

Guiding Difficult Group Discussions

WHEN YOU WANT TO discuss a sensitive topic in a group, the Talker-Listener Card helps prevent, or at least, reduce the level of conflict.

So often when discussing difficult issues, participants don't feel heard, understood, or valued. And that hurts. The hurt produces anger, voices get raised, discussion turns to argument, thinking gets fuzzy and defensive, and behavior becomes aggressive. Then arguments escalate into name calling, questioning motives, straining working relationships, and ending friendships.

If a group wants to discuss a tough topic cooperatively, introduce the TLC process. This method is similar to the Native American "talking stick" tradition. While one person holds the talking stick, the others listen and wait in silence to show respect for the person, their time, and their comments.

The Talker-Listener process adds two steps:

1. Listening responses make it clear to the talker that he or she has been heard and understood.
2. Listening responses also help the talker clarify and develop his or her opinion.

This is a collaborative process where the goal is to learn from each other and support everyone's growth. It works best with an unbiased participant taking leadership by monitoring the process to be sure that everyone gets to speak and be heard.

Put the Talker-Listener Card in front of the person who wants to speak first. Remind the group to focus on understanding one person at a time. When one person is talking, everyone else listens. (You can print and share copies of the four questions in the Listening Game as a model for listening.)

Before the second "wannabee" talker gets a turn, he or she must first earn the privilege by summarizing, to the first talker's satisfaction, what the first person intended to say.

Thereafter, speakers repeat or paraphrase the views of prior speakers before they get to talk. As you monitor the process, see that no one gets away with talking unless they first hear and acknowledge the prior speaker. Again, this does not mean agreement. It means understanding. When this works, everyone gets heard and fireworks start less frequently.

Differing opinions don't necessarily generate heat, except for people who are insecure and have trouble realizing that others can legitimately see the world differently. For them "listen first, talk second" won't cure their upset, but if you carefully guide the process, it should reduce it substantially. More importantly, it also should prevent them from killing a productive discussion for the others.

Heated arguments often arise out of the hurt people feel when their opinions are not heard and respected. The "listen first, talk second" model wipes out this heat source by hearing and respecting people's views.

So, no to arguments; yes to discussing differing opinions and learning from each other.

For example: A second speaker says, *"So what you said was...and it matters a great deal to you. Right...?"* First speaker, *"Yes, that's what I meant to say."* The nod or agreement about being understood ends the first speaker's turn.

Second speaker's turn, *"So I differ from you in this way..."* Third speaker to the second speaker, *"So your opinion is as follows... Is that the way you see it...?"* Second speaker, *"Yep, you got it. It feels good that you took the time to understand me even when I know you don't agree with me."*

Sometimes, I call these gatherings "I see it - You see it" groups. The first person begins by saying, *"I see it this way...and how do you see it?"* The second responds by saying, *"So the way you see it is...is that right?"* And if it is, then the second takes a turn as a speaker saying, *"And the way I see it is...and how do you see it?"*

The "I see it - You see it" language in this method makes it clear that having divergent points of view is the norm, and as such, more than acceptable.

During the 1991 Gulf War, I invited a group to discuss their reactions to America's involvement. We began by establishing ground rules. I would monitor the process. Everyone would get a chance to talk and be heard. Each person had to earn speaking time by first understanding someone else to his or her satisfaction. Because views were strongly held, we would not try to convince anyone, but simply share our opinions, respect others, try to learn from each other, and come out of the discussion as friends.

While we can't accurately categorize any viewpoint, for the sake of simplicity, I'm going to refer to the divergent views as "hawks" and "doves." A dove began and shared her view. The hawk jumped ahead to his response before hearing her out. *"So you go for peace at any price. But someone has to protect this country."*

I asked the first talker whether she felt understood. *"Not at all,"* she said. So I said to the listener, *"Okay, try again and repeat back what she was trying to say."* He couldn't. I asked her to say it again, but he still couldn't repeat it. He was too busy thinking about what he wanted to say. He finally was able to repeat it back on the third try: *"So what you said was, you want to use every possible means of diplomacy before resorting to violence, that is, military intervention...? Is that what you meant...?"* *"Yes, exactly. Thanks for hearing me."*

The doves were no better at listening than the hawks. When a dove had to feed back what a "military brat" thought, the dove could hardly choke out the words: *"So you grew up believing the military is primarily interested in making a more just and safer world...? And that's what you see America doing in the Gulf...?"*

They struggled, but spent the evening carefully listening to each other. They gained understanding about how the other side felt and what they believed. They felt heard in a way they had not before. The evening ended with folks saying to each other, in effect: *"I had no idea you felt that way. I didn't understand what your experience was. No wonder you think the way you do. We certainly don't agree, but at least now I understand your position and respect you."*

The next week, I was to be out of town and the group decided to meet and continue the discussion. I urged them to use the ground rules and monitor the process. At the meeting they decided that since "they were friends and understood each other now, they wouldn't need to." You can guess what happened. The discussion turned into a heated debate, punctuated with misunderstanding and hurt feelings.

The "listen-first-and-talk-second" model works whether the group takes turns systematically going around the room or irregularly moving to the person who wants to talk next.

Regardless of the order, the critical issue is the same. Before anyone gets to talk, that person must earn the right by feeding back what the previous talker said to their satisfaction.

This works best when someone moderates the process and sees that everyone gets heard and understood.

A group can self-monitor, but that requires that members understand the method and be willing to speak up and see that no one gets away with talking without first listening.

If you are going to lead or participate in an emotionally loaded discussion, it helps to know that either the group will discuss without a plan, relying on current cultural patterns (which likely means everyone focusing on their own views and disregarding others) or the group will proceed with a plan. I encourage you to introduce this system to allow everyone to earn their right to speak by listening first.

Taking turns respects and values each member of the group. You have the tools available to help disparate folks with divergent, strongly held opinions build community. Good luck. The world sorely needs what you can do.



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