

All Social Change Begins with a Conversation

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For conversation to become a powerful tool in society, we must take it seriously and examine our own role in making it successful. Here are some basic principles I've learned over years of hosting formal conversations around the country.

We acknowledge one another as equals . One thing that makes us equal is that we need each other. Whatever any one of us knows alone, it is not enough to change things. Someone else is bound to see things that we need to know.

We try to stay curious about each other. I maintain my curiosity by reminding myself that everyone has something to teach me. When others are saying things I disagree with, or have never thought about, or that I consider foolish or wrong, I remind myself that I really can learn from them—if I stay open and do not shut them out.

We recognize that we need each other's help to become better listeners. The greatest barrier to good conversation is that as a culture we're losing the capacity to listen. We're too busy. We're too certain of our own views. We just keep rushing past each other. At the beginning of any conversation I host, I make a point of asking everyone to help each other listen. This is hard work for almost everyone, but if we talk about listening at the start of a conversation, it makes things easier. If someone hasn't been listening to us, or misinterprets what we say, we're less likely to blame that person. We can be a little gentler with the difficulties we experience in a group if we make a commitment at the start to help each other listen.

We slow down so we have time to think and reflect . Most of us work in places where we rarely have time to sit together and think. We dash in and out of meetings where we make hurried, not thoughtful, decisions. Working to create conditions for a true spirit of conversation helps rediscover the joy of thinking together.

We remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together. Conversation is not a new invention for the 21st century; we're restoring a tradition from earlier human experience. It does, however, take time to let go of our modern ways of being in meetings, to get past the habits that keep us apart—speaking too fast, interrupting others, monopolizing the time, giving speeches or making pronouncements. Many of us have been rewarded for these behaviors, becoming more powerful by using them. But the blunt truth is that they don't lead to wise thinking or healthy relationships.

We expect it to be messy at times. Life doesn't move in straight lines, and neither does a good conversation. When a conversation begins, people always say things that don't connect. What's important at the start is that everyone's voice gets heard, that everyone feels invited into the conversation.