How to Talk to A Difficult Conservative

A Guide for Liberals

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How It Begins

Difficult Situations

Have you ever been in any of the following situations:

- **At a Party:** You're at a party and Don, a friend of the host, who you know casually, comes up to you and starts berating you about Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and how her Green New Deal is laughably wrong and would bankrupt the country if it had any chance of passing, which it doesn't!
- **At a Family Gathering:** Maybe it's Thanksgiving, maybe it's Christmas, maybe it's a summer barbecue. Your favorite aunt, Aunt Ellen, complains about the Mueller witch hunt and all of the "fake news" around President Trump.
- **On Facebook**: A friend from college comments on a report that the NFL settled with Colin Kaepernick, saying "they shouldn't have paid him a dime – those ungrateful players should leave the country if they don't like it."

OK, these may be extreme examples (or maybe not), but we do live in difficult times. We may live in the most politically divided time since the 1850s. Conversations across the political divide have become treacherous, with many people avoiding them or regretting them afterwards.

So how do you navigate these difficult situations while staying true to your principles? How do you seek ways to clarify differences and search for common ground without igniting open hostilities?

In this guide, you'll learn skills for communicating effectively with conservative friends, coworkers and loved ones who disagree with you and have strong feelings about Trump and the Republican Party. You'll learn how to avoid the escalation trap when talking about President Trump and his policies.

And you'll get acquainted with the Better Angels movement to depolarize America.

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Hidden Tribes

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Hidden Tribes

It's Not as Bad as You Think

Perhaps the most interesting examination of America's polarized landscape in recent memory is a study called Hidden Tribes published in 2018 by the More In Common Initiative. Their research went beyond the media narrative of two competing tribes, Reds (conservative in philosophy, tending to vote for Republicans) and Blues (liberal or progressive in philosophy, tending to vote for Democrats) to reveal seven groups, defined by their core beliefs, rather than by their political opinions, race, class or gender.

Perhaps more importantly, they found that the overwhelming majority of Americans (86%) are not at the extremes, and that this unheard majority want Americans to come together and solve our countries pressing issues.

> *In talking to everyday Americans, we have found a large segment of the population whose voices are rarely heard above the shouts of the partisan tribes. These are people who believe that Americans have more in common than that which divides them. While they differ on important issues, they feel exhausted by the division in the United States. They believe that compromise is necessary in politics, as in other parts of life, and want to see the country come together and solve its problems.*

From Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape, 2018

As you encounter those "difficult conservatives", stop to consider that they may not be part of the partisan extreme. They are all fellow Americans, and they want many of the same things that liberals and progressives want: good jobs, a bright future for their family, good healthcare, security.

Most people in a friend- or family-relationship have some common values and concerns that can be unearthed in a proper conversation. Use the political conversation for good. Try to learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you politically.

You can also achieve a sense of satisfaction about how well you conveyed your own perspective, feelings, and experiences. Best of all, when done properly you will discover some common ground with your political opposites if it's there.

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Four Do's, Four Don'ts

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Four Do's, Four Don't's

Some Simple Rules to Follow

Political discussions between people who hold different political philosophies or different core beliefs can be very difficult. They are even more difficult in the context of a group. Over Thanksgiving dinner, for example, words can escalate and feelings can be hurt by out of control political arguments.

Group conversations are like water: they run downhill—at the speed of the most argumentative or agitated member. If you can, have these conversations one on one – preferably with someone who you've built trust with over time.

	Four Do's
1	**Try to understand the other's viewpoint before responding with yours** ("I think you're saying that…. Am I getting that right?" "What else do you think about it?")
2	**Use I statements** ("this is how I see it") rather than truth statements (this is how it is!"). Share your perspective rather than making pronouncements.
3	**Find something in common if at all possible** ("I agree with you that…." "We both want to fix this problem." Leading with what you agree on softens the other person.
4	**Acknowledge and then respond**. Go back and forth between acknowledging what the other person has said ("I get it that you think ….") and making your points ("My own view is that…."). This avoids talking over each other and encourages the other person to not just keep repeating a point that you already taken in.

Four Don'ts

1 **Raise your voice and get agitated.** It takes two to escalate.

2 **Ask gotcha questions** ("Do you actually believe that…?") These are attacks rather than real questions.

3 **Assign negative motives to the other side** ("Republicans just want to help businesses pollute the environment for profit.") This leads to defensiveness and counterattack because no one is a villain in their own story.

4 **Throw out labels like "racist" or "wingnut."** This shuts down or inflames the other person. You can usually make your point without the label.

Here's the general rule: Respect the worth and dignity of the person you're talking with even if you are dumbfounded or appalled by the views they express.

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The Six Skill Sets

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The Six Skill Sets

Taking It To the Next Level

The Four Do's and Four Don'ts are a shortcut, 8 helpful things to remember as you have a difficult conversation with someone whose political views are very different from your own.

To take it to the next level, you have to master six skill sets:

The Six Skill Sets	
1	Set a constructive tone
2	Use a helpful communication style
3	Listen in a way that the other person feels heard
4	Speak in a way that helps the other person hear you
5	Handling difficult moments
6	Finding Common Ground

BEFORE YOU START

Goals for these Conversations

- You share your views in a way that makes it more likely that liberals in your social world will understand you—and not attack or dismiss you
- You learn more about the perspectives and experiences of liberals in your social world
- You discover some common ground, if it's there

Expectations to Abandon

- That you can persuade the other person to change core attitudes and beliefs
- That facts will be agreed on and logic followed consistently
- That your conversation partner will match your openness

Cautions

- Timing is key. Start at a calm moment and not after someone has fired off a verbal shot or is in mid-rant
- Only try this with someone you think might want to hear your point of view
- Practice one-to-one first; group conversations are harder
- Not intended for use online! Online conversations are a different "animal", potentially much harder than even group conversations in person

SKILL 1: SET A CONSTRUCTIVE TONE

1. Let the other person know that you want to understand other perspectives better.
   "I'm finding myself curious these days about the views of people who are different from the people I tend to hang out with."

2. Ask permission to pose questions.
   "Can I ask you something about politics and your views on something?"

   Or, to an out-of-town relative:
   "Can I ask you what people in your part of the country are saying about what's going on in Washington these days?"

3. Acknowledge your political stance
   "As you probably know, I'm a progressive Democrat, so that's the perspective I come from."

4. Offer something critical of your own side and credit something positive about the other side.
   "I think liberals sometimes come across like they don't care about individual responsibility. Conservatives have done a better job emphasizing that."

SKILL 2: USE A HELPFUL COMMUNICATION STYLE

Avoid communication styles that make it hard for Reds to hear you

1. Avoid firmly declaring things to be true or false. ("Trump has been a complete disaster for the country.") Instead:

•   Assume the person is reasonably intelligent and knowledgeable and wants a back-and-forth conversation instead of proclamations.
•   Be aware that even if the other person has some blind spots, so do you.
•   Speak with a tone that acknowledges that rational people can disagree with you. *("I realize you may see this differently. From where I sit….")*

2. Avoid deflecting criticism of your side by saying that the other side has done the same thing without being criticized. *("What about when Colin Powell used private email? Nobody objected because it was Colin Powell.")* Instead:

•   Be willing to accept criticism of your own side when appropriate, even if the other side has done the same thing. Two wrongs don't make a right.
•   Accept the reality that most people are more forgiving of their own side and more critical of the other side for the same actions.
•   Be cautious about framing every inconsistency as hypocrisy, unless you are willing to do the same with your own side.

SKILL 3: LISTEN IN A WAY THAT THE OTHER PERSON FEELS HEARD

1. **Paraphrase.** Make sure you understand and the other person feels heard. Listen for a "Yes, that's what I'm saying", but be ready to be corrected instead.

    "So for you, Trump is shaking things up that need shaking up" or
    "You're saying that the Iran Nuclear Treaty didn't have enough protections against cheating by the Iranians"

DO NOT suggest any implications beyond their statement or offer your critique of what they have said, with comments like: *"You're suggesting that we stop anyone who looks Hispanic and if they don't have their citizenship papers on them we deport them?"*

2. **Ask real and honest questions of understanding, not loaded "gotcha" questions.** (This is harder to do than you might think!)

    "How has Trump shaken things up in ways that you think have been good for the country?"
    NOT *"Are you happy with Trump's lack of self-control and narcissism?"*

It can be helpful to ask how the other person came to their view on an issue, especially if it's strongly held. Stories are important: they humanize us.

"I'm interested in how you came to your strong views on the role of government."

Then acknowledge the experiences behind the person's views.

3. Listen for underlying personal values and aspirations, and acknowledging them.
    "I get that for you, obeying the law and waiting your turn is a big deal when it comes to immigration." or
    "You want to make sure that people with strongly held religious beliefs aren't forced into doing things against their beliefs in the name of anti-discrimination."

4. Listen for underlying core conservative values and beliefs, and acknowledge them.

This can give you a context for views the person has on specific policies or political leaders. For example:

- Personal responsibility
- Limited government
- Free markets
- Limited regulations
- Strong national defense
- Traditional American values
- Strong communities
- The rule of law
- Patriotic
- Freedom for people to pursue their own goals

Note that these values and beliefs vary between traditional conservatives, Libertarians and Trump populists.

Skill 4: Speak in a way that helps the other person hear you

1. **Use "I" statements** ("This is how I see it") more often than truth statements ("This is how it is").

    "I think that Trump doesn't have the discipline or the temperament to make a good President," rather than

    "Trump is a liar and a narcissist and is the worst President ever."

If you are offering a factual statement, you can still use I-statements by acknowledging that are you relying on sources.

"I think we need to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, and from what I've been reading, the cost of renewable energy sources has come down to the point that they are in many cases competitive with fossil fuels."

2. **Use "I'm concerned/worried/troubled" expressions** rather than definitive "This is what will happen" when referring to the future.

    "I'm worried that if we don't do something about global warming, our children and grandchildren are going to pay the consequences" and not

    "If we don't do something about global warming today, South Florida is going to be under water by 2060."

3. **Mention an area of similarity or agreement** on a value or policy (if you see one).

   "It sounds like we both want everyone to have good health care and feel the health care system needs a lot of fixing" or
   "I think we agree that gerrymandering is adding fuel to the polarization we're seeing these days."

4. Before expressing disagreement, **say some version of *"I hear you."***
   (acknowledgement)

   "I hear you that you think that the federal government will do a really bad job running something as complicated as health-care. [INTENTIONAL PAUSE] From my point of view, the current system costs twice as much as any other industrialized country and doesn't produce good outcomes, never mind covering everyone. Medicare for all or something similar isn't about who runs health-care, but about who pays for it."

Going back and forth between acknowledging the other's feelings or viewpoint and then stating your own is more effective than just restating your position. It's like a dance: two steps one way, one step back, and repeat. Aim for "yes, and" rather than "yes, but". (I hear you, and here's what I think about this.)

Note: An intentional pause allows for a transition from acknowledging the other's viewpoint to your own. It also gives the other person a chance to acknowledge verbally or non-verbally that you got it right.

5. **Counteract common stereotypes Reds have of Blues**, to allow the other person to see you as an individual and not as a member of a stereotyped group.

From Better Angels red/blue workshops across the nation, here are some stereotypes that Blues believe Reds have of Blues: arrogant/elitist, big government for its own sake, not concerned about dependency on government programs, not patriotic, anti-business, anti-religion, stifling speech they don't like, "snowflakes" (too sensitive)

For comparison, here are the stereotypes that Reds think others have of them: racist, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, heartless (unconcerned about the poor and needy), anti-science, Bible thumpers. .

Here are some ways you might want to counteract unfair stereotypes the other person may have of you:

Proactively affirm values and beliefs the other person may not know you have, such as the importance of individual responsibility, a balanced budget, or your support for capitalism with appropriate protections. In other words, expand beyond traditionally Blue issues such as fairness, government solutions to poverty through social safety net programs and higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy to reduce inequality—assuming that those other values and beliefs are true for you as well.

Acknowledge the kernels of truth in some of the stereotypes: what bothers you about the views, actions, or inconsistencies of some people on your side. ("Some leaders on my side are quick to assign blame as evidenced by the Jussie Smollet case" or "I am a big supporter of capitalism, and sometimes I wonder if my party is so focused on the abuses of a few bad apples that we malign all large corporations.")

If you sense that the other person assumes you oppose President Trump on everything and support everything done by the Democratic party, offer your own thoughts about what Trump tapped into that Hillary Clinton and other Democrats missed (even if overall you don't support or like him).

6. **Be aware of Blue "colorized" language**, acknowledging when some terms are contested by Reds, and being aware when you are reactive to Red terms. Sometimes it's helpful to use alternative language to convey your meaning.

- Blue terms: diversity, inclusiveness, social justice, safe spaces, privilege, marginalized, institutional racism, white supremacy

- Red terms: American greatness, love of country, personal responsibility, fiscal responsibility, religious liberty, big government programs, self-sufficiency, dependency

7. **I**f you feel very strongly about an issue, **say something about what life experiences** have led to you to be passionate about it. **Stories humanize issues** and make passionate political people come across as human beings who care.

   "I've worked in health care my whole career, and I've seen things that have disturbed me a lot…."

8. **Soften flat-out disagreements by signaling first that your perspective is very different**.*("It probably won't surprise you that I see this completely differently.")*

Or if you get really emotional on a topic, signal that as well: *"This one is very close to home for me, and I have very strong feelings about it"*.

SKILL 5: HANDLING DIFFICULT MOMENTS

1. **Stay focused on a topic** when the other person jumps around from issue to issue.

    "Can we stay with immigration for now?"

2. **Don't answer baiting questions;** instead, just restating your viewpoint on the topic.

    When asked "Do you think we should just have open borders and let anyone into the country?" you might respond, "Overall, I think immigrants have been good for this country and we need comprehensive immigration reform as well as a well-thought out policy on asylum seekers".

3. **Don't return provocative statements in kind.**

    When someone blurts out "Hillary was totally corrupt and the FBI investigation into her emails was a total whitewash. She should be locked up" instead of saying "She's a saint compared to Trump's record of corruption", you might respond "The Founders set up a system of checks and balances and we have to give the system a chance to work."

4. **Instead of beating entrenched differences into the ground, agree to disagree.**

    "We both have strong feelings about this, and I don't think we're going to convince each other at the moment."

5. **If the other person is upset and no longer listening, exit the conversation in a low-key way.**

    Examples could range from humor: *"Well, we sure figured that one out!"*

    ...to showing concern: *"I don't want to keep going and end up with bad feelings between us,"*

    Or simply exit stage left: *"Gotta go. To be continued."*

SKILL 6: FINDING COMMON GROUND

Discovering common ground has two component parts – one positive and one negative. The positive component is finding agreement with your partner's point-of-view – common values and concerns that can be unearthed.

You should capitalize on every opportunity to highlight an area of similarity or agreement when you hear one. Often, these are broad issues, philosophical concepts, or generalities. Examples, that could be stated by either persuasion, include:

> *"It sounds like we both agree that the health care system needs a lot of fixing."*

> *"Seems like both of us see the media as dividing us more than informing us right now."*

> *"I think we agree that gerrymandering is adding fuel to the polarization we're seeing these days."*

> *"I think we agree that money has had a corrosive effect on American politics and has made politicians less responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens."*

Note that these statements lack specifics and judgements. Be careful about trying to solve these issues or define them more specifically – it can destroy the agreement you have reached with your partner.

Another technique to finding common ground is to offer something critical of your own side and crediting something positive about the other side.

A liberal might say, *"I think that liberals sometimes come across as overly judgmental; I think that we could do a better job of listening and not being as quick to judge."*

The negative side of finding agreement is softening flat-out disagreements and, as much as possible, trying to defuse tense situations. Before expressing a disagreement, say some version of "I hear you."

A liberal might say, *"I hear you that you think that free markets and competition will result in the best outcomes . . . . From my point of view, health care is different. Not only do people not have the tools to compare price and quality of healthcare compared to other purchases, but no one who learns they or their loved one has a critical disease starts thinking about what is the most cost-effective solution."*

Going back and forth between acknowledging the other's feelings or viewpoints and then stating your own is more effective than simply restating your position. It's like a dance: two steps one way, one step back, and repeat. Aim for *"yes, and" rather than "yes, but"* -- I hear you, and here's what I think about this.

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Talking With Trump Supporters

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Talking With Trump Supporters

A Guide for Blues

Mindset
- Assume that the other person wants good things for the country.
- Don't regard the other person as a political opponent—it's just someone you know.
- Be prepared to stay emotionally calm, even if the other person is not, and use your Better Angels skills.
- Choose the moment—don't let the moment choose you.

Listen and Adapt to Different Kinds of Trump Supporters

1. **Love Him.** Trump speaks to them. He's not afraid to be politically incorrect and he speaks to what they think is wrong with this country

Conversational strategy:

Maintain your dignity without counter-attacking or emotionally defending yourself.

Abandon any thought of influencing the other person's views.

Acknowledge
- The strength of the other person's views and feelings (*"I hear you: you think he paid attention to people who had been ignored and that he speaks his mind."*)
- That others feel the same way (*"I know that a lot of people agree with you. He speaks to them."*)

Briefly and calmly give your viewpoint on Trump. If you have anything positive to say about him or his Presidency, mention this along with the negatives.

If the other person counters and escalates (*"You Democrats are just out to destroy the man through Fake News and your ridiculous witch hunts"*), move towards a graceful exit rather than get into a fruitless argument with someone who is agitated. *"It looks like we see Trump very differently, and I don't think we're going to convince each other to change."*

Let the other person get in one more shot, and repeat your exit line. Do not continue the conversation (*"Let's move on, okay?"*)

May Not like his tweeting and some of his personal characteristics, but support his policies. Voted for him and his policies. Would rather that he didn't tweet so much, but think his opponents are reacting totally irrationally

Conversational strategy:

Try to show that a rational person can disagree with Trump as President, both on issues of style and substance

Don't try to change the other person's central attitude towards Trump

Start with one core reason why you think Trump has been a bad President and see if the other person is willing to listen. *("The constant turnover in his administration (Jim Mattis, for example) and his impetuous decision making on foreign policy (Syria withdrawal, for example) have been bad for the country.")*

Make sure you share any positives you can say about Trump.

When the other person counters, first acknowledge their view before elaborating on your own position. *("I understand that you think he's trying to take us out of some foreign entanglements and put America first. My own view is….)*

If the other person is staying reasonably calm rather than escalating, offer another reason why you disagree with Trump. Repeat the above process of acknowledging and elaborating. Stay calm throughout.

Look for any common ground that has emerged.

If the other person escalates *("I can't understand why you aren't willing to give him a chance")*, then move to gracefully exit. *"It looks like we see Trump very differently, and I don't think we're going to convince each other to change."*

Let the other person get in one more shot, and repeat your exit line. Do not continue the conversation *("Let's move on, okay?")*

If the other person refrained from attacking you and you reframing from counter-attacking and being defensive, you could end by expressing appreciation for the fact that you had a real conversation instead of what usually goes on in our country.

3. **Never Trumper.** Didn't vote for Trump, but couldn't bring themselves to vote for Hillary Clinton either. Supportive of many but not all Trump policies.

Conversational strategy:

Use the standard Better Angels listening and speaking skills.

Whenever you see common ground, express it. *("Sounds like we agree that the top corporate tax rate needed to be reduced. Can we talk about how it could have been done in such a way that didn't contribute as much as it did to the deficit?")*

When after several exchanges you say that you and the other are 180 degrees different, say that non-judgmentally rather than arguing the point. *("It looks like we see the Russian collusion thing completely differently. We'll see how it plays out.")*

Express appreciation for a constructive conversation if that's what you've had. *"We need more of that in this country."*

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Conclusion

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Conclusion

Parting Thoughts

As you engage in this process, we do want to offer some words of caution:

- You cannot expect to persuade someone to change their core attitudes and beliefs. Your best hope should be to reach mutual understanding.

- You should not expect that "facts" will be agreed on and that logic will be followed consistently in the course of conversation.

- Each participant in the conversation needs to save face. You must ensure that no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving, or bigoted.

Preserving the relationship you have with this "difficult" person should be a primary goal for your conversations. In a polarized world, these key relationships become ever more important to your sanity and well-being.

Having respectful conversations and depolarizing ourselves is but the first step.

Better Angels is a national citizens' movement to reduce political polarization in the United States by bringing progressives and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes, forming red/blue community alliances, teaching practical skills for communicating across political differences, and making a strong public argument for depolarization.

We conduct workshops that successfully help polar opposite Americans build trust and better understand each other. Our signature "Red/Blue Workshop" brings together equal numbers of conservative-leaning and progressive-leaning participants for moderated activities and discussions that clarify disagreements, reduce stereotyped thinking, and begin building the relationships needed to find common ground.

Our "Skills Workshop" teaches practical skills for having better conversations with friends and family members with whom you have strong political disagreements.

To learn more about Better Angels, watch the short video [below](#) to learn more or visit www.better-angels.org.

[Better Angels State of the Union Jan 31, 2019](#)

Get Involved

Want to learn more? Or perhaps skeptical that you really can have a good conversation with liberals?

Come join us at one of our events near you. If there isn't an event near you, consider joining Better Angels and organizing an event. We can help you find like-minded liberals and conservatives to sponsor an event, as well as provide detailed instructions and training on how to hold an event.

Find an Event

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