**Keys to Successful**
**One-on-One Conversations**
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 <https://us13.campaign-archive.com/?u=48d2d7fe67a47e411f494ef12&id=609b69259e>

Our efforts to build community and collaborate in viewpoint-diverse environments will be most effective and satisfying if we develop conversational practices and habits that make success more likely. In this space, I offer the kinds of listening and speaking that I’ve learned from mentors and practiced long enough to see that they work.

**Pray**
Jesus prayed for this kind of work to happen, when he prayed for his disciples across the ages "that they all may be one." (John 17.20-21) So, brave soul, you have a holy wind at your back. Pray for courage and guidance and the increase of a Golden-Rule-and-1 Corinthians 13-shaped love in you, and for a receptive spirit in the person with whom you hope to talk.

**Define Success as Understanding**
In our polarized setting, where chasms abound, we have been conditioned by our culture to think that a successful conversation is one in which we come out on top. This zero-sum, winner-loser definition of success generally ends in mutual contempt. Each may walk away feeling smug and victorious, but the relationship has moved backward.

On the other hand, if our goal is to understand the other person better/well, we introduce the possibility that we will leave the conversation feeling more connected to the person than we were before we began.

**Listen Actively First**
Mutual understanding would be the greatest success, but we can’t control the other person’s commitment to that end. We can control our own approach to the relationship and, to some extent, the likelihood that we’ll understand our interlocutor better at conversation’s end.

The best way to succeed at understanding the others is to listen actively and attentively to them.

***What Not To Do***
Of course, the sort of high level listening that makes this possible is not a skill our culture teaches us. Instead, we are taught to…

1. listen for agreement/confirmation with our positions and ignore or discard the rest;
2. make judgments early as to the value of the person talking to us (not just her or his idea);
3. listen to gather ammo and craft our retort while they’re talking; and
4. dismiss-disdain-cancel if that person stands for something opposite or other than our convictions.

***What To Do***
Otto Scharmer, a leadership professor at MIT, has done a great deal of research into what sorts of listening succeed most. In his years of experience with top successful leaders, he has found that they listen differently than most people in our culture. He has built [a simple structure](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLfXpRkVZaI) that tracks with the trained listening skills of these leaders, in order to help us improve our own listening skills. His three higher levels of listening go like this:

1. Have an **Open Mind** to listen curiously for new information outside our defined circle;
2. Have an **Open Heart**to listen empathically to understand the person and life behind the words; and
3. Have an **Open Will/Spirit** to listen for the new thing this conversation can bring to be that is larger than the info and conviction sets of either/any one of the participantsHere’s good news: These “habits of highly effective people” are entirely available to us.

**Separate the Person from the Problem**
My friend and colleague, Dr. David Anderson Hooker, the founder and lead narrator of Counter Stories Consulting and former professor in Notre Dame University’s Kroc Peace Institute, has a mantra that helps us here: “The people are not the problem. The problem is the problem.”

We often respond to the people we encounter – for example, the family members or friends or colleagues who believe differently than we do – as if they are the cause of the things we least like in the world and the threats we most fear. But they almost never are. Their convictions and the words they speak belong to a larger system of thought and power that they didn’t generate or craft.

**Listen to the Person in Front of You**
Separating the person from the problem frees us simply to be curious about the person with whom we’re in conversation. Since the future of the world is not at stake in this conversation, we can ask beyond the first words (which may trigger our anger or firsts). Here are some simple steps that will help us engage people in ways that make conversation fruitful.

1. ***Posture.*** Sit or stand in a way that demonstrates your desire actually to understand the person. (E.g., eye contact is good, folded arms are not, leaning in is good, slumping back is not, and a person-affirming smile never hurts.)
2. ***Paraphrase.***Be humble enough to realize that you may not “get” the person at first phrasing. Listen long enough and well enough to be able to summarize what you’re hearing in different terms. Then check with the person to make sure she or he feels understood.

***Ask Open-Ended Questions.***
Ask beyond the person’s first words. Here are a few ways you might do this:
              “Tell me more. I’m not sure I understand what you mean.“
               "How has embracing this conviction mattered for the way you live your life?”
                “I’m intrigued. What brought you to this observation/belief/way of looking at the world?”

***Identify Common Ground.***
If you discover that there is overlap between your beliefs/hopes/understanding of things and theirs, speak those out.

Example: In a recent Courageous Conversation on Gun Control vs Gun Freedom, the group began very carefully and defensively, convinced that the whole building would blow up if they talked about such a controversial issue. However, within ten minutes, they began to realize that they shared the same ideal: safety. They disagreed strongly on the specific means to this end, in ways that you can probably predict; but they quickly recognized that they shared the same end goal. This helped them realize that their relationship wasn’t all conflict, and they began to be willing to risk a bit more vulnerability in the conversation.

An active curiosity is the key to all of this. If you enter the encounter determined to be “curious, not judgmental,” you will have a very promising opportunity actually to understand another human being. It may feel unilateral at first. It may feel risky. But your generous efforts to listen in this way may just become a contagion that your conversation partner catches. Then you’re on your way to mutual understanding. Even if not, though, someone has to start the dance.