



# Better Angels

## Talking Across the Political Divide

### *Better Angels Skills Workshop*

## Goals and Principles

### Goals for These Conversations

- You **learn** about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you **politically**.
- You have a sense of satisfaction about how you conveyed your own perspective, feelings, and experiences.
- 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.

### Core Principles

- Respect, curiosity, and openness tend to elicit the same from the other person.
- Everyone **needs** to save face—no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving, or bigoted.
- Most **people** in a relationship have some common values and concerns that can be unearthed.

### The Four Skill Sets

1. **Setting** a constructive tone.
2. **Listening** in a way that the other person feels heard.
3. **Speaking** in a way that helps the other person hear you.
4. **Handling** difficult moments.

### 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.

## Tone-Setting Skills

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?"*
- *"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 general political orientation or your stance on an issue.

- *"As you probably know, I'm a liberal Democrat/conservative Republican, so that's the perspective I come from."*
- *"I come at this as a climate change activist/skeptic."*

4. Offer something critical of your own side and credit something positive about the other side.

Blue      *"I think Democrats have been out of touch with a lot of people in rural communities and Rust Belt towns. Trump picked up on that."*

Red        *"I think conservatives sometimes come across like they don't care about minorities. Liberals have done a better job of connecting with minority groups."*

## Listening Skills

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.

Red        *“So for you, Trump is a big threat to the country” or “You’re saying that Medicare for All is the best way to get medical coverage for everyone.”*

Blue        *“So, you’re saying you don’t trust the federal government on health care—they will mess it up” or “You wish Trump didn’t tweet so much, but he’s there to shake things up in Washington.”*

**DO NOT suggest any implications beyond their statement or offer your critique of what they have said, with comments like:** “So you’re saying that the President’s character doesn’t matter” or “You’re saying that Trump can’t possibly learn on the job.”

2. Ask real & honest **questions for understanding**, not loaded “gotcha” questions. (This is hard to do.)

Red

*“Do you see Black Lives Matters helping or hurting things in our cities?”*

NOT *“Do you see attacking the police as the solution?”*

Blue

*“How do you see Trump’s border wall idea addressing the complex problems in our immigration system?”*

NOT *“Can’t you see that the Wall is racist and xenophobic?”*

It can be helpful – and interesting – to ask **how the other person came to their view** on an issue, especially if it’s strongly held. *Sharing stories is important: they humanize us.*

Red

*“I’m interested in how you came to believe in single-payer health care.”*

Blue

*“How did you come to see the federal government as more the problem than the solution?”*

Then **acknowledge the experiences** behind the person’s views.

3. **Listen for underlying values** and aspirations, and acknowledge them.

- e.g. *“I’m hearing that for you, fairness is a big issue when it comes to immigration.”*
- For Reds, it might be fairness related to those who waited years to come to the country legally.
- For Blues, it might be fairness to the Dreamers who were brought here by their parents and have grown up as Americans.

A Tip: Underlying values are where you are most likely to find something you agree with and common ground

## Speaking Skills

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

Blue *"From what I saw, Trump tried hard to undermine Mueller and his investigation," rather than "Trump did everything he could to block Muller and would have fired him if he could have gotten away with it."*

Red *"I see Trump's lack of political experience is a good thing because I think that professional politicians have messed things up", rather than "The last thing the country needs is a professional politician running things. Trump is exactly right for the job."*

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

Blue *"I'm afraid we're going off a cliff on climate change and there will no coming back" versus "We're going to have to evacuate coastal cities before this century is over."*

Red *"I'm concerned the first steps on gun control will lead to efforts to ban all guns in this country," versus "The anti-gun people won't stop until they take guns away from everyone."*

### 2. Mentioning an area of similarity or agreement (if you notice one).

Blue *"It sounds like we both agree that the health care system needs fixing" or "It sounds like we both agree that Trump has tapped into real concerns of a lot of people."*

Red *"Seems like both of us see the media as dividing more than informing us right now" or "I think we agree there's too much money in politics."*

*Note: Mentioning something you agree with is a great way to transition from listening to speaking!*

### 3. Before expressing disagreement, saying some version of "I hear you." (acknowledgement)

Blue *"I hear you saying you don't trust the federal government to do the right thing on health care. [INTENTIONAL PAUSE] My view is only the federal government has the resources to guarantee good health care for all. The market isn't going to do it, and some states are just too poor to support health care."*

Red *"I understand you think that federally-backed health care is the way to go. [INTENTIONAL PAUSE] From my point of view, the federal government has a really bad track record of running domestic programs, and I can't see it doing a good job on something as complicated as health care. I prefer a market approach with states helping people who can't afford insurance."*

*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.*

*Going back and forth between acknowledging the other's viewpoint and then stating your own is more effective than just restating your position. It's like dancing or tossing a ball back and forth. Aim for "yes, and" rather than "yes, but." (I hear you, and here's what I think about this.)*

## Speaking Skills (continued)

4. If you feel very strongly about an issue, **saying 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..."*

5. **Softening 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."*

## Handling Difficult Moments

### 1. Staying focused on a topic when the other person jumps around from issue to issue.

- *"Can we stay with immigration for now?"*

### 2. Not answering baiting questions; instead, just restating your viewpoint on the topic.

**Blue** When asked "Do you think we should let foreigners just pour into this country illegally and then become citizens?" you might respond, *"I think we need a responsible immigration policy that protects our walls and is also welcoming the way it was for my grandparents and lots of others."*

**Red** When asked, "Do you think we should just round up undocumented immigrants and throw them in concentration camps?" you might respond, *"I think we have to make sure that our immigration laws mean something—by enforcing them."*

### 3. Not returning provocative statements in kind.

**Blue** When you're talking about health care and the other person exclaims "Obama was a fraud on health care like he was on everything else!": instead of defending Obama's integrity or attacking Trump in kind, you can ignore the outburst and say something like, *"Obamacare needs fixing for sure, but I don't think the Republican alternative will be an improvement for most Americans."*

**Red** When someone blurts out "Trump will go down in history as the worst President we've ever had," you might respond *"For now, he's the President and I want to give him a chance to succeed,"* rather than saying *"Do you think Hillary would have been a modern-day Lincoln?"*

### 4. Instead of beating entrenched differences into the ground, agreeing 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, exiting the conversation in a lowkey 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."*

## Talking Points for Role-Players

### Immigration talking points (Red perspective):

- You want the country to get control of the border
- You worry about jobs Americans lose to people coming illegally, but you're ambivalent about deporting all
- You're open to permanent residency for some, but adamantly oppose rewarding them with citizenship
- If building a wall would help, you're for it, although you want to know the costs

### Immigration talking points (Blue perspective):

- You want a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who have not committed crimes
- You see them as contributors to society who deserve a chance to stay here legally and out of the shadows
- You're especially concerned about the "Dreamers" whose parents brought them here
- But you do support border controls

### Gun rights/Gun control talking points (Red perspective):

- You see gun violence as a problem in this country that needs to be addressed
- But the Second Amendment gives people the right to own guns
- Most gun regulations won't help because bad guys will always find a way to get a gun, and good guys will lack self-protection
- ..and regulations may be first steps towards taking away legitimate gun rights
- Still, there are some common sense reforms like requiring universal background checks and screening for dangerous people who should not own guns
- You're cautiously open to some regulations on automatic rifles

### Gun rights/Gun control talking points (Blue perspective):

- You see gun violence as a huge problem in this country, and one of the big causes is too many guns
- European countries don't have the gun violence we do
- There is no place for assault weapons in the hands of ordinary people
- Guns don't protect people; in reality, they put people at risk from suicide, mental illness, accidents, and domestic shootings
- Still, you realize that the second amendment gives people the right to have guns
- We need sensible regulation that respects gun rights