

Are you struggling with how to engage in productive dialogue with others when you disagree on politics or other difficult topics? This handout provides some advice when engaging in these kinds of debates and dialogue.

**Start with a Good Intent:** A concept from Crucial Conversations focuses on the idea of good intent. Good intent means you are focused on finding the truth, learning, finding a win-win outcome, and have a desire to strengthen relationships and produce long-term, positive change. This can't happen if we begin a conversation with a desire to be right, look good, win the conversation, punish or blame the other person, or control the dialogue. Good conversations often create an uncomfortable space. The goal should not be avoiding conflict, but rather aligning each other and finding areas of commonality.

**Shame, Force, and Demands:** A central concept in the process of crucial conversations is to seek alignment and realize that agreement is not always possible. What this means is when we are in conflict with someone, and it is unlikely to resolve or find common ground, the focus of our conversation should become how we can share the same college or classroom space.

**What Doesn't Work:** Having some basic ground rules that are agreed upon for the conversation can be helpful to get out in front of conflict and better ensure a productive conversation. To this end, saying things like "I don't care," "Whatever," and "You wouldn't understand" create a deeper sense of division and should be avoided. Generalizations about different groups, exaggerations, and the use of 'always' and 'never' often lead to further divisions.

**What Does Work:** In contrast to the above, asking the other person open-ended questions and being curious about the other person's perspective can lead to a shared sense of interest and a reduction in conflict between the people involved. Using short, clear, and direct statements is a helpful way to engage with people.

Consider the following process when engaging in difficult conversations:

1. Before beginning the conversation, become unstuck from a singular point of view and only share stories that you have a sense of mastery and control over (for example, sharing something raw that immediately results in emotions taking over is not advisable).
2. Seek to create a "pool of shared meaning." This happens when we identify our meaning, understanding, and desires from a heartfelt, invested perspective. This needs to occur in a safe manner without demand, shame, force, or demands. Look and listen for their meaning in the scenario while identifying a shared sense of purpose and an exploration of each other's path and understanding.
3. This must be done in a safe place. Remember, "When people don't feel safe, they move out of dialogue and into silence and verbal violence."