

# How to Talk to A Difficult Liberal

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A Guide for Conservatives

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# CHAPTER ONE



## Introduction



# How It Begins

## Difficult Situations

Have you ever been in any of the following situations:

- **At a Party:** You're at a party and Anna, a friend of the host, who you know casually, comes up to you and starts berating you about Trump's latest tweets and isn't he the worst and most racist President ever!
- **At a Family Gathering:** Maybe it's Thanksgiving, maybe it's Christmas, maybe it's a summer barbecue. Your brother-in-law, Bill, asks you what do you think about the Mueller investigation and when do you think Trump will be impeached?
- **On Facebook:** A friend from college comments on a photo you posted of your latest hunting trip with your buddies, asking why you support killing children.

OK, these may be extreme examples (or maybe not), but we do live in difficult times. We may live in the most politically divided time since the 1850s. Conversations across the political divide have become treacherous, with many people avoiding them or regretting them afterwards.

So how do you navigate these difficult situations while staying true to your conservative principles? How do you seek ways to clarify differences and search for common ground without igniting open hostilities?

In this guide, you'll learn skills for communicating effectively with liberal friends, coworkers and loved ones who disagree with you and have strong feelings about the leadership of your Party. You'll learn how to avoid the escalation trap when talking about President Trump and his policies.

And you'll get acquainted with the Better Angels movement to depolarize America.

## CHAPTER TWO



# Hidden Tribes



# Hidden Tribes

## It's Not as Bad as You Think

Perhaps the most interesting examination of America's polarized landscape in recent memory is a study called [Hidden Tribes](#) published in 2018 by the More In Common Initiative. Their research went beyond the media narrative of two competing tribes, Reds (conservative in philosophy, tending to vote for Republicans) and Blues (liberal or progressive in philosophy, tending to vote for Democrats) to reveal seven groups, defined by their core beliefs, rather than by their political opinions, race, class or gender.

Perhaps more importantly, they found that the overwhelming majority of Americans (86%) are not at the extremes, and that this unheard majority want Americans to come together and solve our countries pressing issues.



*In talking to everyday Americans, we have found a large segment of the population whose voices are rarely heard above the shouts of the partisan tribes. These are people who believe that Americans have more in common than that which divides them. While they differ on important issues, they feel exhausted by the division in the United States. They believe that compromise is necessary in politics, as in other parts of life, and want to see the country come together and solve its problems.*

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**From Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape, 2018**

As you encounter those “difficult liberals”, stop to consider that they may not be part of the partisan extreme. They are all fellow Americans, and they want many of the same things that conservatives want: good jobs, a bright future for their family, good healthcare, security.

Most people in a friend- or family-relationship have some common values and concerns that can be unearthed in a proper conversation. Use the political conversation for good. Try to learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you politically.

You can also achieve a sense of satisfaction about how well you conveyed your own perspective, feelings, and experiences. Best of all, when done properly you will discover some common ground with your political opposites if it’s there.

## CHAPTER THREE



# Four Do's, Four Don'ts



# Four Do's, Four Don't's

## Some Simple Rules to Follow

Political discussions between people who hold different political philosophies or different core beliefs can be very difficult. They are even more difficult in the context of a group. Over Thanksgiving dinner, for example, words can escalate and feelings can be hurt by out of control political arguments.

Group conversations are like water: they run downhill—at the speed of the most argumentative or agitated member. If you can, have these conversations one on one – preferably with someone who you've built trust with over time.

### Four Do's

1

**Try to understand the other's viewpoint before responding with yours** (“I think you're saying that.... Am I getting that right?” “What else do you think about it?”)

2

**Use I statements** (“this is how I see it”) rather than truth statements (this is how it is!”). Share your perspective rather than making pronouncements.

3

**Find something in common if at all possible** (“I agree with you that....” “We both want to fix this problem.” Leading with what you agree on softens the other person.

4

**Acknowledge and then respond.** Go back and forth between acknowledging what the other person has said (“I get it that you think ....”) and making your points (“My own view is that....”). This avoids talking over each other and encourages the other person to not just keep repeating a point that you already taken in.

## Four Don'ts

1

**Raise your voice and get agitated.** It takes two to escalate.

2

**Ask gotcha questions** (“Do you actually believe that...?”) These are attacks rather than real questions.

3

**Assign negative motives to the other side** (“Democrats want open borders for criminals and terrorists.”) This leads to defensiveness and counterattack because no one is a villain in their own story.

4

**Throw out labels like “socialist” or “nutjob.”** This shuts down or inflames the other person. You can usually make your point without the label.

Here's the general rule: Respect the worth and dignity of the person you're talking with even if you are dumbfounded or appalled by the views they express.

## CHAPTER FOUR



# The Six Skill Sets



# The Six Skill Sets

## Taking It To the Next Level

The Four Do's and Four Don'ts are a shortcut, 8 helpful things to remember as you have a difficult conversation with someone whose political views are very different from your own.

To take it to the next level, you have to master six skill sets:

The Six Skill Sets	
1	Set a constructive tone
2	Use a helpful communication style
3	Listen in a way that the other person feels heard
4	Speak in a way that helps the other person hear you
5	Handling difficult moments
6	Finding Common Ground

## **BEFORE YOU START**

### **Goals for these Conversations**

- You share your views in a way that makes it more likely that liberals in your social world will understand you—and not attack or dismiss you
- You learn more about the perspectives and experiences of liberals in your social world
- You discover some common ground, if it's there

### **Expectations to Abandon**

- That you can persuade the other person to change core attitudes and beliefs
- That facts will be agreed on and logic followed consistently
- That your conversation partner will match your openness

### **Cautions**

- Timing is key. Start at a calm moment and not after someone has fired off a verbal shot or is in mid-rant
- Only try this with someone you think might want to hear your point of view
- Practice one-to-one first; group conversations are harder
- Not intended for use online! Online conversations are a different “animal”, potentially much harder than even group conversations in person

## SKILL 1: SET A CONSTRUCTIVE TONE



1. Let the other person know that you want to understand other perspectives better.  
*"I'm finding myself curious these days about the views of people who are different from the people I tend to hang out with."*

2. Ask permission to pose questions.  
*"Can I ask you something about politics and your views on something?"*

Or, to an out-of-town relative:

*"Can I ask you what people in your part of the country are saying about what's going on in Washington these days?"*

3. Acknowledge your political stance  
*"As you probably know, I'm a conservative Republican (or libertarian, etc.), so that's the perspective I come from."*
4. Offer something critical of your own side and credit something positive about the other side.  
*"I think conservatives sometimes come across like they don't care about minorities. Liberals have done a better job of connecting with minority groups."*

## SKILL 2: USE A HELPFUL COMMUNICATION STYLE



### Avoid communication styles that make it hard for Blues to hear you

1. Avoid firmly declaring things to be true or false. (“Obama Care is a complete disaster—it’s ruining the health care system.”) Instead:
  - Assume the person is reasonably intelligent and knowledgeable and wants a back-and-forth conversation instead of proclamations.
  - Be aware that even if the other person has some blind spots, so do you.
  - Speak with a tone that acknowledges that rational people can disagree with you. (*“I realize you may see this differently. From where I sit....”*)
2. Avoid deflecting criticism of your side by saying that the other side has done the same thing without being criticized. (*“What about when Obama put children in jail with their immigrant parents? Nobody objected because it was Obama.”*) Instead:
  - Be willing to accept criticism of your own side when appropriate, even if the other side has done the same thing. Two wrongs don’t make a right.
  - Accept the reality that most people are more forgiving of their own side and more critical of the other side for the same actions.
  - Be cautious about framing every inconsistency as hypocrisy, unless you are willing to do the same with your own side.

3. Avoid using religious and “natural law” arguments without acknowledging that the other person may not share the same worldview. (“God created marriage between one man and one woman,” or “Gay marriage is against nature.”) Instead:
  - If you can, offer reasons that don’t assume that the other person holds your worldview.
  - Be clear that you have a particular perspective, thereby making room for the other person to have a different perspective: *“From my perspective as a conservative and a Christian...”*

### SKILL 3: LISTEN IN A WAY THAT THE OTHER PERSON FEELS HEARD



1. **Paraphrase.** Make sure you understand and the other person feels heard. Listen for a “Yes, that’s what I’m saying”, but be ready to be corrected instead.

*“So for you, Trump is a big threat to the country” or  
“You’re saying that Obama care needs fixing but should not be thrown out.”*

DO NOT suggest any implications beyond their statement or offer your critique of what they have said, with comments like: *“You’re suggesting that Trump can’t possibly learn on the job.”*

2. **Ask real and honest questions of understanding, not loaded “gotcha” questions.** (This is harder to do than you might think!)

*“Do you see Black Lives Matters helping or hurting things in our cities?”  
NOT “Do you see attacking the police as the solution?”*

It can be helpful to ask how the other person came to their view on an issue, especially if it’s strongly held. Stories are important: they humanize us.

*“I’m interested in how you came to your strong views on children and poverty.”*

Then acknowledge the experiences behind the person’s views.

3. Listen for underlying personal values and aspirations, and acknowledging them.  
*"I get that for you, fairness is a big issue when it comes to immigration." or  
"You want to make sure that poor and minority kids don't lose out in our educational system."*
4. Listen for underlying core liberal values and beliefs, and acknowledge them.

This can give you a context for views the person has on specific policies or political leaders. For example:

- Inclusiveness, concern for those on the margins
- Diversity, the value of human differences
- Equality of opportunity, a leveling playing field
- Emphasis on ongoing historical patterns that create inequality and discrimination
- Importance of government for helping those in need and for creating the conditions for equal opportunity
- Concern about abuses of free-market capitalism
- Patriotism balanced with criticism of the country and the idea that all nations have worth
- A desire to protect stigmatized groups from speech and behavior that further harm them
- Openness to big government policy ideas and major social change

Note that these values and beliefs vary between more left-wing progressives, traditional liberals, and moderate liberals; they also vary between some minority and white liberals.

## SKILL 4: SPEAK IN A WAY THAT HELPS THE OTHER PERSON HEAR YOU



1. **Use “I” statements** (“This is how I see it”) more often than truth statements (“This is how it is”).

*“I think that Trump is shaking things up in a good way right now,”* rather than  
*“This country needed to be shaken up, and Trump is doing it.”*

If you are offering a factual statement, you can still use I-statements by acknowledging that are you relying on sources.

*“I’m not against using alternative energy sources, but from what I’ve been reading, if we cut back too fast on fossil fuels, we risk major economic consequences.”*

2. **Use “I’m concerned/worried/troubled” expressions** rather than definitive “This is what will happen” when referring to the future.

*“I’m worried that if the national debt keeps going up, we’ll be bankrupt and there will be no Social Security when I retire”* and not

*“Believe me, the national debt is going to bankrupt the country and none of us are going to be able to retire.”*

3. **Mention an area of similarity or agreement** on a value or policy (if you see one).

*"It sounds like we both want everyone to have good health care and feel the health care system needs a lot of fixing" or*

*"I think we agree that gerrymandering is adding fuel to the polarization we're seeing these days."*

4. Before expressing disagreement, **say some version of "I hear you."** (acknowledgement)

*"I hear you that you think that federally-backed health care is the way to go. [INTENTIONAL PAUSE] From my point of view, the federal government has a really bad track record of running domestic programs, and I can't see it doing a good job on something as complicated as health care. I prefer a market-approach with state help for people who can't afford insurance."*

Going back and forth between acknowledging the other's feelings or viewpoint and then stating your own is more effective than just restating your position. It's like a dance: two steps one way, one step back, and repeat. Aim for "yes, and" rather than "yes, but". (I hear you, and here's what I think about this.)

Note: An intentional pause allows for a transition from acknowledging the other's viewpoint to your own. It also gives the other person a chance to acknowledge verbally or non-verbally that you got it right.

5. **Counteract common stereotypes Blues have of Reds**, to allow the other person to see you as an individual and not as a member of a stereotyped group.

From Better Angels red/blue workshops across the nation, here are some stereotypes that Reds believe Blues have of Reds: racist, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, heartless (unconcerned about the poor and needy), anti-science, Bible thumpers.

For comparison, here are the stereotypes that Blues think others have of them: arrogant/elitist, big government for its own sake, not concerned about dependency on government programs, not patriotic, anti-business, anti-religion, stifling speech they don't like, "snowflakes" (too sensitive).

Here are some ways you might want to counteract unfair stereotypes the other person may have of you:

Proactively affirm values and beliefs the other person may not know you have, such as the importance of a social safety net, your concern about racism and your value of the equal worth and dignity of all people, or your support for legal immigration as good for the country. In other words, expand beyond traditionally Red issues such as limited government, dependency on social safety net programs, and illegal immigration—assuming that those other values and beliefs are true for you as well.

Acknowledge the kernels of truth in some of the stereotypes: what bothers you about the views, actions, or inconsistencies of some people on your side. (“Some leaders on my side are tone deaf when talking about minority groups” or “I’m a big supporter of legal immigration, and sometimes I wonder if my party is so focused on illegal immigration that it’s throwing the baby out with the bath water.”)

If you sense that the other person assumes you agree with President Trump on everything or that you like every tweet he posts, offer your own reservations about the President’s policies or style (even if overall you support him).

6. **Be aware of Red “colorized” language**, acknowledging when some terms are contested by Blues, and being aware when you are reactive to Blue terms. Sometimes it’s helpful to use alternative language to convey your meaning.

- Blue terms: diversity, inclusiveness, social justice, safe spaces, privilege, marginalized, institutional racism, white supremacy
- Red terms: American greatness, love of country, personal responsibility, fiscal responsibility, religious liberty, big government programs, self-sufficiency, dependency

7. If you feel very strongly about an issue, **say something about what life experiences** have led to you to be passionate about it. **Stories humanize issues** and make passionate political people come across as human beings who care.

*“I’ve worked in health care my whole career, and I’ve seen things that have disturbed me a lot....”*

8. **Soften flat-out disagreements by signaling first that your perspective is very different.** (*"It probably won't surprise you that I see this completely differently."*)

Or if you get really emotional on a topic, signal that as well: *"This one is very close to home for me, and I have very strong feelings about it"*.



## SKILL 5: HANDLING DIFFICULT MOMENTS



1. **Stay focused on a topic** when the other person jumps around from issue to issue.  
*“Can we stay with immigration for now?”*
2. **Don’t answer baiting questions;** instead, just restating your viewpoint on the topic.  
*When asked “Do you think we should just round up undocumented immigrants and throw them in concentration camps?” you might respond, “I think we have to find a way to make sure that our immigration laws mean something—by enforcing them.”*
3. **Don’t return provocative statements in kind.**  
*When someone blurts out “Trump will go down in history as the worse President we’ve ever had,” instead of saying “Do you think that Hillary would have been a modern-day Lincoln?”, you might respond “For now, he’s the President and I want to give him a chance to succeed.”*
4. **Instead of beating entrenched differences into the ground, agree to disagree.**  
*“We both have strong feelings about this, and I don’t think we’re going to convince each other at the moment.”*

**5. If the other person is upset and no longer listening, exit the conversation in a low-key way.**

Examples could range from humor: *"Well, we sure figured that one out!"*  
...to showing concern: *"I don't want to keep going and end up with bad feelings between us,"*

Or simply exit stage left: *"Gotta go. To be continued."*



## SKILL 6: FINDING COMMON GROUND



Discovering common ground has two component parts – one positive and one negative. The positive component is finding agreement with your partner’s point-of-view – common values and concerns that can be unearthed.

You should capitalize on every opportunity to highlight an area of similarity or agreement when you hear one. Often, these are broad issues, philosophical concepts, or generalities. Examples, that could be stated by either persuasion, include:

*“It sounds like we both agree that the health care system needs a lot of fixing.”*

*“Seems like both of us see the media as dividing us more than informing us right now.”*

*“I think we agree that gerrymandering is adding fuel to the polarization we’re seeing these days.”*

*“I think we agree that money has had a corrosive effect on American politics and has made politicians less responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens.”*

Note that these statements lack specifics and judgements. Be careful about trying to solve these issues or define them more specifically – it can destroy the agreement you have reached with your partner.

Another technique to finding common ground is to offer something critical of your own side and crediting something positive about the other side.

A conservative might say, *“I think that conservatives can sometimes come across like they don’t care about minorities. Liberals have done a better job of connecting with minority groups.”*

The negative side of finding agreement is softening flat-out disagreements and, as much as possible, trying to defuse tense situations. Before expressing a disagreement, say some version of “I hear you.”

A conservative might say, *“I hear you that you think that federally-backed health care is the way to go . . . . From my point of view, the federal government has a really bad track record of running domestic programs, and I can’t see it doing a good job on something as complicated as health care. I prefer a market approach with states helping people who can’t afford insurance.”*

Going back and forth between acknowledging the other’s feelings or viewpoints and then stating your own is more effective than simply restating your position. It’s like a dance: two steps one way, one step back, and repeat. Aim for “yes, and” rather than “yes, but” -- *I hear you, and here’s what I think about this.*

## CHAPTER FIVE



# Talking With Trump Critics



# Talking With Trump Critics

## A Guide for Reds

### Mindset

- Assume that the other person wants good things for the country.
- Don't regard the other person as a political opponent—it's just someone you know.
- Be prepared to stay emotionally calm, even if the other person is not, and use your Better Angels skills.
- Choose the moment—don't let the moment choose you.

### Listen and Adapt to Different Kinds of Trump Critics

1. **Outraged Critic.** Highly emotional/agitated. Trump is horrible and so us everyone supports him.

#### Conversational strategy:

Maintain your dignity without counter-attacking or emotionally defending yourself.

Abandon any thought of influencing the other person's views.

Acknowledge

- The strength of the other person's views and feelings (*"I hear you: you think he is a terrible President in just about every way."*)
- That others feel the same way (*"I know that a lot of people agree with you. He drives a lot of people crazy with this personality and policies."*)

Briefly and calmly give your viewpoint on Trump. If you have any concerns about him or his Presidency, mention them along with the positives.

If the other person counters and escalates (*"I can't see how you could support a racist narcissist!"*), move towards a graceful exit rather than get into a fruitless argument with someone who is agitated. *"It looks like we see Trump very differently, and I don't think we're going to convince each other to change."*

Let the other person get in one more shot, and repeat your exit line. Do not continue the conversation (*"Let's move on, okay?"*)

**Upset Critic.** Emotional but not agitated. Perplexed that a rational person could support Trump.

**Conversational strategy:**

Try to show that a rational person can support Trump

Don't try to change the other person's central attitude towards Trump

Start with one core reason why you support Trump and see if the other person is willing to listen. (*"He promised to shake up the Establishment, and he's delivering."*)

Make sure you share any reservations or criticisms you have of Trump.

When the other person counters, first acknowledge their view before elaborating on your own position. (*"I understand that you think he's destroying things rather than shaking them up. My own view is...."*)

If the other person is staying reasonably calm rather than escalating, offer another reason why you support Trump. Repeat the above process of acknowledging and elaborating. Stay calm throughout.

Look for any common ground that has emerged.

If the other person escalates (*"I can't understand why you can't see through this con artist!"*), then move to gracefully exit. (*"It looks like we see Trump very differently, and I don't think we're going to convince each other to change."*)

Let the other person get in one more shot, and repeat your exit line. Do not continue the conversation (*"Let's move on, okay?"*)

If the other person refrained from attacking you and you refrained from counter-attacking and being defensive, you could end by expressing appreciation for the fact that you had a real conversation instead of what usually goes on in our country.

**3. Calm Critic.** Is willing to listen and is curious about why you support Trump.

**Conversational strategy:**

Use the standard Better Angels listening and speaking skills.

Whenever you see common ground, express it. (*"Sounds like we agree that social media is adding fuel to the fire in this country....that something has to be done with immigration policy even if we don't agree on exactly what to do."*)

When after several exchanges you say that you and the other are 180 degrees different, say that non-judgmentally rather than arguing the point. (*"It looks like we see the Russian collusion thing completely differently. We'll see how it plays out."*)

Express appreciation for a constructive conversation if that's what you've had.  
*"We need more of that in this country."*



# Conclusion



# Conclusion

## Parting Thoughts

As you engage in this process, we do want to offer some words of caution:

- You cannot expect to persuade someone to change their core attitudes and beliefs. Your best hope should be to reach mutual understanding.
- You should not expect that “facts” will be agreed on and that logic will be followed consistently in the course of conversation.
- Each participant in the conversation needs to save face. You must ensure that no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving, or bigoted.

Preserving the relationship you have with this “difficult” person should be a primary goal for your conversations. In a polarized world, these key relationships become ever more important to your sanity and well-being.

Having respectful conversations and depolarizing ourselves is but the first step.

Better Angels is a national citizens' movement to reduce political polarization in the United States by bringing progressives and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes, forming red/blue community alliances, teaching practical skills for communicating across political differences, and making a strong public argument for depolarization.

We conduct workshops that successfully help polar opposite Americans build trust and better understand each other. Our signature "Red/Blue Workshop" brings together equal numbers of conservative-leaning and progressive-leaning participants for moderated activities and discussions that clarify disagreements, reduce stereotyped thinking, and begin building the relationships needed to find common ground.

Our "Skills Workshop" teaches practical skills for having better conversations with friends and family members with whom you have strong political disagreements.

To learn more about Better Angels, watch the short video [below](#) to learn more or visit [www.better-angels.org](http://www.better-angels.org).



[Better Angels State of the Union Jan 31, 2019](#)

# Get Involved

Want to learn more? Or perhaps skeptical that you really can have a good conversation with liberals?

Come join us at one of our events near you. If there isn't an event near you, consider joining Better Angels and organizing an event. We can help you find like-minded liberals and conservatives to sponsor an event, as well as provide detailed instructions and training on how to hold an event.

[Find an Event](#)