

Ways of Wisdom for Civil Discourse

Over the years we've collected many "ways of wisdom" that can guide us during sensitive conversations. Here are a few of them for you to use. Please let us know if they work for you, and also, please share your ideas with us.

Model the way

Set the tone and standards for discussions by always showing and insisting on respect, and by guiding conversations away from negative rhetoric and toward meaningful understandings.

Stick to your principles

Do you exaggerate, spread rumors or backstab? Do you allow anger or fear take over your ability to be honest with others? Maybe it's time to review the principles we learned in kindergarten that remind us to tell the truth, be kind to others and always be respectful. This is what we expect of others, so let's start with ourselves.

Stop Spinning

"Spinning" facts has become all too common. Have you learned to accept the word of people who twist information to their advantage? Try limiting your exposure to information outlets that only support your current views of the world. Stop allowing the spin to become the facts. Remember, we're all entitled to our own opinions, but not our own facts.

Do your homework

We may not have read the latest bill being proposed in Congress or heard all the legal arguments about a case in the news. So, do your homework before you give an opinion. Research your concerns from a variety of sources and don't allow pundits and neighbors to sway you from the facts.

Allow for doubt

We can't always be right. We don't know all the information we need to totally understand issues. We may shape our opinions on bias or assumptions rather than facts. Allow yourself to be humble enough to know that we're all at times influenced more by our views of the world than the facts in front of us.

Empathize

There's a saying that, "we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behaviors." We forget that others have intentions as well, and that those intentions may be as important and meaningful as ours. Put yourself in the shoes of the other person and strive to understand their experience and how that experience influences their beliefs. It's one of the strongest ways to find common ground.

Drop the labels and focus on issues

Ralph Ellison once said, “When you label me, you negate me.” That’s how I feel when someone labels me. We can’t honestly hope to understand how others think if we’ve pigeon-holed them, nor can we have meaningful discussions if we look at one another as one-dimensional caricatures. When labels or loaded terms come into a discussion, ask for definitions. For example, “What is a liberal or a conservative in your mind?” More importantly, ask the other person to focus on specific issues they’d like to discuss.

Get specific

You can argue generalities forever with no fruitful outcome, so get specific. My friend made a comment about “tax and spend” politics. Rather than argue with such a broad and loaded term, I asked for an example, and she explained that her school district just mandates uniforms to be worn by students, and that the cost of the uniforms would be supported by local school taxes. We were then able to discuss the pros and cons of that decision and what could be done to either support or challenge it.

Search for common ground

Yes, there are differences in how many of us view the world and seek solutions to current problems. But there are also ways in which ideas, opinions and perspectives cross. Search for those commonalities as you discuss your differences. We can agree that we love our community, that our children need education, that we should have the best affordable health care. Shrink the gap between differences by connecting commonalities with our overall interests and goals.

Be more curious and less critical

We may get defensive when we are confronted with different points of view. Maybe the other person is coming on strong with aggressive language and putting your perspective down. Focus on the content of what the person is more than the way the person is speaking. Model how you would like the discussion to proceed. One way would be to try to rephrase what they’re saying in a more respectful way and ask open-ended questions about their point of view and how they reached it.

Acknowledge emotions

The biggest stumbling block during political or sensitive discussions is our emotions. Either party in the discussion can feel demeaned, belittled, or angry while talking to people who differ with us. Discussions can spiral downward pretty quickly if we don't acknowledge the impact of these emotions. So, acknowledge them and let the other person know that you can't hear them because you're feeling attacked, intimidated, or demeaned.

Be “in the moment” when listening

We all talk to ourselves. We constantly carry on conversations with ourselves as we’re waiting for others to finish talking. And much of the time we believe we already know where the other person is leading and we internally finish their sentences in our heads,

rather than listening. Be aware of your own internal conversations and stop them so that you can truly hear what the other person is saying.

Find people with opposing views to speak with

Most of us have friends, relatives or colleagues with opposing views from ours. Find those with whom you feel safe speaking with about your views and ask them to share theirs. This can be a way to practice having difficult discussions about politics, community issues, family problems and other concerns.

Thank the person for the discussion

Even if you had to “agree to disagree,” thank anyone willing to have a civil conversation with you about issues in which you differ. Thank them for their time, thoughts and, most importantly, dignity.