



HOW TO HAVE PEACEFUL TALKS

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The world is falling apart; we are seemingly on the brink of self-destruction. However, for the last three weeks, I have been virtually sequestered, caring for my 94-year-old Mom in a precious post-surgical bubble. Mom and I get along wonderfully well (it really is a wonder), and the time flew by with our attention diverted from current events.

You might question me for not staying abreast of the international news, but I probably would become defensive and argue how “responsible” and morally “right” I was to focus my time on my Mom. That conversation would be over before it even began.

Most people try to avoid the stress of “difficult” conversations with “difficult” people. Agreement on processes and guidelines conducive to conversation is an absolute prerequisite to safe discourse on highly sensitive issues. The mediator is the conductor of this delicate symphony.

Conducting and facilitating conversations brimming with hot-button issues, especially those impacting core values, is risky. The consequences of a failed process can be explosive.

That is why in some cases, we need third parties to implement the system and environment in which negotiations, conversations, and debate can proceed. The neutral can craft and safeguard the communications system, which must take into consideration many different signals, such as conflicting cultural signals.

Here is an example of how I successfully put the brakes on a potentially damaging debate:

I was at a meeting, and a colleague and friend stated that he is passionately opposed to vaccines and government-mandated vaccination programs. My friend, whom I like and respect, became very agitated and appeared to be preparing for a fight.

He was very disturbed that so many people were “shooting themselves up” and the government was hiding research proving the Covid vaccines were unsafe and ineffective. My friend said that he has read so much more of the primary medical resources than most, so he was more qualified to inform others and convince them to change their minds.

I did not share my views; it wasn't the right time. I was beginning to feel bullied and insulted because his **words and tone** implied that (1) his statements were fact, not opinion, (2) his opinion was more valid than any others', (3) his knowledge and information sources were superior, (4) it was appropriate to demean others who disagreed with him by describing taking a vaccine as “shooting themselves up” and (5) others who may approve of the government's actions don't know what they're talking about.

People feeling bullied and insulted likely would not stick around to have a conversation about the possible merit of my friend's views.



I told him that we could not have a conversation on the topic because his **words and tone** felt dismissive, demeaning, and offensive. I would never listen to or consider the validity of any of his views if he continued what I perceived as a rant. Fortunately, my friend wisely listened.

The solution: I told my friend that we had to have a conversation about **how** we would have a conversation about this hot-button issue. Coming to an agreement on the ground rules for the conversation held a great deal of appeal to him. I successfully conveyed my desire to learn about his opinions, and expressed an assumption that he would keep working to spread his gospel. He recognized this as a priceless opportunity to be heard, and possibly to influence others' thinking. Ground rules should include civility, respect, curiosity, patience, no interruptions, and mutual goals of learning and understanding. There are countless other effective ground rules.

This concept is very simple. If you want to influence others' opinions, don't start by insulting them. That is a certain and straight path to escalation of conflict, fear, and violence.

You *can* wisely discuss, negotiate, or debate differing views, even those that involve differing core values such as identity, religion, policy, or politics. Start with respect and curiosity. Listen to understand. That approach is far more likely to generate helpful exchanges of information and opinions than introducing a subject with what feels like a verbal or even physical attack.