2: to learn something or teach something. You might ask someone to explain some topic of interest, share their travel experience, or give an update on what's been going on in their family. You might explain or share something with them.

Motive 3: to learn together. We can share information, ideas, knowledge and points of view, so that all parties can enrich their perspectives and build a better understanding than they had before. And,

Motive 4: to show how smart we are. One, both, or all participants might be determined to preach their own "truth" to the others, implying that their truth must become the

truth for everyone. Typically, the others resent having someone else's truth shoved down their throats, they resist or push back, and that's the way arguments start. Sometimes it's the way wars start.

Arguing is the least effective way to learn.

It's also the least effective way to change someone's mind.

Students in high school and college learn to debate, which is a kind of non-contact sport in which the opponents perform in front of an audience, each hoping that, by using tricks and gimmicks of language, they'll "win" the contest. But how many of our schools teach students the skills of open-minded listening, insightful questioning, critical thinking, and consensus-building?

Win-lose confrontations often degenerate into lose-lose stand-offs, where nobody wins.

For many of our political office holders, a toxic style of combativeness and confrontation seems to have become the norm—the preferred method of persuasion. People we would like to look up to as thinkers, leaders, and people of principle often resort to the most dishonorable tactics to promote themselves and their agendas and discredit those they perceive as their enemies.

The political playbook advises: if you can't counter your opponent's ideas with your own; if you don't think you can sell your agenda on its merits; or if you don't really believe that your course of action would win out in the "marketplace of ideas," then don't attack the competing ideas—just discredit the person who's promoting them. The Latin expression for this is the *ad hominem* attack ("against the person").

Conversing respectfully takes a bit of self-confidence and a bit of courage. You can allow the other person to make their case, without interrupting them or shouting them down. You're not afraid to encounter new facts or evidence because you're not emotionally welded to your opinions. You can think like a scientist, always investigating, always learning, always keeping your opinions and conclusions open to revision. You're not afraid to admit there's something you didn't know, or even to change your views when you encounter new evidence.

You can converse respectfully even if the other person won't. You're in control of your side of the conversation; you don't have to shout them down. You don't have to acknowledge their *ad hominem* assaults or react to their sarcasm. You don't have to respond to aggression with aggression; just don't take the bait.

By staying calm, listening respectfully, and explaining your views clearly, without trading put-downs, you might even help them see things a bit differently.

2. Use "Clean" Language

Our words matter. The way we use our language matters.

The late US Senator S. I. Hayakawa, a respected scholar and former president of San Francisco State University, advised us,

"Words can start people marching in the streets—and they can stir others to stoning the marchers."

"Hitler is gone," he wrote, "but if the majority of our fellow citizens are more susceptible to the slogans of fear and race hatred than to those of peaceful accommodation and mutual

respect among human beings, our political liberties remain at the mercy of any eloquent and unscrupulous demagogue.” Δ

Please consider the following statements:

- “That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard.”
- “If you believe that, you must be really stupid.”
- “You’re wrong—you’re dead wrong.”
- “Either you’re with us or you’re against us.”
- “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.”
- “That’s just socialism.”
- “They’re a bunch of tax-and-spend liberals (corporate fat cats, ivory-tower intellectuals, etc.)”
- “They (political party) want to destroy our democracy.”
- “Person X hates America.”
- “Illegal aliens are ruining this country.”

What do these statements have in common? They’re all examples of rigid, intolerant, *dogmatic language patterns* that tend to alienate rather than affiliate. Extremist claims; gross generalizations; flat, take-it-or-leave-it declarations of “truth” that accept no alternatives; name-calling; accusing; sarcasm, applying mean-spirited labels to people and ideas; framing issues in terms of two-valued, either-or choices (a.k.a. *polarizing*); pushing absolutist value judgments; and throwing slogans around—all tend to discourage open-minded sharing of ideas and mutual learning.

Many people who prefer a respectful, civil experience of conversation tend to feel bullied and pressured by someone who likes to “dump their bucket” aggressively and without regard for the rights of others to have their own views.

Students and practitioners of *psycho-semantics*—the psychology of language—make a distinction between “clean” language and “dirty” language in human conversation. The statements we’ve just considered all qualify, by that distinction, as *dirty language*. Calling it dirty doesn’t mean that it’s profane or vulgar—just that it muddies up a conversation and works against mutual understanding and cooperation.

Clean language is a more neutral way of speaking and writing that invites others to open up, share ideas, and learn together. It acknowledges differences in viewpoints. It affirms each person’s sacred right to their own reality, their own world view, their own understanding of the way of life, and their right to think and believe as they do.

We can clean up our language habits by paying closer attention to what we say, and by diligently replacing the toxic forms and phrases with more neutral expressions.

The first step involves merely “owning our stuff.” We can flag our beliefs and opinions as our own, thereby inviting others to feel comfortable in sharing their own views. Qualifying phrases, such as “So far as I know . . .,” “To some extent . . .,” “In my experience . . .,” and “It seems to me . . .” consciously acknowledge that our “truth” is not the only truth. We signal to others that we don’t seek to impose our truth on them, and we invite them to feel comfortable in sharing their truth.

3. Practice and Promote Factuality: Respect for Facts and Evidence

The one habit of thinking and speaking that sets scientists apart from ordinary people is *respect for evidence*. Most of us could benefit significantly in our lives, our occupations, our relationships, and our roles as citizen-owners of the Republic by increasing our commitment to *factuality*.

Factuality means not saying more than you know.

How sure can we be of anything? What is a fact? In today's polluted information environment, what can we take to be true? What are the effects of bad information?

Think of the many terms we use in conversation that signal that our information can be uncertain, flawed, or "iffy." Accusations. Assumptions. Beliefs. Claims. Conclusions. Conjectures. Extrapolations. Falsehoods. Fiction. Guesses. Half-truths. Hearsay. Hypotheses. Inferences. Interpretations. Lies. Misrepresentations. Myths. Opinions. Presumptions. Projections. Rumors. Speculations. Stereotypes. Theories.

Adopting a personal policy of factuality means explicitly reminding ourselves and those we speak to that we don't know everything; that what we think we know might be wrong or out of date; that new facts and evidence could appear at any moment; and that we're ready and willing to update our knowledge.

Western cultures generally tend to value being "decisive," having firm opinions, and being "in the know," especially for males. For many people, changing one's mind is evidence of incompetence, lack of self-confidence, and even weakness of character. We're supposed to have thought through every important issue, have our opinions ready to go, and stand ready to defend them against competing viewpoints.

For the person who's learned to think scientifically, changing one's mind is a *skill of the highest order*. It requires a very special attitude— a habit of considering all information as temporary and subject to change or revision. It means keeping our beliefs and opinion "on probation" at all times.

Ironically, people who know a lot about an issue or a question can sometimes be the most narrow-minded about it. The Zen master Ryuku Suzuki spoke about the "beginner's mind," a way of thinking that's always open to new learning. He observed,

"The biggest obstacle to learning something is the belief that you already know it. The most important thing every expert needs to learn is how to think like a beginner."

4. Use the Secret "Magic Wand" of Persuasion: Questions

Please consider these two versions of the same statement:

Statement #1: "America needs a universal healthcare system."

Statement #2: "Does America need a universal healthcare system?"

The difference in the way these two statements land in the gray matter of the person hearing or reading them can be both subtle and profound. They draw the listener or the reader into the conversation in two very different ways.

In the first instance, the perceiving person is likely to feel a "sales pitch" coming on. They might tend to put up their defenses, or prepare to do so, expecting that the sender will want them to agree.

In the second instance, the perceiver is more likely to feel invited to co-think the issue with the sender and perhaps feel more like a partner in the inquiry. This brings to mind the Biblical reference, “Come now, and let us reason together.”

But suppose you encounter that ideological zealot, the person who carries around a whole package of beliefs, convictions, and dogma, which they like to inflict on anybody who will listen. You can listen politely to their diatribe, and at the occasional critical point, you can ask an innocent question: “Are you sure that’s true?” “Where does that information come from?” “Can you be more specific? In what way is capitalism ‘evil’?” Or, “How do you think that problem could be solved?”

A series of polite, carefully placed questions can slow down the rehearsed monologue, and as they see their ideological “package” begin to fall apart, they might tend to have second thoughts about some of their more extreme declarations. Or, they might decide that you’re no fun to talk to (or at), and abandon the conversation.

Another powerful method of subtle persuasion, also using questions, is the art of the “half-sell.” Most people prefer to have some ownership of the ideas they adopt, rather than feeling like they’ve had their conclusions forced upon them. Using the half-sell method, you frame the problem in preliminary terms, leaving out your own ideas about solving it, and you invite the other person to think about it with you. If you’ve framed it skillfully, they might already be heading toward the kind of solution you think would work well. You simply invite them to co-invent the rest of the solution. When you arrive at a solution you both agree with, they’re likely to feel a stronger sense of commitment to something they’ve created.

Admittedly, this method might seem a bit manipulative, but if you use it in good faith, not seeking to disadvantage anyone but to find good solutions, then you can probably come to peace with your own karmic algebra.

Recap

Let’s think about, apply, and constantly improve these four powerful strategies for achieving understanding, gaining cooperation, and finding consensus:

1. Show Respect;
2. Use “Clean” Language;
3. Practice and Promote Factuality; and
4. Persuade with Questions

Δ *Language in Thought and Action* (fifth edition). S.I. Hayakawa. New York: Harcourt, 1991.