

FINDING WAYS TO CONNECT WHEN YOU DON'T SEE EYE-TO-EYE

Key Takeaways:

- Do not assume that a person's view on a political issue tells you everything about him or her.
- Find issues that you do agree on, and build on that common ground.
- Have face-to-face conversations, instead of online ones as much as possible.

Too often these days, discussions between people who disagree with each other seem to rapidly devolve into emotional, heated shouting matches...or their online equivalent. Discourse among strangers, neighbors, and even co-workers and family members gets bogged down by a polarized "us versus them" mentality that stops any possibility of acceptance, compromise and progress.

As a result, nothing substantive gets done (Exhibit A: the United States Congress), and society doesn't make important strides it could and should be achieving. At the individual level, more people feel disconnected from their own communities and suspicious of other people's motivation. Trust erodes, making it even easier for misinformation to spread unchecked.

What can be done to go beyond our differences and find that all-important common ground? For answers, we reached out to Gina M. Masullo, associate director for the Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin and author of *Online Incivility* and *Public Debate: Nasty Talk* and *The New Town Hall: Why We Engage Personally with Politicians*. Her research focuses on how the digital space both connects and divides people and how that influences society.



Five ways to engage meaningfully and productively

The good news is that researchers like Masullo and her team (as well as others) have identified concrete action steps we can take in our own lives that can help build bridges between us and people we disagree with... even deeply. When we're able to talk across these differences (political, social or otherwise), we can start to identify opportunities to work together more productively to address the concerns we do share, and actually move the needle on key issues of importance to us.

In particular, there are five steps that the research shows can help us talk across our differences in ways that can enable us to find agreement while still allowing us to maintain our strongly held beliefs and ideals.

1. Focus on the person, not the politics.
2. Find common ground.
3. Stick to the facts and avoid confrontation.
4. Be an advocate.
5. Pick your battles.

1) Focus on the person, not the politics.

The goal here is to look for the humanity in the people you disagree with so you can avoid the increasingly common mistake of assuming a person's view on one particular topic fully represents and reveals everything about him or her.

Perhaps the best way to make that happen is to work at building a relationship with another person before talking about politics or politically contentious issues. That can help create an affinity for (and broader understanding of) the person, which in turn may help tame the urge to draw big conclusions about that person when you learn he or she feels very differently than you about a controversial issue.

Focusing on people also can mean sharing stories - your own experiences or even hypothetical scenarios that are relevant to the discussion. Conversations that focus on people rather than policy or concepts can often create agreements or shifts in viewpoints. One participant in Masullo's study recalled using this approach to explain her support of government social services. "People should work. One, it gives you purpose in life. It gives you drive. It, it rewards you as a person. [It] feels valued and useful. ... What if, what if this tragedy happens to you, and you mentally cannot work or physically cannot work. But you have worked. You've worked 20 years, and you paid your taxes. Should you not be taken care of by your community in that situation?"

2) Find common ground.

The research indicates it can be much easier to talk about divisive topics if you first bond with people over less polarized issues. "The thing you connect about could be parenting, gardening, sports, you name it," says Masullo. "If you connect with someone in one area, do you later not hate or attack the person if you find out you disagree with him or her politically?"

One potentially powerful way to bridge-build is to find common ground on an issue of importance that is impacting your street or neighborhood. Two people with completely different views on abortion rights, for example, might share the exact same concerns regarding the amount of commercial property development in their community. If you're aligned there, when you learn later that you disagree on the abortion debate, maybe the earlier shared belief about your shared community will help you not attack each other. Says Masullo, "You might not become best friends, but your connection on one important issue can help you maintain respect for the person."

That said, you can also seek common ground on the divisive topic itself—which, while often challenging, can lead to more informed opinions and new ideas. Take the abortion issue again. An abortion-rights person and an anti-abortion person may very well find they agree on key issues in the debate, such as wanting fewer women to have abortions and seeking to ensure that all children are able to have their basic needs met by their parents. That common ground can help fuel further agreement and cooperation on issues related to children's and women's health or income inequality, even if you never see eye to eye on the abortion issue.

The key is being open to listening to and understanding others' viewpoints, then being willing to find parts you agree with and build from there (see the box below). Asking good questions plays a big role here, so you can draw out opinions as well as the reasons and stories behind them.

Empathy ≠ Agreement

Seeking to understand someone's views deeply, and empathizing with them, does not automatically mean you must agree with those views or diminish your own values. It merely means you're doing what you can to fully understand where the other person is coming from.

At that point, you can respond in what's called a high-person-centered way, acknowledging that you hear where the other person is coming from, and that you have a different take on the situation. "Once people feel acknowledged, especially about an issue they feel strongly about, they can become more receptive to another viewpoint," says Masullo.

3) Stick to the facts and avoid confrontation.

This could be the toughest step, given that we live in a time when verifiable facts and universal truths are often labeled as "fake news." However, fact-supported opinions and stories you share can help keep emotions from boiling over (yours and the other person's) and keep the talk grounded in reality.

Avoiding a confrontational tone can also foster greater openness to differing viewpoints. Rather than attacking the person, or even risking the appearance of an attack, express your opinion using "I think/I see" instead of "You're wrong." Example: "I understand where you're coming from, but I see it differently because of the research showing that ... "

Pro tip: If a discussion is heating up so much that it's going nowhere, know when to end it. Simply saying "I understand your point and need to think about it more" and moving on can do the trick.

4) Be an advocate.

The way you talk to people you disagree with should be different from the way you talk to people with whom you see eye to eye. If, for example, you know that certain terms or phrases will upset the other person and cause them to shut down, don't use them. You can still make your case and state your concerns, but by avoiding specific trigger words, you help the conversation move forward—potentially toward common ground, instead of making the other person dig in their heels and become intractable.

Another approach: Stick to discussions of specific policies and your thoughts on their likely impact, rather than framing a discussion in terms of a Democrat- or Republican-led initiative. Tying everything to a specific political party can quickly create a "tribal" situation where people see each other as "the other side" and "the enemy."

5) Pick your battles.

Here again, discussing (relatively) low-stakes, local community concerns and policies—bond initiatives or zoning ordinances, perhaps—versus the hottest hot-button national issues can be one way to create connections and find small areas of agreement to build on going forward.

But ultimately, there may be topics that people have such intense feelings about that it doesn't make sense to even attempt to address them or seek common ground. Often such topics center on specific political figures on the left or right side of the aisle. Not all conversations are worth having, so don't waste your time in those instances.

Broad concepts to guide you

Of course, implementing these action steps may be much easier said than done, which is why Masullo also offers some overarching guidelines to keep in mind when trying to follow these tips.

- **Expect to work at it.** The starting point for any of this is choosing to have a genuine willingness to connect and build bridges with others. But intention isn't adequate, says Masullo—you've got to practice the steps repeatedly, even when others around you get emotional or start to lash out.
- **Be ready to go slow.** One of your goals is to build relationships with others before deep-diving into political discussions. That takes some time in most cases—so understand that finding common ground and ways to cooperate is a long game that can, as Masullo says, "make for a better community and country and democracy."
- **Converse face-to-face (or at least Zoom-to-Zoom).** Research out of the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Chicago shows we attribute more humanlike qualities to people expressing opinions we disagree with when those opinions are spoken rather than written. Aspects of speech like intonation and pauses make people seem more intellectual and emotionally warm to listeners. In short, meet up for coffee instead of typing at each other online.

Conclusion

Finding ways to move beyond our different opinions and to stop automatically seeing people who disagree with us as “the enemy” seems harder to do than ever. And yet, if we take steps to find common ground, compromise, and work together in meaningful and productive ways to further shared interests, we can potentially boost the progress we make in all aspects of our lives.

It takes work, but that work might just reveal that we have more in common than we think. As author Michael Lewis notes, “When you push slightly below the surface politics of a given person, the people you think of as righties or as lefties, if they’re in a room doing something together, they aren’t as different in their values as it may seem.”



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VFO Inner Circle Special Report

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