

Moving Beyond Partisan Polarization: Some First Steps

1. Have a New Conversation with Yourself

Listen to your internal dialogue.

Do you sometimes think about those who disagree with you “They’re all alike.”

Do you sometimes refer to activists on “the other side” with terms like “murderers” or “terrorists”?

Are there slogans used by your “side” that don’t fully resonate with your experience or values? Some that offend, confuse, or concern you?

Have you met or seen anyone on “the other side” who seems to be an exception to the image you may hold of what “they” are like?

Are your views more complicated than people close to you may imagine?

Do you have ideas or feelings about animal research that you tend to silence?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of silencing your own complexity?

What could be the advantages and disadvantages of re-examining some of the assumptions you make about people on “the other side”? To you? To your “side”? To the community at large?

What could be the advantages and disadvantages of participating in a conversation in which you could speak about what you really think and really hear different views? To you? To your “side”? To the community at large?

2. Have a New Conversation with an “Ally”

Talk to someone who generally shares your perspective, making agreements about communication guidelines that will foster listening and constructive speaking.

Agree that your goal is mutual understanding rather than agreement.

Try learning about each other’s views leaving aside terms that label your point of view.

Are differences in your experiences or beliefs obscured by those labels? For example, if you agree on the question of whether or not animals should be used in research, do you differ in the way you came to hold that belief? If asked, “what is the heart of the matter for you?” are your answers identical?

If you discover some differences, share how it feels to surface these differences?
Disloyal? Authentic? A little of both?

What made this conversation hard?

What made it rewarding? What did each do (or not do) that contributed to its course?

What did you learn about fostering authentic and constructive communication about animal research or other “hot” issues in the future?

3. Have a New Conversation with an “Opponent”

Invite someone with a different perspective on a major partisan issue to participate in a dialogue. Agree that your goal is mutual understanding rather than agreement.

Develop and agree to some communication ground rules and guidelines before you start. (For example, you both might agree to refrain from interrupting, challenging, or attempting to persuade each other, speaking only for yourself, time limits, etc.)

Avoid words that raise your listener’s defenses. Express your feelings and views so they become sources of contact and learning rather than alienation and antagonism. Open your mind to learning something new. Listen and seek to understand.

Begin by telling each other about personal experiences connected with the development of your views. Then speak about “the heart of the matter” for you.

Notice what you do not understand and ask each other questions that arise from a genuine wish to understand more.

Listen to each other’s responses respectfully and do not argue with any statement.

Allow time to make final statements about what you learned about the issue and about constructive conversation.

4. Help Something New Happen in Your Community

Consider initiating dialogue in your community or in a particular civic or religious group. Try to construct a planning team with people from both “sides.”

Bring people who have diverse political perspectives together to explore what you can do to resist polarization and identify shared concerns and goals.

If you know people with “third party” skills such as facilitators, therapists, clergy, educators, mediators, or negotiators, talk with them about how to create an environment in which conversation on this subject is likely to be constructive.

Don’t know where to begin? Need help with design, strategy, or facilitation tools? Contact Essential Partners (617-923-1216), info@whatisessential.org. We are here to help.

5. Ask the Media for Something New

Urge representatives of the media to give more time and attention to those who have complex views about major issues. Challenge them to make constructive conversation more interesting than shouting matches and extreme statements. Write letters of appreciation when they do so.

Express your concern when members of the media foster misinformation, use demonizing stereotypes, give polarizing accounts of events, ask inflammatory questions, etc.