

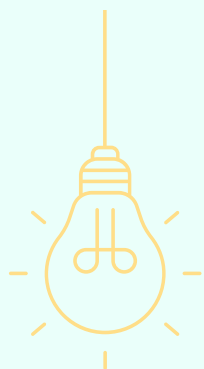


CONVERGENCE

Solving Problems. Sparking Hope.

Tips for Productive Conversations From an Expert Mediator

With as much division and polarization there is in society today, it is imperative that we are intentional about engaging different viewpoints to solve challenging issues. This is the only way that we will hold our families, community, and country together. It's easy to forget that we share values with most people with whom we disagree and that there's benefits to fostering relationships despite our differences. This is why we prepared these tips from Mariah Levison, seasoned consensus-builder and Convergence leader.



**I firmly believe that
no one wakes up
wanting to make the
world a worse place.**



- Mariah Levison

CEO and President of Convergence



This Guide Contains:

- Engagement Strategies
- How to Foster Connection
- How to Come to Collaborative Solutions
- Ultimate Takeaways

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Engagement Strategies



Mindsets Matter

Mindsets are the beliefs and attitudes that shape our behaviors. Cultivating a mindset that embraces conflict, curiosity, and relationships goes a long way in tense conversations. Try approaching conflict with curiosity and seeking to truly understand their position by asking questions instead of being argumentative and responsive with your own position.



Believe Conflict can be Constructive

Most people have shared goals such as a strong economy and good schools and shared values such as fairness and kindness. What we disagree on is how to achieve these shared goals and values. See these disagreements as an opportunity to learn and push thinking to a new level. Focus on uncovering common ground and achieving shared goals to avoid destructive conflict.



Make Sure Everyone Gets the Benefit of the Doubt

Very few people wake up in the morning wondering, "How can I make the world a worse place today?" Even when people's actions are unproductive or potentially harmful, they generally have a story about why they are doing what they are doing that makes as much sense to them as your stories does to you.



Engagement Strategies



Know Curiosity is the Cure

Get curious about their story, both because it is a kind thing to do and because it will give you information about what concerns and needs are driving their positions and actions. This is information that you will need to achieve mutually beneficial higher ground solutions. Ask the other person, “Can you tell me more about that?” Then briefly summarize what you think you’ve heard and ask, “Did I get that right?” and “Is there more you can share about that?” Remind yourself that no one person or group holds all the answers to complex issues.



Make Sure Relationships are at the Core

Learning about people’s stories lays the foundation to build relationships which in turn lays the foundation for solving tough problems. Spend time breaking bread and getting to know each other more deeply. Seek to identify shared goals, values, identities, and life experiences and focus on them before addressing differences. The stronger the relationships built; the more likely mutually beneficial solutions can be found.



Seek Higher Ground

Recognize that we can solve problems without compromising values and principles by shifting from fighting over adversarial demands to integrating the most important needs of all stakeholders into mutually beneficial solutions.



Foster Connection

Escape the Echo Chamber

When we don't interact with people who think differently than we do, we miss the opportunity to see the many things that we do have in common such as being parents, fans of our local sports team, bargain shoppers, people who have suffered loss and so much more. That is how we begin to exaggerate our differences. Meaningfully connecting with someone different from you can bring surprising and important commonalities to the forefront.

Listen First

When people feel heard and understood, they're more inclined to listen to others who hold different perspectives. Research shows that, after being heard, people are less likely to make extreme statements and more likely to approach the conversation with nuance. They are also more likely to return the favor and listen to things that might be hard to hear. Active listening and tuning into someone's perspective is key to effective connection. Remember that you can listen and understand without agreeing with someone.

Disclose to Deepen Trust

Nothing builds trust like vulnerability. One way to show vulnerability is to tell your story. What shaped you and your views on the issue that you disagree with? Research shows that personal stories are far more persuasive than facts. Another way to disclose is to indicate that you aren't sure you are 100% right. You can do so by using words like "probably, sometimes and maybe" rather than talking in absolutes. The world is a VERY complicated place — none of us can be sure we are 100% right.

Focus on Individuality, not Group Identity

People are often categorized into groups, such as conservative/liberal, young/old, immigrant/citizen, or rural/urban. Research suggests that when we focus on unique individual qualities and preferences instead, we feel less threatened by those who seem different. The key is to stop seeing others as anonymous group members and to see them as unique individuals who may share common interests and values with you.



Foster Connection



Take Responsibility for Your Contributions to the Problem

Everyone involved in conflict has done something to contribute to the escalation. This doesn't mean that everyone is an equal contributor. Acknowledging your part makes the other side more willing to acknowledge their part, and the solutions become clearer. Taking responsibility for our contributions is empowering because even if the other side doesn't change, we now know one thing we can change – ourselves.

Be Angry, not Outraged



According to social scientists, anger can be beneficial for conflict resolution and repairing relationships. Anger is a dense form of communication that conveys a lot of information more quickly than other emotions. It does an excellent job of forcing us to listen to and confront problems we might otherwise avoid.

The same is not true of outrage. Outrage is an escalating cycle of blame, rumination, and ever-expanding unproductive fury for revenge. So, dare to express your anger in constructive ways but recognize that excessive anger is an unproductive force that will be a barrier to solving problems.

Disagree Well



While doing the things in this list can lead to repaired relationships and consensus solutions, disagreeing well is also important. Sometimes, healing or problem-solving are not in the cards. That is okay. Democracy is all about a strong competition of ideas, leading to the best ideas rising to the top. Disagreement can help us develop better ideas, innovate, and improve.

Too often, disagreement leads to contempt. And contempt spells doom for both interpersonal relationships and democracy. Disagreeing well means creating and maintaining good relationships with people with whom you disagree. It means letting go of persuading the other side of the righteousness of our ideas and instead seeking to understand each other's perspective.



Collaborative Solutions



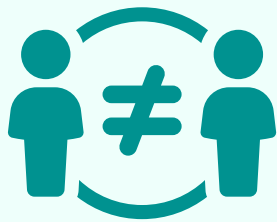
Identify Common Goals

When people from different groups identify a goal that they share, and they recognize that they need to work together to achieve that goal, they're capable of putting aside their differences to come together, replacing distrust with a spirit of goodwill. Though individuals and groups may have disagreements, look for the goals they can work on together or try to highlight these common goals when the groups come together in dialogue.



Focus on Interests, Not Positions

In every conflict, both positions and interests are present. Positions are the fixed stance or demands of one side of a conflict. They rarely provide insight into an individual's interests, which are the underlying needs, concerns, fears, motivations, or values that drive their positions. By focusing on interests, participants in a collaborative problem-solving process can discover shared goals and overlapping interests that are often obscured when just examining positions.



Don't Split the Difference, Make the Difference

Collaborative problem-solving processes help participants move beyond their positions and reflexive "us versus them" zero-sum thinking to craft creative solutions that integrate some of the most important needs and interests of all parties. Try to excavate both your own interests and the interests of the other side. Ask yourself "What's behind the outcome you and the other side are demanding?" At the deepest level, interests often include the core human motivations of a sense of security, belonging, and significance. Then integrate them into a solution that makes a difference.



Acknowledge Injustices and Commit to Making Things Right

Most people have shared goals such as a strong economy and good schools and shared values such as fairness and kindness. What we disagree on is how to achieve these shared goals and values. See these disagreements as an opportunity to learn and push thinking to a new level. Focus on uncovering common ground and achieving shared goals to avoid destructive conflict.



Ultimate Takeaways

1

Don't Get Played

Some companies and politicians benefit from our division. Conflict on TV and social media sells, and it turns out voters. Some “conflict entrepreneurs” (to borrow a phrase from Amanda Ripley’s excellent book *High Conflict: Why we Get Trapped and How We Get Out*) take advantage of some of our wiring to sow conflict for their own gain. Use this list to stop them!

2

Choose Hope

Media coverage is often biased toward the negative. Sometimes, news shows don’t even aim for balanced coverage. Social media often curates feeds and uses a business model of outrage. Turn it off. Every day your eyes will show you friends, family, colleagues, and neighbors being good to each other in a million little ways. Believe your eyes and not the news.

3

Love. That is all.

At the end of the day, everyone we disagree with is a human being. Many great spiritual and political leaders taught and modeled unconditional love. Jesus told us to, “Love your enemy.” Abraham Lincoln counseled, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” It is said that the British soldiers were warned to stay away from Gandhi lest his loving presence bring them over to his side. Martin Luther King said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” These quotes and stories teach us that the real enemy is the illusion that the person was ever my enemy. How do you get beyond this illusion? Love. You probably practice it with your family every day and even with strangers too. When you disagree with someone, even when they treat you poorly, choose to respond with kindness and generosity. This behavior is highly contagious, and you will find, that it will improve your physical and mental well-being too.

4

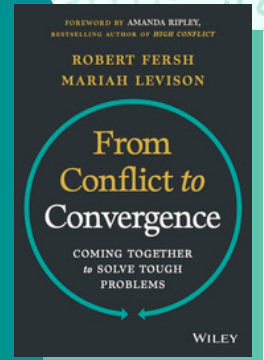
Learn, Practice, and Share

In the past few decades there has been a revolution in the understanding of human behavior. As our country has become more polarized, social scientists and leaders have been applying this science to understanding conflict and conflict resolution. There are new books, podcasts, articles, and trainings every day. There are also new opportunities to practice dialogue across difference. We don’t get good at anything without practice.

More Ways to Learn, Practice, and Share

EXPLORE Convergence Training and Workshop Options

Our learning solutions will improve your leadership capacity and your organization's effectiveness at navigating conflict and solving critical problems. Training options include custom workshops, Convergence Compass — an online learning program — and *From Conflict to Convergence*, the book co-authored by Convergence Leaders Rob Fersh and Mariah Levison.



ConvergencePolicy.org/Convergence-Compass

CONVERGENCE COMPASS



Constructive
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Greater Good
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ENGAGE With Curated Resources

Designed to give you opportunities to learn and connect across divides



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SHARE these resources and tips!

The more people who are ready to have constructive conversation, the more change we can spark!

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