

*How to Talk with People Who Disagree
(but aren't yet disagreeable)*

1. Don't talk. Listen. Nothing you say can gain confidence as much as your willingness to hear them out.
2. Don't talk. Question. Ask them to tell you more about the reasons behind their thinking. Look for shared values and concerns, even when a particular word (like "freedom" or "fairness" or "sustainable") doesn't mean the same thing.
3. Don't try to persuade people unless you're willing to be persuaded, not about deepest values, but about politics or policy or positions. Play the believing game and the doubting game. Try to believe each other as long as possible before you begin doubting. And don't look for conversion experiences. You're not likely to be converted to another position, so don't expect it of the conversation. You're planting seeds, not harvesting the crop.
4. Be personal (and personable). If you keep your comments in the area of your own perception and values, it's hard for others to disagree. Try "it seems to me that" Or "What I hear you saying is" Or "I wonder if we could agree that"
5. Agree to disagree. You can say, "I'm pro-life and you're pro-choice and neither of us seems likely to change. I wonder if we could both support measures that would reduce the number of abortions." Or "You are for market solutions to climate change, and I'm for public solutions. Is there a way we could imagine public policies that would make the market work better for the environment?"
6. Don't demonize. Don't call people "evildoers"—it's seldom a persuasive argument. Don't tell people that they're either for us or against us. It makes it too easy to be against us. And as much as possible, avoid dichotomies—they usually provide the kind of clarity that's not productive in a conversation. Robert Benchley once said that there are two kinds of people—those who think there are two kinds of people, and those who don't. Try to be one of the latter.
7. Agree to agree. Try to expand the area of the "we." Sometimes we get so caught up in an argument that we don't notice when we might agree. When I asked one of my classes why they didn't talk about their deepest values, they said it was because they didn't want people to make fun of them. But when I asked them all their deepest values, they were remarkably similar. So you can risk talking about things that really matter, if only because they likely matter to other people too.
8. Don't frighten people off with too much information. Information is a tool, not an end in itself. So use it sparingly. But use facts when other people have misused them. People are entitled to their own opinions ("I don't think global warming is happening"), but not their own facts (concentrations of carbon dioxide, average global temperatures, etc.)

9. Tell stories. Use analogies. It's hard to reason people out of things they haven't been reasoned into. But stories are more subtle, and more open-ended. As Daniel Quinn says, "You can't just stop being in a story, you have to have another story to be in." In the same way, analogies allow us to introduce the new in terms of the old, and the abstract in terms of the particular. It's easy enough to talk about the logic of the precautionary principle as a response to global weirding, but more persuasive perhaps to show how we practice precaution in our lives already—in following the rules of the road, in listening to the weather report, in purchasing insurance, etc..

10. Be particular. Put a face on issues. People like to talk about people—that's what gossip is, and there's a lot of it—but we don't get as excited about abstractions or statistics. Victor Sidel once said that vital statistics aren't really vital until you can feel the people cry. Thirty thousand children die of hunger every day. Who cares? Most of us don't think we can care for thirty thousand kids. But maybe we could help this one.

11. Laugh—preferably at yourself. If you can't laugh, smile. Humans are the only species to do humor professionally, and humor often (not always) relieves tension, relaxes people, builds community, and—in the right hands—operates as a subversive tool. Humor shows a sense of perspective, and shows that you're not taking yourself too seriously.

12. Fail gracefully. Change is really hard for most people, so you're not likely to change another person's convictions. It's hard enough to change our own minds, and even harder to change someone else's. On the other hand, if you do this well, you will have:

- modeled civic engagement and civil discourse
- put a face on ideas and assumptions that weren't entirely known to the other person
- reduced the polarization of politics
- engaged somebody else in an important part of political culture, conversation
- clarified your own opinions by being able to express them
- practiced empathy as a way of learning, AND
- opened the door to further conversations and persuasion.