



Key Principles and Best Practices

Engaging in conversations across the divide opens doors to finding common ground and moves our country toward a more perfect union. Our programs convey several key principles and best practices that are critical to connecting across divides, including: **Empathy** instead of vitriol; **Listening for Understanding** instead of hearing to overpower; and **Humility** instead of all-knowing. Reflect on those that speak to you, or recall a compelling personal experience.

Engaging Differences Constructively is Valuable:

- There's an intrinsic satisfaction when we successfully connect across divides. It fulfills some of the best of what it is to be human.
- Practically, how well we engage differences influences concrete outcomes. Failing to engage differences constructively can be enormously costly and painful for us as individuals and as a nation. On the other hand, engaging differences constructively can lead to new insights and better decisions. Drawing on the range of experience and perspective can feed innovative solutions that leave us all better off in tangible ways.
- Engaging differences constructively is essential to achieving the more perfect union that we all want. James Madison argued that because the American republic is so large and diverse, broad support could only be achieved on principles of "justice" and the "common good." The base of each party is only about one-third of the country. More than 40% of Americans consider themselves independents. It will never work for one-third to impose their will on the rest. We have to work together to find measures that can attract broad support for our system to function and to reach the wisest decisions.

Listening for Understanding:

- Listening is one of the most fundamental skills for engaging differences constructively.
- During conversations many of us have a tendency not to truly listen. We may hear their first comments and make assumptions about where the conversation will go, or we may be thinking about how we will counter their points.
- To Listen for Understanding, it helps to enter the conversation with curiosity and an open mind to really listen to what the other person is saying. It can help to ask respectful, clarifying questions for the purpose of learning rather than to invalidate the merit of the other person's perspective. It can also help to reflect back to the other side in your own words and ask if you've understood.



Empathy:

- We engage differences more constructively when we put ourselves in another person's shoes, when we see things from another person's point of view.
- It helps to be able to see the other person not as a stereotype of a political label but as a fellow human and American who wants our country to reach its full potential.

Humility:

- We engage differences more constructively when we recognize that other reasonable and moral people can reach different conclusions than we do.
- When we recognize that don't know everything we can benefit from hearing different insights from others.

Conscience:

- Respecting and empathizing with a different perspective is not the same as agreeing with it.
- We engage differences more constructively when we combine understanding and respecting others' perspectives with honoring the dictates of our own conscience.

Principled Advocacy:

- Empathy and Humility are different than going along to get along or abandoning one's own convictions.
- Simply accommodating others' views with which we genuinely disagree violates our own conscience and robs them of the opportunity to benefit from our honest views.
- We engage differences more constructively when we make our case on the merits without resorting to attacks on the character of those with different views or seizing on trivial missteps or misstatements they make.

Common Ground:

- As we engage our differences, it's important to remember and articulate our common ground.
- Because it's easy to fixate on our differences, it helps to acknowledge shared values, aspirations, and experience and to call out points of agreement.
- We've always had our disagreements. We've never fully realized our ideals. Still, we share a commitment to perfecting the promise of American self-government.

