



GUTENBERG  
COLLEGE

# THE ART OF MEANINGFUL DISCUSSION

## WORKSHOP

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*Indeed a conversation is a dramatic work, even if a very short one, in which the participants are not only the actors, but also the joint authors, working out in agreement or disagreement the mode of their production.*

~ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

### Overview

Meaningful discussion is an exchange of thoughts and ideas. The quote above from Alasdair MacIntyre speaks to the fact that a discussion is a team effort. In meaningful discussions, everyone in the group is working together for the good of everyone else in the discussion. As such, discussion centers on clear communication, charity, thoughtfulness, humility, honesty, respect, dignity, and kindness. Discussion is a place for affirmation, but also for disagreement. Disagreement handled gracefully can bring depth and insight for all involved.

When people feel like a discussion has gone well, it is because they feel like they have been seen, heard, and understood; have had the opportunity to learn from the others in the room; and have made some headway on an issue that is meaningful to them. Discussions are unscripted and, consequently, unpredictable. The purpose of this workshop is to give discussion leaders confidence by addressing key issues to becoming an effective discussion leader and a good participant.



### **Q1: How should I think of the other participants in the group?**

Your discussion group is a team of intelligent, diverse, and interesting people. Regardless of age, race, gender, or background, everyone in the group has unique knowledge and experience to bring to the discussion. These contributions may be extremely valuable to others in the group in sometimes unexpected ways. The participants are valuable human beings—use their names when addressing them directly or referring back to what they said previously in discussion.

A common pitfall of discussion leading is for all—including the leader—to assume that she is an expert or specialist who is there to educate the others. When the leader sees herself in this way, discussions can easily become a lecture from “an expert.” Resist this. While a leader may have special knowledge and experience, this must be seen in a peer-to-peer context where all in the room are learning from each other. It is helpful for leaders to think of everyone in the room as co-learners trying to understand each other and figure out something together. This will take humility and restraint on the part of the leader.

Some people communicate in a non-linear fashion. They may or may not articulate what they believe to be a clear relationship between their response and the question. Whatever the method and style by which participants communicate, it is important to dignify who they are and what they say even if it’s off topic or controversial.

### **Q2: How should I think of my role and responsibility as the discussion leader?**

The discussion leader is responsible for facilitating discussion among the participants. To “facilitate” means to help others communicate and to be understood by the others in the room. This may necessitate keeping a loose grip on the discussion. The more skilled the discussion leader, the less she will say. In an ideal situation, the discussion leader will say little, and speak only as needed to cultivate a group dynamic of openness.

### **Q3: How should I think about who benefits from discussion and how they benefit?**

There will be multiple speakers in a discussion. The person speaking benefits in that she has the opportunity to articulate a thought or idea. Upon speaking it, that person then gets to make a decision about whether the thing expressed is agreeable to her or not. In responding to what the speaker says, the speaker can get more information about whether she said what she meant. If she did not communicate what she meant, leave space for her to elaborate.

#### **Q4: How can I help people in my discussion group communicate better?**

A central part of leading a discussion is helping everyone in the group communicate. The leader can do this in a few ways. The leader needs to make it clear to all in the room that she is listening to the speaker and is not taking sides. The leader can indicate that she is listening a few different ways:

- 1) Look at the speaker.
- 2) Read the faces and body language of everyone else at the table—are *they* looking at the speaker? Are they engaged?
- 3) Ask follow-up questions of the speaker.
  - a. People feel listened to when the listener can summarize and say back to the speaker what she has said.
    - i. For example, the leader might summarize what the speaker said in this way: “It sounds like you are saying that in this scenario, Joe politely pulled out the chair so that Lisa could sit down.”
      1. Note: a summary of what the speaker said should avoid language and tones of voice that judge what the speaker said.
    - ii. Ask follow-up questions to help the speaker communicate more fully what she means:
      1. “Do you feel like I understand what you are saying?”
      2. “What made you think of that?”
      3. “What do you mean by ‘politely?’”
      4. “Why was it significant to you that Joe was polite to Lisa in this case?”
      5. “Can you give an example?”
      6. “Can you say that a different way?”

#### **Q5: What challenges can I expect of a discussion, and what kinds of things can I do to handle them gracefully?**

Because discussions are unscripted, anything can happen. In all instances, pursue a solution that dignifies and respects everyone in the group.

Challenge 1: There’s dead air.

If discussion is about communicating, and no one is talking, this can become uncomfortable. However, silence can mean a number of different things. Silence may mean indifference, that the question/issue is not interesting to the participants. Silence may mean that the participants are confused—that they don’t understand the question asked. Silence may mean thoughtfulness, that the participants are wrestling with the question/issue internally before they speak. Silence may mean shyness, that the participants want to be sure that they are in a safe place to speak their mind.

Ideas: 1) Wait until someone breaks the silence. 2) Ask someone—by name—if she has thoughts on the question/issue. Resist the urge to use the silence to lecture.

Challenge 2: A controversial issue/perspective comes up.

Confronting controversial issues can be one of the most meaningful aspects of a discussion, if handled well. Controversial issues can range from religion to politics to family practices.

Ideas: 1) The discussion leader should resist taking sides or articulating his or her position on a controversial issue unless directly asked by another participant. 2) Be extremely attentive to help the participants communicate directly—don't let them talk over each other's heads. In this instance, the leader may need to be very active in summarizing opposing views for the group. Example: "It sounds like you are saying, x. Is that what you mean?"

Challenge 3: A participant is going off topic.

When a participant goes off topic, one of two things is happening. Either the question/issue caused an association that the speaker has to verbally process before she gets back around to the main issue OR the speaker feels like she needs to be heard on the particular issue.

Ideas: 1) When the speaker finishes, ask "What about our discussion so far made you think of that?" or "What relationship do you see between what you just said and the front end of the discussion?" 2) When the speaker finishes, you might propose a relationship between what she said and the topic at hand: "I see what you're saying. To me, it seems like x might be similar to y." This will help keep the discussion coherent and let the others know that this is still a team effort in which their input is desired.

Challenge 4: Someone is dominating the discussion.

Hopefully, the person dominating the discussion is not the discussion leader. Either way, this situation is difficult to handle. It's important to listen to and dignify the speaker, but it's also important to honor everyone else in the group. It may sometimes be difficult to tell when too much speaking is too much.

Ideas: 1) Ask the dominating speaker to pause so everyone in the group can get clarity on what she is saying. The leader could say something like "Could we pause for one minute to make sure we all understand what you're saying? [insert leader's summary of what the speaker is saying here]" Use the opportunity to pose a follow-up question relating to what the dominating speaker has just said to the rest of the group. This opens the floor for others to contribute ideas.