



**Public
Conversations
Project**

Reaching Out Across the Red-Blue Divide, One Person at a Time

What this guide offers

This guide offers a step-by-step approach to inviting one other person—someone whose perspectives differ from your own—into a conversation in which

- you both agree to set aside the desire to persuade the other and instead focus on developing a better understanding of each other's perspectives, and the hopes, fears and values that underlie those perspectives;
- you both agree to pursue understanding and to avoid the pattern of attack and defend;
- you both choose to address questions designed to open up new possibilities for moving beyond stale stereotypes and limiting assumptions.

Why bother to reach across the divide?

Many people have at least one important relationship that has been frayed by painful conversations about political differences or constrained due to fear of divisiveness. What alternatives are there? You can let media pundits and campaign strategists tell you that polarization is inevitable and hopeless. Or you can consider taking a collaborative journey with someone who is important to you, neither paralyzed with fear of the rough waters, nor unprepared for predictable strong currents. You and your conversational partner will be best prepared if you bring 1) shared hopes for the experience, 2) the intention to work as a team, and 3) a good map that has guided others on similar journeys. We hope this guide will help prepare you to speak about your passions and concerns in ways that can be heard, and to hear others' concerns and passions with new empathy and understanding—even if you continue to disagree.

Are you ready?

Are you emotionally ready to resist the strong pull toward polarization? What's at the heart of your desire to reach out to the person you have in mind? Is pursuing mutual understanding enough, or are you likely to feel satisfied only if you can persuade them to concede certain points? What do you know about yourself and the contexts in which you are able—or not so able—to listen without interrupting and to speak with care? Are you open to the possibility—and could you gracefully accept—that the other person might decline your invitation?

Are the conditions right?

Do you have a conversational partner in mind who you believe will make the same kind of effort you are prepared to make? Is there something about your relationship that will motivate both of you to approach the conversation with a positive spirit? Will you have a chance to propose a dialogue in ways that don't rush or pressure the other person? Will you be able to invite him or her to thoughtfully consider not only the invitation but the specific ideas offered here—ideas that you might together modify? Can you find a time to talk that is private and free from distraction?

If you decide to go forward, take it one step at a time.

Extend the invitation with clarity about its purpose and a spirit of collaboration. If the invitation is declined, accept that response and talk to someone else.

Example—“I've been talking to people who share my general perspective about what's happening politically. I've hesitated to talk across the red-blue divide for fear of having a fruitless and divisive battle. Would you be willing to have a conversation with me, setting aside any impulse to persuade, instead focusing on better understanding each other and being understood for what we believe?”

[Pause for a response, continuing if appropriate.]

“I have a conversational roadmap, some questions, and also some suggested agreements. Would you be willing to look at them, and if you're interested, we can figure out together how to proceed?”

[If you decide to move forward...]

Make some communication agreements.

Example—“I hope we can bring our best selves to what could be a hard conversation. Can we agree to

- *share speaking and listening time*, not interrupting each other and limiting ourselves to a preset amount of time (e.g., 4 minutes) for the opening questions?
- *speak for ourselves* from our personal experience, not trying to represent or defend an entire political party or ideological approach?

- *maintain the spirit of dialogue* by avoiding a critical or dismissive tone, aiming simply to understand (not to persuade)?”

Select some opening questions and take turns responding to them.

Example—“Here are some suggested questions for opening the dialogue (see back page). The suggested format is to

- *read each question set*
- *take a couple minutes to reflect* on how we want to respond, then...
- Each of us can *take a specified amount of time* (e.g., up to 3 or 4 minutes) for each set of questions. If one of us forgets about time, we can signal that person to wrap up. During this very structured part of the dialogue, we can jot notes to remember what we want to explore or ask about later in our conversation.”

Open the conversation to each other’s questions and deeper exploration.

Example—“This is a less structured time, but it’s still important to maintain agreements that we made. This is our chance to

- *ask each other questions*—not rhetorical questions—that reflect genuine curiosity about each other’s experiences and perspectives;
- *pursue topics* that will help us further reflect on our own views, learn about each other’s views, unpack the meanings we associate with certain terms, and, perhaps, identify common concerns and values.

First, let’s see if we have questions for each other.”

[If there are time constraints, agree to save a preset amount of time, perhaps 10 minutes, to close the conversation.]

Reflect on and close the conversation.

Example—“This is a time to say something about what this conversation was like and what we did or did not do that contributed in a positive way. We also can exchange parting words—perhaps words of appreciation, expressions of hope, or ideas about next steps.”

Use questions that truly open the conversation and avoid narrow debate.

Some suggestions appear below. These questions are best used in the order presented here. Each question set involves one person speaking without interruption and the other listening, then the other answering the same questions, also without interruption. Take a couple minutes to reflect silently before answering questions. This is important! Thinking before speaking is a good idea, especially if you want to avoid the somewhat habitual and reactive exchanges common in polarized discussions.

Some suggested opening questions:

First question set—your hopes for the dialogue and your underlying values:

- What hopes and concerns do you bring to this conversation?
- What values do you hold that lead you to want to reach across the red-blue divide?
- Where or how did you learn those values?

Second question set—sharing what's at the heart of your perspective:

- What is at the heart of your political leanings (e.g., what concerns or values underlie them) and what would you be willing to share about your life experiences that might convey what those things mean to you?

Third question set—reflecting upon complexities in your views:

- Within your general perspective on the issue(s), do you experience any dilemmas or mixed feelings, or are there gray areas in your thinking?
- In what ways have you felt out of step with the party or advocacy groups you generally support, or in what ways do those groups not fully reflect what's important to you?

Optional question set—stepping away from stereotypes:

- During divisive political debates, are there ways that your values and perspectives are stereotyped by the “other side”? If so, what is it about who you are and what you care about that makes those stereotypes especially frustrating or painful? Are there some stereotypes of your own party that you feel are somewhat deserved—even if they are not fully true—given the rhetoric used in political debates?

If you try these exercises, please let us know how it goes. Also let us know if you have invented other useful approaches or have questions that you'd like to share: e-mail mherzig@publicconversations.org.

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To learn more about dialogue, read
Fostering Dialogue Across Divides
A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project

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