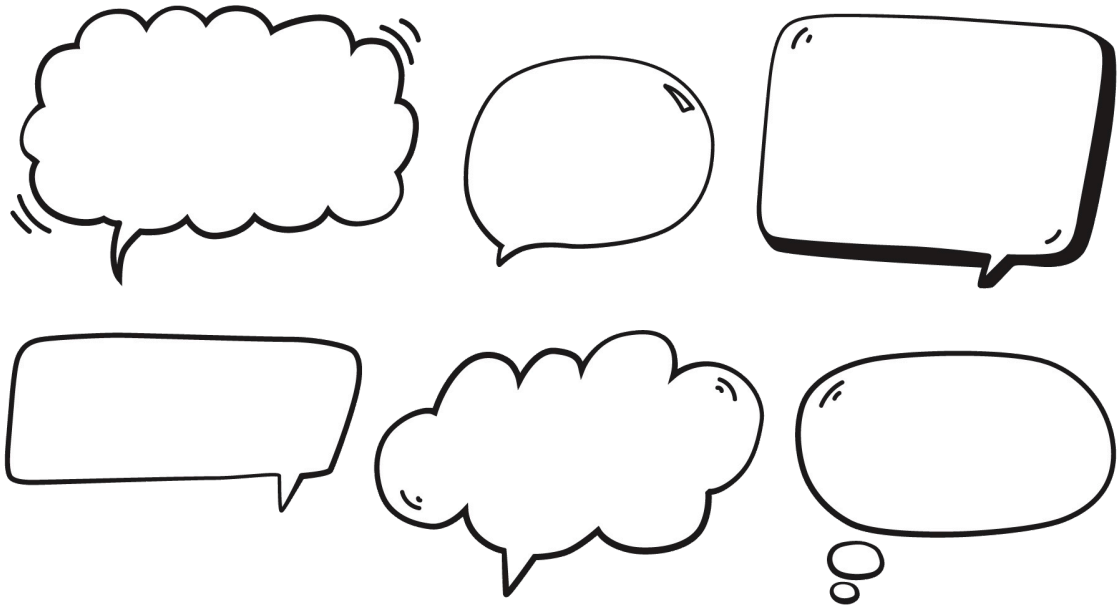
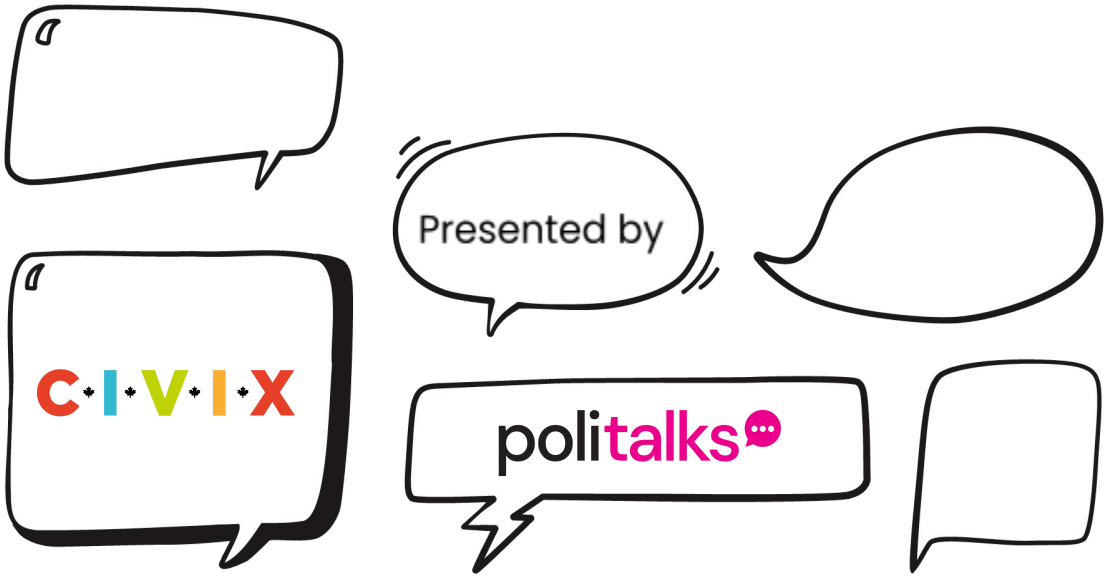


Better Discussions

How to talk about politics, policy, ideology, and other things that aren't easy to talk about



Acknowledgements

CIVIX is a Canadian charity dedicated to strengthening democracy through experiential civic education.

We create programming and provide professional development opportunities that empower teachers to take real-life political events and turn them into teachable moments in the classroom.

PoliTalks is an educational initiative that aims to cultivate the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to participate constructively in political discussions.

Better Discussions was made possible with support from the Government of Canada.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

As people become increasingly entrenched in their own perspectives, struggle to see value in opposing views, and express disagreement in ways that are harmful, it feels more difficult than ever to have discussions with one another.

Having discussions is crucial when we need to make important decisions in our communities. When people lose the ability to respectfully disagree, however, it is not only difficult to make progress, but society fragments and democracy weakens. The ability to listen and consider the perspectives of others in our communities is therefore an essential skill.

That doesn't mean it's easy. Research has shown that we are increasingly disliking those that we perceive as holding political and ideological views that are different from our own. We also tend to make assumptions about other people's beliefs and values based on their group membership or where they fall on the political spectrum, which can result in dismissing others before we even start listening to them.

While it's true that people disagree about a lot of important issues, our perceptions of one another are often exaggerated[1]. We fall into patterns of "us vs. them" thinking, and focus too much on where we disagree. We also often think of other people as being fundamentally different from us, when in reality we tend to have a lot more in common than we think.

All of this is to say: we need to learn how to have more constructive discussions. Discussions are constructive when participants focus on understanding views that are different from their own and are not motivated by winning an argument or defeating an opponent. They allow more voices to be heard and broaden people's perspectives.

This guide has been created to help foster constructive discussions about topics that can be difficult to talk about. This includes issues about how we should create our communities, social and policy issues, and issues that reflect people's political or ideological views. The tools and activities contained within can be used to help facilitate

[1] The difference between our perceptions of each other and reality is sometimes called the "perception gap," and has been studied in countries around the world. In general, people on different sides of the political aisle have exaggerated views of one another, and Canada is no different (see: https://www.mediatechdemocracy.com/all-work/mass-polarization-in-canada-whats-causing-it-why-should-we-care).

discussions by civil society organization leaders, community leaders, elected officials, or anyone who wants to make difficult discussions easier.

In facilitating discussions about difficult topics, our goals are the following:

- Create an environment where people have a clear understanding of the norms and expectations around discussions
- Have discussions that focus on developing a deeper understanding of an issue, rather than defeating an opponent
- Recognize the factors that make it difficult to talk to those we disagree with, and learn how to mitigate or work with those factors
- Learn what to do when productive discussions turn into unproductive arguments
- Practice perspective-taking so that discussions remain constructive

The contents of this guide are based on the PoliTalks program created by CIVIX. To find the resources linked in this guide and learn more about the program, visit betterdiscussions.ca.

2. Creating a Discussion-Friendly Environment

No matter what kind of discussion you're having, people need to feel like they are in a space where open, constructive discussion is encouraged, and where they will listen and be listened to. We'll call this a *discussion-friendly environment*.

Creating a discussion-friendly environment is not always easy, especially when you are discussing a potentially contentious issue. However, there are some steps you can take to help set expectations around discussions while also encouraging open-minded exchanges of ideas.

Discussion, Not Debate: Focus on Understanding, Not Winning

What do we mean by "discussion," anyway? A *discussion* is the act of exchanging ideas with others through focused conversation on a specific problem, question, or issue. The purpose of discussion is to exchange ideas and deepen our understanding of a topic.

However, political issues, social issues, and policy issues tend to be addressed through *debate*. In debates, evidence is provided for and against a position, and rebuttals are considered and presented. Unlike discussions, in debates people on opposite sides of an issue are positioned as rivals, and at the conclusion one side wins and the other loses.

Debates are not an inherently bad way of approaching a contentious issue and can be productive if done right. However, when issues are presented as topics of *debate*, participants are put in a frame of mind where they are focused on defeating their opponents and are not working cooperatively to understand each other's views or achieve a common goal.

Difficult discussions can be made easier by reframing the discussion process as one that focuses primarily on understanding and not winning. While discussions that are part of a decision-making process will eventually need to lead to pursuing one course of action instead of another, that process will go much more smoothly if participants first develop a better understanding of why other people disagree with them.

Try This
When discussing a contentious issue, do not just open the floor. Instead, use one of the discussion protocols (page 20) to have a structured discussion that shifts the focus to understanding rather than winning.

Establish Discussion Guidelines

Once you've ensured that participants understand that they will be discussing and not debating an issue, it's time to establish discussion guidelines. Depending on the kind of group or discussion you're leading, you may already have some rules or codes of conduct in place. It's a good idea to periodically review these guidelines before having a discussion, especially if you anticipate that the discussion could be contentious.

In addition to any guidelines that you are required to adhere to when conducting meetings or running discussions, you can provide participants with the opportunity to develop additional guidelines that they think should be adhered to. Participants are more likely to adhere to rules they have had input in determining, so co-creating discussion guidelines can encourage respectful and constructive discussion. It is also easier to hold one another accountable for rules that everyone has participated in making. Consider implementing the Co-Created Discussion Guidelines activity:

Activity: Co-Created Discussion Guidelines

1. Explain to participants that their goal will be to brainstorm guidelines that everyone will be expected to adhere to during discussions. Give everyone a few minutes to complete the following sentence stems:
    - Discussion doesn't work well when…
    - In my experience, discussions have been most successful when…
    - I feel comfortable participating in a discussion when…
2. Divide participants into groups of four or five.
3. Ask participants to individually write down their proposed guidelines on a piece of paper (suggested minimum of 3 norms per participant). Alternatively, the activity could also be conducted with an online app, such as a Google Doc.
4. Provide time for each participant to share their recorded responses with the rest of their group.
5. Next, have each group decide, collectively, on the three most important guidelines and record them separately. All group members should agree with the group list.
6. Have each small group share their guidelines with the group as a whole. Identify the guidelines that everyone agrees on and create a list.

Here are some examples of guidelines that groups may generate:

- Listen actively when others are speaking (e.g., be attentive, check your body language).
- Show empathy.
- Respond with curiosity instead of judgement.
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Avoid making assumptions or generalizations about others.
- Encourage people to share from their personal experiences, but do not ask people to speak on behalf of a whole group (even one they identify with).
- If you say something that offends someone, apologize, even if the offence was not intended.
- Always presume good intentions of those involved in the discussion.
- Strive for equitable participation from all members in the discussion.

Encourage participants to consider what these guidelines mean in terms of their own approach to discussions. For example, for some people this might mean getting out of their comfort zone and participating when they otherwise wouldn't, while for others it might mean devoting more time to listening rather than speaking.

Know Your Audience (and Yourself)

Politically-loaded discussions can be taxing, especially when participants do not share the same opinions. On top of this, even when all participants are engaging in a discussion in good faith, it can be disproportionately tiring to engage in or facilitate a conversation when the topic is related to a part of your identity, or when your view on the issue does not express the status quo, or it directly impacts you in another way.

It can be especially taxing to engage in a conversation where one or more parties are related much more directly to the issue being discussed than others (this is one of many reasons why we urge facilitators not to ask a member of a marginalized group to speak for all members of this group). This is not to say that we should avoid conversations where this is the case - after all, some of the most valuable discussions involve sharing our experiences with one another. We can, however, create safeguards to help discussions feel less taxing for both discussion leaders and participants.

As a discussion leader or participant yourself, it's also important that you recognize how your own beliefs and experiences influence your perspectives, and which issues are ones that you find controversial. Think about how you will handle a comment that provokes an

intense emotional reaction or response that you strongly disagree with. When your worldviews are challenged, it can feel like a personal attack, so it is important to recognize which issues might set you off, as well.

Try This
As either a discussion leader or participant, consider the following questions before engaging with a controversial discussion topic:

- **What is *my* relation to the topic of discussion?**
    - Is this an issue or set of issues that impacts me *directly*?
        - Is this an issue or set of issues that is attached to part(s) of my identity? (Consider using an Identity Chart, page 30)
        - Is this an issue or set of issues that impacts me directly in another way – perhaps a policy that has a direct impact on my life?
    - Is this an issue or set of issues that impacts me *indirectly*? If so, how?

- **How will my relation to this topic impact the way that I show up today?**
    - If this topic of discussion feels "close to home," do I need to set any boundaries beforehand?
    - If this topic doesn't impact me directly, how can I remind myself to be mindful of the ways in which my experience of the discussion will be different from those it does impact?

These questions can be answered on a piece of paper, or in conversation with other discussion leaders. Consider using a Save the Last Word protocol (page 25) to structure your discussion.

You can also use the "Preparing for Discussion: Participant's Guide" template to encourage participants to engage in this kind of reflection before discussion (see page 3).

Share Experiences, Not Just Opinions (or Facts)

In an ideal world, disagreements would be resolved by appealing to definitive, objective evidence. This is not how things work in the real world. Instead, we typically do not have access to conclusive evidence about contentious issues, or we disagree about which view the evidence supports, or the available evidence is simply not the predominant factor that shapes our beliefs.

We should still strive to base our discussions on the best available evidence, and it is important that participants have a shared base of knowledge for discussions to be as productive as possible. But having a discussion does not simply involve engaging with evidence and arguments, it involves engaging with *people*. That means that we need to consider not only the content of what someone is saying but also the experiences and beliefs that led them to form their views.

While it is important that participants be able to express their opinions on issues, a *mere* exchange of opinions has the potential to increase our animosity toward others. After all, if all we're hearing from someone is that they disagree with us, we're likely to perceive them in a more adversarial light.

Similarly, people are not always receptive to being presented with facts that challenge their views. This is *not* to say that we shouldn't correct errors when people make them: sometimes people will just get verifiable facts wrong, and in those cases, it is a good idea to set the record straight. However, disagreements often stem from people reaching different conclusions from different bodies of evidence, and so merely presenting someone with evidence that is contrary to their own is unlikely to change many minds[2].

Recent research suggests that when people share their experiences that led them to form their opinions, others view them as more reasonable and generally in a more positive light. This is for a few reasons:

- **People are *storytellers***. When we talk to others we rarely just tell them a list of things that happened; instead, we tell them a story. We are naturally inclined to tell each other stories, and more receptive to hearing stories from others.

[2] You may have heard that when it comes to disagreements about contentious issues, presenting someone with evidence they're wrong will "backfire," causing them to hold onto their views even more strongly. While research into the so-called "backfire effect" is ongoing, the majority of recent studies suggests that the backfire effect is not significant, and so we shouldn't be deterred from correcting others' mistakes (see research from the Nieman Lab).

- **Experiences humanize others**. When all we know about a person is that they disagree with us, it is easy to conceive of them as a threat to our beliefs and values. Hearing about people's experiences reminds us that we are, in fact, talking to a human being and not just a contrarian.
- **We can find common ground**. The more you learn about why someone holds their opinions, the more opportunities you have to identify what you have in common. Finding common ground can then help you find a starting point for a more constructive discussion.

Try This
The activities in this guide give participants many opportunities to share their experiences and stories, in addition to evidence and opinions. To help participants practice sharing experiences and stories, try the Value Cards activity (page 31) and the Save the Last Word discussion protocol (page 23).

Encourage Diverse Voices and Opinions

When having discussions it's important to encourage input and participation from everyone involved. That's not always easy: some people like to dominate discussions, others might be shy or reluctant to participate, and some people feel like their views are not welcome, especially if they're members of minority or equity-seeking groups.

Excluding people from conversations is not necessarily done in a conscious, intentional way: structural and societal factors tend to amplify some voices and encourage expression from some people more than others, whether we're aware of them or not. Part of creating a discussion-friendly environment requires taking these kinds of factors into account, and ensuring that diverse voices are heard.

Depending on the purpose of the discussion, it can also be important to ensure that a wide range of opinions and perspectives are heard. This isn't always the same as encouraging participation: even if most people are participating, certain perspectives on the issue might be left out of the discussion.

Sometimes, it can be important to introduce a perspective that a more homogeneous group of participants may not be familiar with, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the issue at hand. But it is also worth keeping in mind that even if most people are participating in the discussion, participants whose views do not conform with the status quo are often less likely to share what they *really* think.

Extra Credit
To learn more about creating an environment that ensures that underrepresented voices are heard, check out Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement from the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue.

Try This
Discussion protocols (page 18) are a great way to give as many people as possible the opportunity to share their views. Try the Chalk Talk protocol (page 24) that allows participants to express their views anonymously.

Setting Boundaries
With some discussion topics you might anticipate participants taking them in unproductive directions, or the space becoming unsafe for participants or yourself. When this happens, we encourage you to consider setting explicit boundaries on discussions before they begin. Setting a boundary means placing a limit on what we are okay with engaging with and the means by which we engage with a topic. It is not meant to control others or limit their freedom to express their views, but rather to ensure that discussions remain constructive and on-track.

While part of engaging in discussions of controversial issues often involves embracing discomfort, these discussions should not and need not be done at the expense of our own emotional safety. It is good to set personal boundaries around what topics and forms of engagement are on and off the table for discussion, based on what participants and facilitators' boundaries are.

Here are some examples of what boundary-setting might look like before or during a discussion:

- "Discussion that involves questioning *x* is off the table for me."
- "I am going to take a pause/I need to permanently end this conversation if you continue to bring *x* up."
- "*X* is not part of today's discussion."
- "I only have capacity to facilitate this conversation for one hour today, so we need to move on."
- "I will no longer engage in this discussion if you continue to raise your voice."

Participants and facilitators may not realize what they have capacity for until the discussion is underway. You can invite participants to make use of the PLANS framework (page 27) to help them determine if they want to continue in a discussion that is potentially causing them discomfort.

When discussing an important or controversial issue, participants may bring up other, related questions. Addressing these questions can sometimes move discussions forward, but also risk getting the main discussion off track. Some participants may also use a discussion as an opportunity to bring up an issue they are interested in or have strong opinions on, no matter how tenuously connected. Establishing boundaries early on in the discussion can be an effective way to keep discussion on track and prevent those involved from feeling unsafe or unwelcome in the space.

Try This

Consider establishing a list of *open* and *settled* issues related to your main topic to discussion:

- Open issues are ones we treat as unsettled; they are a matter of live discussion- questions that haven't been decided upon yet (example: "Should we lower the voting age in Canada?").
- Settled issues are ones that we treat as settled, i.e., not up for discussion (example: "Should women have a right to vote?").

Which issues or questions we treat as open and which ones we treat as settled says something about our values, and can greatly impact the safety and wellbeing of those present, and participant's general understanding of what is acceptable in the space. Treating the validity of part of a participant's identity as an open question, for instance, can be deeply harmful to them. It is important to keep this in mind as you decide which questions you will treat as open and which ones you will treat as settled.

A Note on What We Owe Each Other (and What We Don't)

A pluralistic society is one where many people with different and conflicting opinions need to work together. When we're having discussions we have the responsibility to listen to other people and try to keep an open mind, just as we have the right to be heard.

However, there are limits to these rights and responsibilities. For example, we do not have the right to be insulting or aggressive towards others we disagree with, and if other people act that way towards us we do not have a responsibility to listen to them. It is common to find commentators - especially online - making hay about their right to free speech (or, in Canada, freedom of expression) and complaining when they feel that they are not receiving adequate attention. The right to freely express oneself does not, however, obligate others to listen when those expressions are unproductive or harmful.

We might then ask: how far does our responsibility to listen to other views extend? In his book *Outraged: Why We Fight About Morality and Politics and How to Find Common Ground*, psychologist Kurt Gray considers what he calls the "KKK counterargument": "Do we really want [a country] where people with repugnant ideas - like White supremacists - have a seat at the table? Does pluralism mean we have to support those who are anti-pluralists, who want to deny the free expression of other people?"

According to Gray: "The short answer is no." It is still the case that we shouldn't refuse to listen to an opinion just because we disagree with it. However, we can draw the line of tolerance at the point where someone attempts to repress the ability of others to exercise their rights. Giving airspace to views that denigrate others can silence voices, leading to a much less diverse set of views being shared.

Ultimately, different people will have different tolerance levels when it comes to views that they find offensive or counterproductive. While discussion leaders should try to create an environment where a wide range of views are shared and discussed, they should not feel as though they must listen to views that prevent others from feeling safe enough to engage in discussions.

3. Make Difficult Discussions Easier

Discussions about political, social, and policy issues can be difficult. Whether they take place around the dinner table, on social media, in community spaces, or in the workplace, discussions that involve personal values and deeply held beliefs can quickly turn into arguments. If it feels like these discussions are getting more difficult, you're not alone.

Many factors that contribute to discussions becoming more difficult. In this section we'll look at a few, and what we can do about them.

Polarization

Many people are concerned about increasing *ideological polarization*: the phenomenon where people get further apart from one another on important issues, and our views on those issues become more extreme. A society is ideologically polarized on an issue when there are a lot of people who strongly agree with it, and a lot who strongly disagree, with not a lot of people in the middle.

While there certainly are those who hold extreme views, ideological polarization differs depending on where you are. In Canada, for example, we are not as polarized on the issues as we might think[3].

What *is* increasing in Canada - as well as around the world - is *affective polarization*. This refers to the phenomenon where we increasingly dislike those who hold different views from us, and those feelings become more extreme. One consequence is that those on the left and right sides of the political spectrum have exaggerated views of one another, often attributing to the other side much more extreme positions on topics than they truly hold[4].

It's hard to have a constructive discussion with someone you don't like. But this cloud has a silver lining: if we can put aside our feelings about one another and focus on what we have in common, we can create a foundation for having productive conversations.

Try This

To cut through affective polarization we need to learn more about the people we're talking to. Sharing experiences and stories helps humanize others and gives us more opportunities to find the things we have in common. Try one of the following activities included in this guide:

[3] https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2022/polarization-representation-canada/
[4] https://ppforum.ca/publications/polarization-democracy-canada/

- Share experiences about the factors that divide us with the Rank Order Protocol: Factors that Divide Us discussion (page 22)
- Explore how prioritizing different values leads to different opinions with the Value Cards activity (page 32)

Sorting

Another factor that has been increasing recently is the extent to which our views about politics, policies, and ideology are becoming interconnected. Politicians and political parties are increasingly aligning themselves with stances on social and ideological issues that might not have much to do with policy or governance, and voters are increasingly identifying with those parties because they share similar ideologies.

Numerous issues are also becoming "politicized," such that views on those issues have become associated with different political parties or parts of the political spectrum. For example, views on certain scientific issues tend to be associated with different parts of the political spectrum, and the so-called "culture wars" have created an environment where one's ideas about identity, social justice, and human rights are used to categorize and attack them.

The result is that it can be harder to disentangle people's views about policies, ideology, and politics. We also risk making unwarranted assumptions about another person's views about a whole host of issues, based on limited information. For example, many discussions on social media become unproductive when someone dismisses someone else based on something they have written in their bio: that someone lists their pronouns, displays flag emojis, or states they are members of certain religions are common reasons why others may choose to dismiss them. The problem is that we often take a very small amount of information about someone and fill in the rest of their views on their behalf.

While we often perceive each other as holding predictable views based on stereotypical markers of group identity, in reality, people are complex and may have values, beliefs, and experiences that are not so different from our own.

Try This

It's easy to make assumptions about a person's views on political, social, and policy issues based on little information about them. To better recognize how categorizing

others affects how we interact with them, and to break out of some of these bad habits, try the following activities included in this guide:

- Have participants learn more about each other with the Identity Chart activity (page 31) or the Iceberg activity (page 31)
- Learn about in-group bias with the Sharks vs. Bears activity (page 30)

Confirmation Bias: We hear what we want to hear

We all like to think that we're good at keeping an open mind and being objective. In reality, we all tend to read, listen, and watch things that tell us what we want to hear and interact with those who share our views.

This is called *confirmation bias*: our tendency to seek out and interpret information in ways that confirm what we already believe, and ignore information that challenges our beliefs. Confirmation bias makes it more difficult to discuss important issues with those we disagree with: we might not have a shared base of knowledge to work from, and we are less inclined to interpret information charitably if it's coming from someone challenging our beliefs.

Confirmation bias is a result of how our brains evolved to process information: it's built-in, and we can't get rid of it. However, there are some strategies we can use to try to ameliorate its effects.

- **Consider the opposite**. Before discussing an issue that you have very strong beliefs about, consider the view of someone who believes the opposite. This can make you more receptive to considering new ideas[5].
- **Find new information**. We tend to develop habits where we read and watch the same things over and over. Consider seeking out some different sources of information to get a sense of what other people are talking about.
- **Talk to new people**. An easy way to hear what people who think differently than you are talking about is to find them and talk to them! You can use one of the discussion protocols (page 20) to start having more constructive discussions with people you disagree with.

[5] Lord, C. G., Lepper, M. R., & Preston, E. (1984). Considering the opposite: a corrective strategy for social judgment. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *47*(6)

Try This
It's easy to make assumptions about a person's views on political, social, and policy issues based on little information about them. To better recognize how categorizing others affects how we interact with them, and to break out of some of these bad habits, try the following activities included in this guide:

- Learn how confirmation bias can make it difficult to have a shared body of knowledge with the *What do you want to read?* activity (page 30)

In-Group Bias: We put people into groups

We are all members of different groups: groups based on our identity or beliefs, where we're from, and our hobbies and interests, among others. Some of these groups are big and important, and others are small and inconsequential.

People naturally view each other in terms of groups. We are also predisposed to think more highly of and be kinder and more charitable to people who are members of the same groups we are when compared to people we perceive as outsiders. This is called *in-group bias*.

In-group bias makes discussions about political, social, and policy issues more difficult because our views on these issues often put us into groups. Endorsing a political candidate or joining a political party immediately puts us into partisan groups, and we start thinking of others as being either members of our group - "in-group members" - or members of a different group - "out-group members." Once we become part of a group we naturally start thinking in "us vs. them" terms, which makes it much more difficult to engage meaningfully with those we perceive to be outside of our groups.

It's unavoidable that political, social, and policy issues put us into groups. As we've seen, perceiving someone as being outside of our groups makes us more likely to be less kind to them and interpret them less charitably. There are some things we can do to try to lessen the effects of in-group bias.

Think Big

While you may be members of different groups when it comes to the issue you're talking about, there will almost certainly be a larger, more encompassing group that you are both members of. For example, if you're talking with someone you disagree with about politics

you'll be members of different political groups. At the same time, however, you're also members of the same, bigger group: the group of people who live in the same country[6].

Try this
If a discussion you're leading isn't going well, try getting the participants to think big by identifying their common goals and group memberships. This can work best when you are dealing with large groups of people with different opinions and backgrounds. For example:

- Emphasize to a group of community members that they are all residents of the same community, and share common goals.
- Remind political rivals that they are both citizens who have the best interests of their shared country in mind.
- Zoom out and look at the issue under discussion from a larger angle. If people can't agree on the specifics, focusing on the larger issues that they do agree on can help make discussions about details easier.

Emphasizing shared group membership can come in the form of a subtle reminder of the shared goals and identities of your audience, or something more explicit, like guiding them to take a step back and consider the bigger picture. Try using a discussion protocol (page 20) to refocus a discussion that's not going well.

Think Small

There's another way to think about out-group members differently: instead of identifying a bigger group you're both members of, find a smaller one.

Here's an example: say that you are having a discussion with someone on a different part of the political spectrum. Immediately you classify each other as being outside of your respective groups, and the discussion becomes difficult. But then through your discussion, you realize you have something in common: you both love minigolf.

[6] Research has shown that emphasizing shared national identity is a particularly effective way to facilitate political discussions. See: Gaertner, S. L., Dovidio, J. F., Anastasio, P. A., Bachman, B. A., and Rust, M. C. (1993). The common ingroup identity model: recategorization and the reduction of intergroup bias. Eur. Rev. Soc. Psychol. 4, 1–26. doi: 10.1080/14792779343000004.

The group of minigolf lovers is a much smaller group than the group of citizens. However, by identifying a group you and your discussion partner are members of, the effects are similar: you shift your mindset from thinking of the other person as an outgroup member to an in-group member.

Try this
If discussions aren't going well, identify small things that people have in common. This can work best when you are dealing with smaller groups, or when you have a small number of people that are creating the most discord. For example:

- Highlight a small thing that your group members have in common. Choose something that is politically neutral, e.g. a shared sports fandom, favourite kind of food, etc.
- Identify one common goal of a deliberation that people can agree on.
- If an argument breaks out between sides and there is an identifiable leader on each one, focus on finding something that they have in common in order to lessen the pressure.

These ideas can be used alongside the *Thinking Big* ideas, as well.

Focus on the Person, Not the Group

While our tendency to categorize people into groups can make discussions difficult, people have another tendency that can make discussions easier: we tend to think of an individual's *true self* as fundamentally good. The problem is that we often don't focus on what we think a person is like deep down inside, but instead as representatives of a group that we're not a member of.

For example, let's say that you are a staunch supporter of one political party, and you meet someone who votes on the other side of the political spectrum. You might not see them as an individual, but as someone who represents everything you don't like about the political party you disagree with. Not only do we categorize people in terms of groups, but we think of them as being almost completely defined by the characteristics of those groups.

We know that this is too simplistic of a way of thinking about others: other people are complicated and have all kinds of different views. It's easy to lose track of this, though, when we are engaged in a disagreement about issues that are important to us.

Research has shown[7] that thinking about a person's "true self" can reduce the effects of in-group bias. This means getting to know and highlighting the values and beliefs that someone has - learning what makes them the person that they are - rather than focusing on their role as a member of a group.

Try this
To learn more about the "true selves" of those around you, try the Value Cards activity (page 32).

[7] De Freitas and Cikara. 2018. "Deep down my enemy is good: thinking about the true self reduces intergroup bias." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 74: 307-316.

4. Structuring Discussions With Protocols

Discussion protocols provide structure for discussions to support inclusive, collaborative discourse. Protocols take a lot of the guesswork out of discussions (‘Whose turn is it to speak?’ ‘Am I speaking too much/too little?’ ‘What’s the purpose of this discussion?’) so that participants can focus on sharing and listening actively.

While there are many common discussion protocols, we’ve chosen the following 5 for their flexibility and range.

The activities outlined can be used in a variety of contexts, but not all protocols will be suitable for every topic or situation. Choose the one that best meets the goals of the discussion.

Think-Pair-Share

This foundational protocol is well-suited for discussion that starts with a specific prompt or text, and as a way to jumpstart discussion.

1. Provide participants with a question or discussion topic.
2. Ask participants to think about the prompt individually, and write down some of their thoughts, questions, and ideas.
3. Divide participants into pairs and ask them to exchange what they've written.
4. After participants have shared with their partners, expand the sharing into a whole group discussion.

Try This
To facilitate participants getting to know each other, or just as a way to break the ice, use an identity chart (page 31) as part of a think-pair-share protocol.

1. Provide each participant with a blank identity chart.
2. Ask participants to fill out the chart: they will write their names in the centre, and then something they consider to be important about who they are around the outside.
3. Divide participants into pairs and ask them to exchange their charts. Give participants a minute to ask any questions or reflect on anything they found particularly interesting.
4. After participants have shared with their partners, have them find someone new and repeat the process.

Rank Order

Rank order activities are flexible and can be used to meet numerous goals. When applied to an issue they can be a great way to help participants organize their thinking on complex topics or to reflect on a set of variables.

1. Provide participants with a list of items (eg. a list of policy issues, characteristics, values) and ask them to rank them in order of most to least important (or favourite to least favourite, etc.). Don't make the list too long: around 5 to 7 items work well.

2. Ask participants to write down some notes to explain why they ranked the items in the way they did.

3. Divide participants into pairs or small groups and ask them to compare rankings. Participants should explain their choices to each other even if they are in agreement since it's possible that they ranked items similarly for different reasons.

4. Reflect on the activity as a whole group. Some guiding questions:

    - Were participants surprised by how others ranked the items?
    - Were any items especially difficult to rank?
    - Were there major points of consensus or dissensus?
    - Were there cases where participants had common priorities but different opinions?
    - Did seeing someone else's ranking and/or hearing their reasons make you see or understand one or more of the items differently?

Try This

There are many factors that make it difficult to talk about political and ideological issues, and we often perceive those who disagree with us on those issues as being unreasonable. However, there's evidence that one way to help make opposing views seem more reasonable is to share our personal experiences with the factors that divide us[8].

If you find that your participants are finding it difficult to have constructive discussions because of political differences, try using a rank-order protocol with the following items:

Rank Order: Why are political discussions so difficult?

There are a lot of factors that can make political discussions difficult. Rank the following factors by what you think is the most to least significant.

1. Politicians and political parties creating divisions among Canadians
2. The spread of false and misleading information online
3. A hostile environment on social media
4. Increasing polarization on important issues
5. Increasing intolerance toward people with different viewpoints

This activity encourages participants to share their experiences with the factors that they believe create divisions between individuals and groups. By sharing experiences and stories, participants are more likely to be receptive and charitable to others.

[8] Kessler, Daniel and Dimitrakopoulou, Dimitra and Roy, Deb. "Hearing Personal Experiences Improves Social Evaluations Compared to Personal Opinions, Especially for Polarized Parties" (December 05, 2023). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4978495 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4978495

Four Corners

This activity requires participants to take a stand on a specific topic and provide reasons for their positions. It can work well as a warm-up or debriefing activity.

1. Place signs in the four corners of the room: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree.”
2. Present participants with a proposition. The statement should express a judgement or opinion, and expose different perspectives on a particular issue.
3. Give participants some time to think about their answers individually and then ask them to choose the corner that best represents their opinion.
4. Once participants are in their corners, ask them to discuss the reasons behind their choices.
5. Finally, ask one representative from each group to justify their position to the group. Encourage participants to change sides if they are influenced by someone’s arguments.

Try This
If you’re discussing a potentially contentious issue for the very first time you can get a better sense of where everyone stands by doing a “temperature check”: present the issue under discussion and have participants express how strongly they feel about it by using the guidelines above.

Save the Last Word

This protocol encourages active and empathetic listening among participants and works well when you'd like to encourage a wider range of participation, or when participants disagree about decision-making.

1. Divide participants into groups of 3. Assign one participant the role of timekeeper.
2. Provide a question or prompt. This could be related to a topic the group is discussing or a decision that needs to be made. Give participants time to reflect.
3. Choose a speaker to go first. The first speaker responds to the question while the others listen. (Max time: 3 minutes)
4. In turn, the other two participants respond to the first speaker (max two minutes each), building on what has been said (e.g. areas of agreement, differences, related insights). No interjections are allowed during this process.
5. The first speaker is then given the "last word" and is able to respond to the others.
6. You may provide the first speaker prompts such as:
    - "I like what ___ had to say about…."
    - "I hadn't considered ___ that way before."
    - "It was hard not to interject when ___ was said."
    - "Hearing other perspectives helped me make ___ connection"
7. The activity repeats until each participant has had the chance to go first.

Try This

Try doing the Iceberg Activity (page 31) as part of the Save the Last Word protocol:

1. Distribute a copy of the Iceberg Activity sheet to every participant.
2. Provide them with a question or prompt that you are discussing, and have participants write down their opinion about the issue at the tip of the iceberg. Next, have them consider what kinds of beliefs, experiences, and values led them to form their opinion. Have them write down these factors under the surface of the water.
3. Divide participants into groups of 3, and proceed with steps 3-7 above.

Chalk Talk

This is a silent activity that allows participants to respond to a prompt - and each other - in writing. It encourages reflective thought and gives everyone an opportunity to participate and contribute to group discussion. This activity can also be used as a way to brainstorm ideas when difficult decisions need to be made.

1. Explain to participants that this is a silent activity and that they will respond in writing.
2. Write a prompt or question on the board or on a piece of chart paper.
3. Ask participants to respond to the prompt or question by writing on the board or chart paper. Alternatively, you may provide participants with sticky notes that they can stick to the board/paper once they have written their responses.
4. Once everyone has responded, allow participants time to read the other responses. Ask participants to respond to any of their peers' comments and draw a connecting line between their response and the one they are responding to. Participants can also group or draw connections between similar responses using a different colour marker or chalk.
5. Once everyone has responded to at least one comment, you may repeat the process or transition to a verbal discussion to discuss themes or questions that emerged from the activity.

Try This

If you find that some participants are dominating discussion, or that some people rarely express their views, try using the Chalk Talk protocol at the end of a discussion. Consider providing one of the following prompts to have participants respond to:

- What's one question you wanted to ask, but didn't get a chance to?
- What's one thing you took away from the discussion today?
- What's something you'd like the group to address next time?

5. Constructive Disagreement Framework: PLANS

Disagreement is a natural part of discussions. However, discussions become difficult when people can't get past their differences and struggle to communicate. The result can be anger or frustration, with one or both people unable to understand why the other just doesn't get it.

It's easy to fall into a trap of believing that if we can just create a convincing enough argument then we'll get the other person to see things our way. However, this is not how things tend to work. More often than not, conflict just makes people feel defensive.

Hearing something we don't agree with can feel like an important part of our identity is under attack, especially if it connects to our deeply held values. Our reactions to these feelings can quickly make a disagreement toxic. While we can't build bridges with everyone (nor should we necessarily want or try to) there are simple steps we can take to promote mutual understanding.

The *PLANS for Constructive Disagreement* framework encourages active listening and self-expression habits for constructive discussion. It applies both to structured discussions, and unstructured, organic discussions that participants might have with friends or relatives.

It is intended to help participants remember the fundamentals when they are needed, especially when a discussion gets tense and tools are required to keep things on track. And if one person can model constructive disagreement skills, odds are others will follow suit.

PLANS was designed to be used as a general tool whenever disagreements become difficult, and can be used in combination with co-created norms of discussion and any of the discussion protocols.

PLANS for Constructive Disagreement

➳ PAUSE

In this step, participants take a breath, notice their emotional state, and commit to keeping an open mind for the coming exchange. There is also an option to opt out if it doesn't feel possible to keep the discussion constructive.

➳ LISTEN

Listening actively means not just waiting for your turn to speak, but paying full attention to the speaker in order to better understand their views. While it can be tempting to formulate our own responses while waiting to talk, this step encourages participants to slow down and reflect on what's being said.

➳ ASK QUESTIONS

Asking questions helps to build understanding and creates rapport with the speaker. Is there something the other person said that you would like to know more about? Does anything they said require clarification?

➳ NOTICE COMMON GROUND

Here participants are invited to articulate where they agree with the other person. This may be challenging if their perspectives are far apart, but there will almost always be something to identify in common. If finding common ground is difficult, return to the 'Ask Questions' step to try to get a sense of why the person has the perspective they do, and see if it's possible to relate to shared beliefs or values.

➳ SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Sharing your own perspective comes after listening and trying to understand. People are typically more responsive to different viewpoints once they feel understood themselves. It may be helpful to transition with language such as, "I agree with you about X, but I see things differently - are you open to hearing another perspective?" If they say 'no' you can either get curious about why they don't want to hear what you have to say - to try to understand them better - or agree to end the discussion. Once you have shared your perspective, invite feedback.

Download the PLANS poster here

politalks

PLANS for Constructive Disagreement

The goal is to understand. It's not about being right or trying to persuade others

Pause

Take a breath and notice your emotions. Can you keep an open mind? Opt out if needed.

Listen

Give the speaker your full attention, and reflect back what you hear. Avoid focusing on your own responses until later.

Ask Questions

Get curious. Ask questions to increase your understanding of what has been said. Try short direct questions that demonstrate you've been listening.

Notice Common Ground

Let the speaker know what you agreed with in what they said. If you disagree with an opinion, see if you can relate to the values underneath it.

Share Your View

Respectfully share your own point of view. Use "I" statements, and invite feedback from the other person.

Before

Consider the Context

- Who are you talking to?
- Where is the conversation taking place?
- Does one of the participants have more power than the other?
- Does one person care more about the issue?
- How might the answers to such questions inform your approach to the discussion?

After

Integrate the Learning

- Reflect on what's been accomplished
- Consider what you might want to investigate further as a result of the conversation
- Think about if or how you should evolve your own perspective

6. Activities

In addition to discussion protocols, there are activities that you and your fellow discussion participants can use to take on new perspectives and better understand the factors that divide us. These can also be found at betterdiscussions.ca.

Online Interactives

Access the activity here

Sharks vs. Bears
This short quiz puts people into groups by categorizing them as either a shark or a bear. Participants will then describe what they think sharks and bears are like, and discuss results.

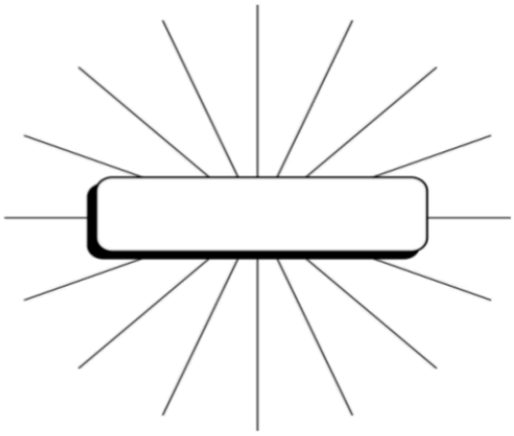
This activity is a low-stakes way to illustrate the effects of in-group bias: even when we are categorized into meaningless groups, we still tend to be kinder to members of our own groups. Participants are then given some tips to help combat in-group bias.

What do you want to read?
This dynamic quiz has participants express their opinions on several controversial issues. From a series of headlines, they then indicate which articles they would be most interested in reading. Overall, people tend to select headlines that confirm what they already think and ignore headlines that challenge them.

This activity is a quick way to introduce confirmation bias: our tendency to read, watch, and listen to views that tell us we're right. After completing the quiz, participants then learn some tips to help them combat confirmation bias when engaging in contentious discussions.

Access the activity here

Handouts



Download the handout here

Identity Chart

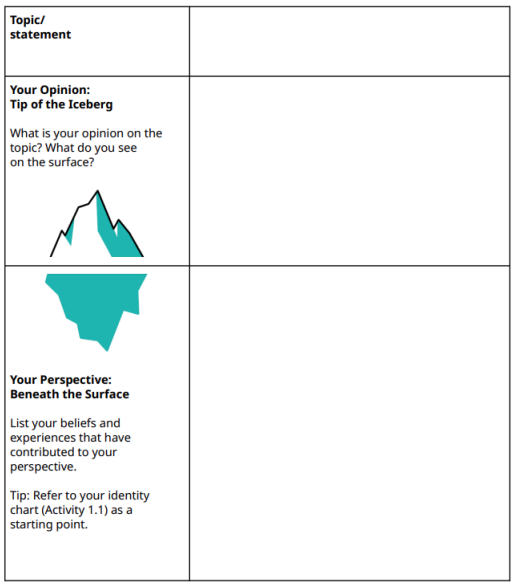
An identity chart is an easy way to get people to reflect on what's important about themselves and learn about others. Participants fill out their names in the centre of the chart, and then fill out the spokes with facts about themselves, their beliefs and values, and their experiences that they think are most important to understand who they are.

This activity can be done on its own, or as part of a Think-Pair-Share discussion protocol (page 21).

Iceberg Activity

This activity has participants sharing their opinion about an issue, and then diving beneath the surface to reflect on the beliefs, values, and experiences that led them to form that opinion.

This activity can be done on its own, or as part of a Save the Last Word discussion protocol (page 25).



Topic/ statement	
Your Opinion: Tip of the Iceberg What is your opinion on the topic? What do you see on the surface?	
Your Perspective: Beneath the Surface List your beliefs and experiences that have contributed to your perspective. Tip: Refer to your identity chart (Activity 1.1) as a starting point.	

Download the handout here

Value Cards

Value Cards is a perspective-taking activity where participants experience how views can change when prioritizing different values. It can be played in groups of 2-5 players and takes approximately 20 minutes to complete.

This activity is a great way to spark discussion, consider alternate viewpoints, and build empathy for those we have disagreements with. Cards and instructions can be downloaded and printed from betterdiscussions.ca.

Activity Instructions

1. Get into groups of 3 or 4.
2. Take one deck and separate the black prompt cards from the pink value cards. Shuffle the black cards and turn one over.
3. Shuffle the pink cards and deal out three to each player, one above the other (as pictured below).
4. Each player reads out their values and says what they think someone who prioritized those values would say about the prompt - would they agree, disagree, or be undecided or conflicted?
5. Players take turns discussing how the values they were dealt influenced their response.
6. (Optional) Shuffle the pink cards and deal again. Repeat steps 3-5. Players will then discuss how their answers changed (or didn't change) and why.
7. Turn all the cards onto the table and identify which value is most important to you.

7. Discussion Planners

Once you have decided on which topic(s) you are discussing and whether you are going to use a discussion protocol, activity, or combination of both, you can plan out your discussion session. When planning your discussion session, consider the following elements.

- *Discussion Overview*. What is the central discussion idea, prompt, or question that will guide the discussion? What is the goal of the discussion in the first place (e.g. to brainstorm ideas, to make a pressing decision, to seek feedback, etc.)?

- *Introduction/Hook.* How will you introduce the topic to the participants? Consider using a short activity to "hook" your audience to increase their interest in participating.

- *Main Exchange*. How will you structure the bulk of the discussion? Consider using a discussion protocol.

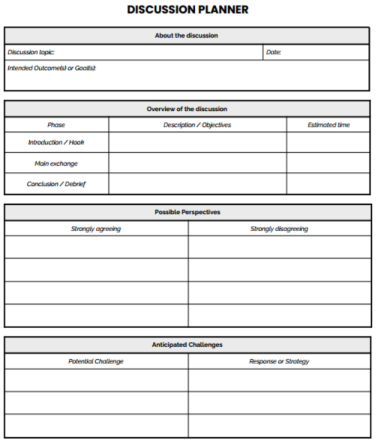
- *Conclusion/Debrief*. After the discussion has concluded, consider providing participants to reflect, and raise any outstanding questions.

During the planning of your discussion is also a good time to anticipate how people will respond. Consider some of the possible responses participants may provide on different sides of the issue, as well as some potential problems that may arise.

Download the Discussion Planner Template

To help facilitate your discussion planning you can download a Discussion Planner template.

A blank Discussion Planner template, as well as a filled-out example template can be downloaded at betterdiscussions.ca.



DISCUSSION PLANNER

About the discussion	
Discussion topic:	Date:
Intended Outcome(s) or Goal(s):	

Overview of the discussion		
Phase	Description / Objectives	Estimated time
Introduction / Hook		
Main exchange		
Conclusion / Debrief		

Possible Perspectives	
Strongly agreeing	Strongly disagreeing

Anticipated Challenges	
Potential Challenge	Response or Strategy

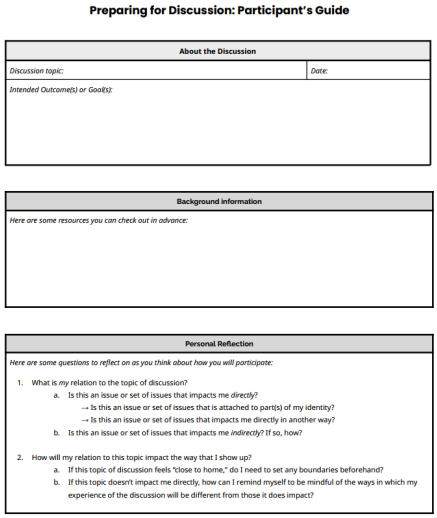
After planning the discussion, consider sending participants an overview of what they can expect if you are planning your discussion in advance. This will help to ensure that participants come prepared to participate. Participants can consider:

- Their goals in participating in the discussion.
- Background resources that they might consider consulting in advance if they need to get up to speed.
- How they might react to the topic of discussion, and what they might consider doing to prepare.

Download Preparing for Discussion: Participant's Guide

To help participants prepare for difficult discussions, you can download and distribute a Preparing for Discussion: Participant's Guide template.

A blank template can be downloaded at betterdiscussions.ca.



Preparing for Discussion: Participant's Guide

About the Discussion	
Discussion topic:	*Date:*
Intended Outcome(s) or Goal(s):	

Background Information
Here are some resources you can check out in advance:

Personal Reflection
Here are some questions to reflect on as you think about how you will participate: 1. What is *my* relation to the topic of discussion? a. Is this an issue or set of issues that impacts me *directly*? → Is this an issue or set of issues that is attached to part(s) of my identity? → Is this an issue or set of issues that impacts me directly in another way? b. Is this an issue or set of issues that impacts me *indirectly*? If so, how? 2. How will my relation to this topic impact the way that I show up? a. If this topic of discussion feels "close to home," do I need to set any boundaries beforehand? b. If this topic doesn't impact me directly, how can I remind myself to be mindful of the ways in which my experience of the discussion will be different from those it does impact?

8. Troubleshooting

By their nature, discussions are unpredictable. Even with careful planning and preparation a discussion can sometimes go in directions that you may not have anticipated. This section contains some best practices for dealing with problems that might arise, as well as some common problem scenarios with some ideas about how to address them.

Address the problem
Whatever the issue is, address it head-on. Ignoring problematic behaviour can set a bad precedent or create tension that undermines the discussion.

Refer to your guidelines
It's always useful to review the guidelines you developed prior to any discussion, and during the discussion, you can refer to those guidelines as an initial intervention.

Manage your own reactions
Inappropriate statements or behaviour can be upsetting not only to other participants but to yourself. It's important to take note of your own reactions and to give yourself a moment to pause and take a breath so that you can continue to guide the discussion effectively. You might also consider expressing your feelings of discomfort: this can make participants more comfortable with their own discomfort, especially if you explain or model how you can work through it.

Take a break
Discussions about politics and other controversial issues can produce passionate responses, and sometimes participants can become angry or upset. In these situations, it can be a good idea to take a temporary break from the discussion to do something different and refocus. Simply doing something different for a few minutes can break the tension and be very helpful for moving forward productively with a difficult conversation.

Switch up the format
Perhaps your chosen discussion protocol isn't getting you the results you want, or maybe the participants who are grouped together aren't interacting well. Try switching things up: for example, move from a whole-group discussion into small groups, or vice versa.

Pause for reflection
If a discussion isn't going well, ask participants to do some independent reflection, and return ready to contribute. You can also try one of the activities on page 30 to refocus people's attention.

What to do when someone is dominating the discussion

When someone is dominating a discussion, they're often not aware that they are doing anything wrong, they're simply passionate about the topic. Unless you have explicit reason to think otherwise, it is best to assume that someone who is dominating the discussion is not *trying* to do so, and to approach the issue as such.

The easiest way to prevent someone from inappropriately dominating a discussion is to put safeguards in place at the outset:

- Establishing discussion norms early on ensures that everyone is on the same page. This makes it easier for you as a facilitator to hold them accountable for sticking to these norms, and makes it easier for them as a participant to understand why they're being asked to speak less.
- Plan to incorporate Discussion Protocols (page 20). These protocols are set up to provide opportunities for equitable participation.

If you're facilitating a discussion where participants are *called on*, you can try inviting other members of the discussion to participate by saying something like, "let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet today." Alternatively, switching up the discussion format, even if not what you originally planned, can help to give others the opportunity to share. To do this, consider making use of one of our Discussion Protocols, like Save the Last Word, where participants break into groups and each given the opportunity to take on the role of *first speaker* (page 25).

If someone is continually dominating the discussion or speaking out of turn, you might consider pulling them aside after the discussion and speaking to them about it. Especially if this is the first time you are talking to them, we recommend making a point of emphasizing that you value their input, but the issue is one of equity: you want to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate.

Something to consider
When someone is talking a lot, it is worth considering what you know about their own relation to the topic of discussion. Is the person talking more than others because the particular topic is one they have lived experience with *that others in the space do not?* Is that experience one that is often marginalized? If so, remember that part of striving for *equitable* participation might mean allowing them to take up a bit more air space than others in the room.

What to do when no one is talking

It can be hard to formulate an opinion or a response on the fly, especially when it comes to topics that feel high-stakes. In order to ensure that participation is accessible, we encourage you to send out an overview of what participants can expect in advance of the discussion.

Make active involvement and participation through speaking (as long as participants are able) the norm from the outset by starting off with *co-creating* your norms for discussion (see page 5).

Take the pressure off by lessening the number of people participants are expected to talk in front of. Use one of our discussion protocols (page 20) to structure smaller group discussions or to give participants a chance to gather their own thoughts first. Structure your discussion so that participants break into smaller groups first, and use one of our Discussion Protocols to get them talking! For instance, consider Save the Last Word (page 25), where participants break into small groups and each take on the role of speaking one by one.

If you're facilitating a *series* of discussions with the same participants and you're having trouble getting them to participate in the beginning sessions, you can always remind participants of the role that active discussion will play in helping you to achieve your aims, and then collect feedback to see if they have suggestions for how to make the environment more conducive to participation.

Finally, try to get comfortable with awkward silence! Sometimes it will take a little while for people to formulate thoughts, and that's okay.

What to do when someone is extremely stuck in their ways

It is helpful for both facilitator and participants to be on the same page about the *kind* of participation that will be conducive to the aims of the discussion before the discussion begins. Before you establish your Discussion Guidelines (page 5), consider going over the difference between a *discussion* and a *debate* (page 4).

When a participant is continually doubling down on their own view without demonstrating reflection on their own opinions or showing curiosity towards others' views, you can reference this distinction and remind them that the goal of discussion is for us to gain a better understanding of one another. You might also reference a more specific part of your discussion guidelines, for instance, "*respond with curiosity instead of judgement*".

If you find that the discussion is particularly polarizing (perhaps *multiple* participants are extremely stuck in their ways), you can use the Value Cards activity (page 32) or a Discussion Protocol (page 20) to encourage participants to practice "trying on" different perspectives. For example, you might consider coupling the Iceberg Activity with our *Save the Last Word* or *Think-Pair-Share* protocol, and encourage participants to identify commonalities and differences in the perspective that underlies their opinion.

Finally, sometimes people just aren't going to change their minds, and the best you can as a facilitator is to acknowledge disagreement about open issues in a manner that affirms all perspectives in the room.

Something to consider
There is a difference between someone being *stuck* in their ways and someone carefully considering other perspectives and remaining committed to the view they already had afterwards. In the former case, the issue is that the person is not approaching the conversation with the goal of understanding, whereas in the latter case, the participant is still engaging in a good faith discussion.

What to do when opinions lack diversity

If you sense that important viewpoints are not being brought up, *especially* if those viewpoints stem from marginalized perspectives, then there are measures you can take to ensure that these viewpoints get brought into discussion.

- ➔ Something to keep in mind: just because one perspective is dominating the discussion, that does not mean that everyone in the room is in unanimous agreement. Often, it is disproportionately taxing to defend a view that doesn't conform to the status quo (see page 6).
- ➔ Even if everyone *is* in unanimous agreement, if the goal of your discussion is for participants to gain a better understanding of the *issue* being discussed, then it can be fruitful to introduce other perspectives.

As a facilitator, you can help to mitigate this issue. Here are some suggestions for how:

- ➔ Lead by example and introduce another viewpoint yourself. As a facilitator, you have the power to normalize marginalized perspectives by introducing them to the discussion. If others share this perspective, they might feel more comfortable contributing to the discussion afterwards! Try: "have you considered ….?", or "while this makes sense, someone else might argue… . What do you think?"
- ➔ You can use the Iceberg Activity (page 31) and/or one of our Discussion Protocols (page 20) to help to illuminate differences in the perspectives participants are already introducing.
- ➔ Have participants engage in perspective-taking using our Value Cards (page 32).