

How to Have Supportive and Respectful Communication Among Friends, Classmates and Co-Workers

To cope with the current world situation, many people have a need to talk and voice their views – whether personal, political, emotional or intellectual. Discussions can create an opportunity for constructive dialogue, and even help prevent and resolve potential conflict. It’s important that we reach out to each other, to be able to talk with those around us. But discussions may be challenging because of the sensitivity of the issues. Given how deeply people can be affected, a conversation with co-workers, roommates or classmates can be anything from a wonderful learning experience to a very difficult debate. Here are some suggestions to help you have meaningful, yet supportive and respectful discussions.

Be aware of your communication style when speaking of difficult issues. Communication styles vary widely among individuals, cultures, and ethnicities. For some, these issues are subjects for dispassionate, intellectual discussion. For others, issues may be deeply felt—if you attack their ideas, this may make them feel as if they are being attacked personally. There may also be people who are not interested in discussing these topics at all.

Treat each person as an individual. A good place to begin discussions is to not make assumptions about where someone stands. Let individuals tell you their ideas.

The same words or symbols may mean different things to different people. Words such as “war,” “American,” “patriotism,” or “terrorism,” or symbols such as the American flag or the peace sign can evoke a variety of feelings and values. You may need to use specific language in expressing your thoughts and opinions and be aware that others may have reactions to words and symbols that you might not expect.

Silence means only that: silence. Silence does not mean agreement or disagreement. People have the right to be silent or to have other reactions that may not be comfortable for you. If you’re unsure about what someone’s silence means, ask for clarification. However, respect that a person may still choose to remain silent.

Feeling “judged” and feeling “respected” don't usually occur together. When people feel judged, they don't feel respected. If you act judgmentally, you may create a barrier between yourself and others. Also, use humor carefully—humorous jokes or remarks may be interpreted as disrespectful.

Consider these Principles of Genuine Dialogue

Suspension is a commitment to notice and temporarily suspend our own reactions, opinions, and assumptions. It is being aware of our thoughts, feelings, and judgments--e.g. “he’s naive,” “she’s a liberal”--and to put them aside.

Identifying assumptions, which are our beliefs and opinions about how the world works and what is true for us (e.g. “people over 50 don’t like to change” or “silence means people agree—or disagree--with me”).

Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy. *Inquiry* involves asking others what underlies their opinions and learning more about their views; *advocacy* is the act of sharing our own thoughts and feelings with others.

Reflection is the thoughtful contemplation in the search for meaning. It arises from SILENCE -- a time to allow the pieces to move around and suggest new patterns, meanings and relationships to emerge.

Be Gentle with yourself and with others. Gentleness includes respecting our differences. We each have our own unique history, memories, stresses, levels of support and ways of coping. Encourage people to slow down, to honor the differences that enable our own ideas to be genuinely considered.

Remember the Difference Between *Dialogue* and *Debate*. Debate has a role in our academic and political lives, but it is not the only framework for discussion. Here are some differences between debate and dialogue.

In *debate*, we emphasize differences in a win/lose fashion; increase separation, and distinguish agendas. Debate tends to be driven by individual interest and advocacy and exploits weaknesses. *Dialogue* seeks to identify underlying meaning and principles, builds community, and embraces differences while highlighting commonalities.

Consider the importance of organized discussions to address the many issues that arise during these challenging times. Such discussions offer a structured time for people to talk, especially if they're talking in the hallways anyway. If there is already conflict, or high risk for conflict, the meetings may not make things better, but they will rarely make things worse.

Have ground rules, and enforce them. Go over ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. Get verbal or non-verbal agreement from everyone (such as, people nodding "yes"). See if there are other ground rules people want to suggest. Post ground rules so everyone can see them. Here are some examples:

- *The discussion stays in the room.* What is shared in the room, stays in the room.
- *Listen respectfully.* Allow people to finish their thoughts, without interruption.
- *Speak from your own perspective.* Use "I" statements: "I think," "I feel," "I believe."

Agree to disagree. In any group we expect different opinions, and it's no different on this occasion.

We all need to keep working and studying together. What you say today may be remembered for a long time. Try to respect differences; you and others can agree to disagree or agree. And, we can have our discussions in ways that support all of us as respected, contributing members of the campus community.

For More Help

For further assistance and/or consultation, contact:

- **If you work with students**, Counseling Services for Students is available at 2-9494.
- **If you work with faculty and staff**, CARE Services for Faculty and Staff is available at 3-7754.

Also see:

How to Support Others During Difficult Times: Tools for Faculty, Managers, Supervisors, Residence Hall Directors, and Others in Leadership Roles, available at www.uhs.berkeley.edu.