



## Timely Information for Personal Success

# Keys to Cultivating Civil Dialogue

**D**onald Trump. Hillary Clinton. And now the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems Americans' views on many topics, whether political or otherwise, have never been more polarizing than they are today. Joseph Dana wrote in "The National": *"Social media encourages aggressive discourse. The more dramatic the update on Facebook, the more 'likes' it will get. As such, social media provides the illusion of empowering users when in fact it merely entrenches their views, silos them with like-minded people and encourages rude exchanges with adversaries."*

Truer words have never been spoken. Whether it's talking with a co-worker about a hotly debated topic at the water cooler (practicing social distancing of course), or taking exception to what someone posts on social media, it IS possible to cultivate civil dialogue with someone whose views oppose your own.

As Jeff Daly reminds us, *"Two monologues do not make a dialogue."* It takes two to tango, and it takes two people to have a responsible civil discussion about tough topics. You don't control others, but you can take responsibility for your own actions.

If your goal is to win the argument, you are setting yourself up for a frustrating exchange. Certainly, we want to influence others to *consider* our position, but as important is fostering better clarity on any difficult issue. Here are some guidelines on how you can do your part to sustain a meaningful civil disagreement:

**Be an interested listener first:** Stephen Covey's Cardinal Law described in "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" states: *"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."* Give others the courtesy of listening and working to accurately restate their position rather than immediately launching into an attempt to destroy their argument.

**Avoid dismissive comments, name-calling, and inflammatory rhetoric:** Beyond the unflattering caricatures are real people who deserve respect. Trade *communication stoppers* like "That's true, but...", or "Are you kidding/serious?" for *dialogue enhancers* like "Tell me more," "What else can you tell me?" or "I'd love to hear what you think about..." The words you use matter.

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## Healthy Recipe: Summer Fruit Sizzle

### INGREDIENTS:

- ½ teaspoon butter
- ½ cup blueberries
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- Dash of nutmeg

### NUTRITIONAL VALUE:

- Calories per serving: 134
- Carbohydrates: 32 g.
- Sodium: 6 mg.
- Fat: 1 g.
- Saturated fat: 1 g.
- Fiber: 1 g.

### DIRECTIONS:

❶ In a small skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the fruit and cook until it begins to soften slightly, about 2 to 3 minutes.

❷ Add maple syrup and nutmeg. Bring to a boil and then remove from heat.

❸ Serve over waffles, pancakes, ice cream or frozen yogurt.

**Serving size:** About ¼ cup.

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**Stay cool and in control:** Thomas Jefferson wisely counsels, “*Nothing gives one person so much advantage over another as to remain always cool and unruffled under all circumstances.*” Stay away from emotional escalation by lowering your volume, keeping your expression approachable, and your tone assertive rather than aggressive.

**Do your homework!** Seek out relevant facts and work together to resolve factual disagreements whenever possible. Solicit and consider input from a variety of stakeholders and sources. Everyone has an opinion, but not everyone offers evidence to back up when they are saying.

**Humbly admit when you’re wrong:** 1950s presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson said: “*Man does not live by words alone, despite the fact that sometimes he has to eat them.*” Be open to someone challenging your point of view or your relevant facts. Be able to admit what you don’t know but are willing to explore. Being able to admit mistakes strengthens your cause by showing an openness to thoughtful feedback.

**Use the humor advantage!** By keeping it light, you can defuse tension, help everyone keep perspective, and build rapport even when you disagree. The safest target for your humor is always yourself and *your own* position.

**End frustrating conversations with dignity:** The late country singer Kenny Rogers sang about wisdom in his hit, “The Gambler”: “*You gotta know when to hold them, and know when to fold them.*” Take distance with dignity instead of pushing for victory. Be able to say with a smile, “It’s clear we disagree, and thank God we live in a country where we’re free to do that and still respect each other. You’ve given me a lot to think about. But for now, I’m calling a time out to do more thinking and a little less arguing.”

Forcing closure often only serves to *harden* positions while giving time to percolate what was said (or written) often *softens* dissension. Difficult as it may be, resist the urge to make an impulsive remark (or post) whenever possible. You can always add to a discussion later, but it’s very difficult, if not impossible to take back what you said (or posted) once you’ve said it.

Civil discourses have never been more difficult in today’s knee-jerk reaction day and age, and politicians certainly don’t set a good example! That said, it IS possible to do our part to go against the grain and have a civil discussion. It isn’t easy, but it can be done. ■

Sources: *Employee Assistance Report* and Terry Paulson, PhD, psychologist, award-winning professional speaker, author, political columnist, and commentator. For more information on Dr. Paulson, visit his website at [www.terrypaulson.com](http://www.terrypaulson.com).