Tips for talking with coworkers who don’t share your politics

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The turmoil surrounding the violence against George Floyd this summer reminds our country that the ugliness of racism remains endemic to America. Long-held and unaddressed disparities people of color face are entering our conversations. Meanwhile, we’re having this discussion while confronting a global pandemic in one of the most polarized political environments in 50 years.

How to deal with these highly charged issues in a productive, civil manner is no small feat. And if you’re at the workplace or logged in all day alongside people who see things very differently from you, well, that makes things even tougher.

For the past year, we have been partners in the Civility Project, an effort to promote civil discourse between people who hold different views, at a time when such discussions are laden with risk and emotion. The project grew out of our own experience as a conservative and a progressive who have managed to remain fast friends.

We aim to bring people out of their political bunkers to engage across the divide honestly, and without prejudgment and hate. We don’t confuse civility with passivity. And we don’t believe civility means conversion to your way of thinking. Though the two of us are of different minds about the violence that sometimes accompanies today’s protests, we agree

there are situations when it's necessary to defy oppression by any means. But in individual interactions, the things we say and do with the people in our own communities, progress is best achieved through productive dialogue.

The first step toward enabling that dialogue is building trust and understanding. When people can talk one-on-one, and share details of their different political, religious, or cultural backgrounds, they become familiar as people before engaging in discussions that might unleash conflict.

We advise starting with the acceptance that most everyone comes to their opinions in the same way: by examining the facts and applying to them their own experiences and values. If that analytical process leads them to a different viewpoint than yours, it doesn't make them evil, ignorant, or unpatriotic.

The point of building civility is to create harmony and understanding, which inevitably leads to more peaceful and productive communities, workplaces, and organizations. It's a step-by-step process that takes time and a commitment to never walk away from the relationship. Here's how we recommend doing so.

Listening is key

Ask nonthreatening questions about your conversation partner's experiences and values. And then commit to listening—seriously. Listening is the core value of civility. That means listening to what the other person has to say, fully and completely, without jumping in with a retort or with your own perspective. Additionally, it means not judging, or expecting to embarrass the other person or "win" the discussion. It's best sometimes to not even think of wanting to "win," but instead to learn more and gain understanding or insight into someone else's perspective.

If you're mentally forming a response before the other person has finished talking, this is a sign you are not listening.

Set a goal to learn, not convince

Rather than trying to convert, agree that the most desirable outcome is for both participants to learn something from the conversation. Each must be treated as equally deserving of being heard, and both people must be open to considering another perspective. Treat the conversation as an opportunity to care and empathize about issues you may not immediately be aware of.

Take breaks when you need to (but always come back to the conversation)

This isn't always easy, even for the two of us. Passions sometimes overcome us. And when that happens, it's okay to walk away and cool off.

In our work together, we've had to take a break, and start over, time and again. We get passionate. We get mad. We forget our own rules. But we've never walked away from the relationship. We've never shut the door on listening. We always know we'll be back to try again, as friends.

This is important, since we've also committed to not avoiding any topic, no matter how contentious—whether it's about race, privilege, or the behavior of our president**.**

Look for the common ground

As an African American city dweller and a white suburbanite with Southern roots, our experiences and backgrounds are worlds apart. However, we do share a desire to make our community better. We advocate different approaches, with the same end goal.

For coworkers and colleagues, the situation may be different. You may not necessarily consider a colleague a friend. You may not care about them beyond the workspace.

But chances are that you share a commitment to good work and the success of the shared workspace. You probably both want stress-free days and productive projects. With those shared goals, surely you can find common ground in much the same way that we build a lasting friendship.

Think of the bigger picture

Even when we don't agree on solutions, we do agree that we must find solutions. To get there, pragmatism must trump ideology. That's the only way there can be movement toward the middle.

Civility comes from making a commitment that no matter what the idea, no matter how offensive we find words or beliefs, we agree to have a productive and respectful conversation that can lead us closer to workable solutions.

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