

Better Conversation Toolkit

FLC Political Engagement Project (PEP) and Political Psychology Course (PS304)

Tactic	Description	Notes/Resources	Citation(s)
Active listening	Studies suggest that most of the time we're "listening" in a conversation, we're actually planning how to respond. Afterwards we think we've understood and listened, but we have not really (Collins et. al 2024). Active listening is the conscious effort to be mindfully present to receive a message, and checking for understanding (such as with looping, below). Research suggests active listening increases a sense of being heard and decreases negative feelings between groups (Brueneau and Saxe, 2012).	<p>Celeste Headlee's TED Talk: How to Have a Better Conversation</p> <p>UC Berkeley Greater Good in Action: Active Listening Guide</p> <p>Better Angles Skills for Bridging the Divide eLearning Course</p> <p>Very Well Mind: Active Listening Techniques, Benefits, Examples.</p> <p>Video: The Art of Active Listening (Harvard Business Review Guide)</p>	<p>Bruneau, E. G., & Saxe, R. (2012). The power of being heard: The benefits of 'perspective-giving' in the context of intergroup conflict. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i>, 48(4), 855-866.</p> <p>Collins, H. K., Minson, J. A., Kristal, A., & Brooks, A. W. (2024). Conveying and detecting listening during live conversation. <i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: General</i>, 153(2), 473–494.</p>
Looping	This active listening strategy involves reflecting back what the other person has said and checking if your summary accurately captures their perspective. The goal here is to make sure the other person feels heard.	The Center for Understanding in Conflict: The Loop of Understanding	<p>Friedman, G., & Himmelstein, J. (2006). Resolving conflict together: The understanding-based model of mediation. <i>J. Disp. Resol.</i>, 523.</p> <p>Ripley, A. (2021). <i>High conflict: why we get trapped and how we get out.</i> Simon and Schuster.</p>
Ask open-ended questions for understanding	Approach every conversation with an attitude that you have something to learn, and use journalism's open-ended "who, what, when,	Headlee, C. (2016). TED Talk: Help make America talk again.	Headlee, C. (2017). <i>We need to talk: How to have conversations that matter.</i> Hachette UK.

	why, where, how” to ask questions from a place of genuine curiosity. This allows people to describe their experiences in their own words and avoids cornering questions that escalate the conversation.		Wheatley, M.J. (2022). Willing to be disturbed. <i>Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future</i>. Berrett-Koshler Publishers.
Ask clarifying questions to increase intellectual humility by revealing gaps in understanding	We all suffer from the “illusion of explanatory depth” on some issues. That is, we think we understand exactly how things work but when pressed, we realize we have gaps. Some studies suggest that this illusion drives political polarization and attitude extremism, and that by asking good-natured clarifying questions such as “How exactly does X lead to Y?” or “Can you help me understand how that works, exactly?” can help uncover these hidden gaps in understanding and increase humility and open-mindedness.	Fernbach, P. (2013, November 14). The Illusion of Understanding [Video]. TEDxGoldenGatePark. Dubner, S. J. (Host). (2019, May 29). How to Change Your Mind [Audio podcast episode 379]. Freakonomics Radio. Listen to the episode	Fernbach, P. M., Rogers, T., Fox, C. R., & Sloman, S. A. (2013). Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding . <i>Psychological Science</i> , 24(6), 939–946. Sloman, S. A., & Vives, M. L. (2022). Is political extremism supported by an illusion of understanding? . <i>Cognition</i> , 225, 105146.
Admit that we have our own biases and gaps of understanding	We all have our own unique perspective on the world (“naive realism”) and some biases that come along with that. It is easy to see others’ biases but difficult to see our own. If we can admit that we have our own biases or that we have some holes in our own understandings, we create space for our conversation partner to acknowledge their own gaps. This can create enormous connection and de-escalate difficult discussions.		Tavris, C. and Aronson, E. (2008). <i>Mistakes were made (but not by me): Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts</i> . Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Haidt, J. (2006). Chapter 4: The Fault of Others . <i>The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom</i> . New York: Basic Books/Penguin.
Leverage shared identities	We are divided by strong identities of age, race, geography, class etc. that increasingly align with ideological and partisan identities. However, psychology has found that we hold many		Turner, J. C., & Tajfel, H. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. <i>Psychology of intergroup relations</i> , 7-24.

	<p>identities, and that the identities we emphasize in a situation are strong predictors of our behavior. This gives us powerful tools to connect. For example, a rancher and a Denverite might be very divided on the issue of wolf reintroduction due to their different identities, but if they connect on an identity as Coloradoans, environmentalists, or even concerned citizens, they will have an easier time getting along.</p>		<p>Brewer, M. (2009). Social Identity and Citizenship in a Pluralistic Society. In Borgida, Eugene, Federico, Christopher M., and Sullivan, John L. (eds.) <i>The Political Psychology of Democratic Citizenship</i>. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 153-175.</p>
<p>Emphasize a curious mindset and identity, such as “scientist” or “scout”</p>	<p>Related to the above, we can choose to engage in conversations with different goals and different identities. If we enter a conversation as a soldier for our side or a politician trying to convince, we’re likely to narrow our own view and invite pushback from our conversation partner. However, if we emphasize curiosity and an investigative identity such as “scout” or “scientist,” we might be better able to both see the issue more clearly and connect with and learn from our conversation partner.</p>	<p>Galef, J. (2016, April 4). Why “scout mindset” is crucial to good judgment [Video]. TEDxPSU. YouTube.</p> <p>Keltner, D. (Host). (2024, January 25). How curiosity can help us connect (No. 12) [Audio podcast episode]. In The Science of Happiness. Greater Good Science Center.</p>	<p>Grant, A. (2021). <i>Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know</i>. Viking, Penguin Random House; New York, New York</p>
<p>Complicate the narrative by being surprising and breaking stereotypes</p>	<p>We hold wildly false stereotypes about outgroups, particularly political outgroups (Ahler and Sood 2023). When we bring those stereotypes to our conversations, we shut down curiosity and good will as nobody likes to be put in a box and stereotyped. Instead, be surprising and complicate the narrative. This disrupts conflict loops and opens space for new connections.</p>	<p>Medium Solutions Journalism: “22 Questions that complicate the narrative”</p>	<p>Ripley, A. (2021). <i>High conflict: why we get trapped and how we get out</i>. Simon and Schuster.</p> <p>Ahler, D. J., & Sood, G. (2023). Typecast: A Routine Mental Shortcut Causes Party Stereotyping. <i>Political Behavior</i>, 45, 1581–1607.</p>
<p>Grounding / Reducing the binary</p>	<p>Escape us vs. Them by finding some common ground in terms of shared information, values, goals, and threats.</p>		<p>Clark, H. H., & Brennan, S. E. (1991). Grounding in communication. <i>Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition</i>.</p>

			Ripley, A. (2021). <i>High conflict: why we get trapped and how we get out.</i> Simon and Schuster.
Emotion-Fact Sandwich	Rather than expecting facts to speak for themselves, work them into a compelling story that starts with an emotional hook, makes a contrast between your point and others apparent, introduces the fact, and then		Westen, D. (2006). <i>The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation.</i> New York: Public Affairs.
Moral Reframing	Couch your own point/concern in the moral language of the other side, rather than your own.	<p>Willer, R. (2016, September). How to have better political conversations [Video]. TEDxMarin.</p> <p>This requires a basic understanding of moral foundations theory.</p> <p>Haidt, J. (2008, September). The moral roots of liberals and conservatives [Video]. TED.</p>	Feinberg, M. and Willer, R., (2015). From gulf to bridge: when do moral arguments facilitate political influence?. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i> , 41(12), pp.1665-1681.
Mindfulness meditation	Engaging in a short meditation or a bit of quiet time can help enter conversations with a more open mind.		Lueke, A., & Gibson, B. (2016). Brief mindfulness meditation reduces discrimination. <i>Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice</i> , 3(1), 34.