

THE PRINCIPLES OF PRINCIPLED CONVERSATION

BASIC PRINCIPLES

- **Assume the best about the other person:** Do not ascribe dishonorable motives to another because you disagree. Assume the other person, like you, is a person of integrity who is doing their best in a given situation. If there are two ways to take another person's statement, one way that offends you and another way that does not, opt for the latter. In short, *treat others as you would like to be treated*.
- **What happens here, stays here:** People will speak freely only if they can trust others not to gossip or make extra-curricular comments about what was said.
- **Try to be truly curious about another's point of view:** True curiosity seeks to discover how someone came to hold their opinion or feels a particular way. A curious person remains open to another's thoughts without needing to criticize, judge, or counter with one's own thoughts. If there are things you don't yet understand, ask the person if it is ok for you to ask questions to better understand their thoughts - just be sure your question is not a veiled criticism or loaded with your own assumptions.
- **Explore areas where you and the other person might share common ground.** Focusing on our differences with others often quickly turns conversations into arguments. Discovering areas of shared experiences, preferences, or hopes, helps build a foundation for mutual understanding despite significant differences. However, if common ground eludes you, discern what you have learned during the conversation.
- **People are entitled to hold a wide variety of core attitudes and beliefs.** A principled conversation starts with the premise that we take each other as we are, and that the purpose of the conversation is never to persuade another to change their beliefs. Instead of trying to win over the other or defending your viewpoint, simply listen with your heart, from the place inside yourself that holds empathy and compassion, so that you are open to understanding the other without anyone needing to be "right" at the end of the conversation.

"Principles for Principled Conversation" was compiled by Becky Robbins-Penniman, a retired Episcopal priest who is a member of the Rotary Club of Cedar Park-Leander, to support the work of the Racial Unity and Peacebuilding Committee of the Rotary Club of Georgetown, Texas. For more information or to download this document, scan this QR code and visit our Racial Unity and Peacebuilding site.



THE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

- **Use “I” Statements:** Take responsibility for your own message by using phrases such as “I think . . .”, “I believe . . .”, and “I feel” Avoid making statements about what another person has said that ascribes motives, thoughts, or feelings to them, or makes a judgment about them.
 - “You” message: “You are stuck on only one way of doing this. You don’t care what others think.”
 - “I” message: “I see it a different way. I’d like for us to consider other options.”
- **Be an “Active Listener:”** Let others finish speaking before talking, then make sure you’ve understood them correctly before making your response. It is impossible to truly hear what others are saying if we spend the time they are talking thinking only about what we have say, then launching right in. Before talking, be sure the other person is finished, then briefly restate what they said to ensure you’ve understood them. **Don’t continue the discussion unless the other person agrees that you have restated their position satisfactorily.**
 - Reactive Listening:* “I can’t believe it! You want to endanger innocent children by forcing them to go to school in the dark!”
 - Active Listening:* “What I heard you say is that you think all schools should start early enough in the morning that parents can get to work by 8:00 a.m. Did I hear that correctly?” [Wait for affirmative response; if the speaker corrects you, try again.] OK, could you and I consider together whether that would be beneficial to all concerned, such as children, teachers, and bus drivers, as well as to parents?”
- **Be Respectful:** Say “please” and “thank you.” Do not call people names, either the person you’re talking to or any other person whose name comes up in the discussion.
 - Disrespectful:* “They are a bunch of hypocrites.”
 - Respectful:* “Most of us can name a time when we have behaved in a way that is inconsistent with our values.”
- **Be Accurate:** If you wish to base your opinion on a fact, be prepared to justify the statement with credible evidence. Otherwise, make it clear that your opinion is your own personal belief.
 - Fast and Loose:* “Growth is ruining our community.”
 - Factual:* “A recent study showed that the increases in population will strain our resources.”
- **Avoid Generalizations:** Similarly, avoid blaming, stereotyping, and generalizations. Stating that another (person, party, ethnic group, etc.) has certain attributes, “always” or “never” does something, or bears all the fault for a facet of our common reality is both unfair and inaccurate. In addition, this usually makes the other feel accused and defensive and can quickly sidetrack a discussion. Be specific and focus on the points at issue.
 - Sweeping Assertion:* “They are always trying to blame others for all the problems we’re having.”
 - Specific Example:* “Last week, they publicly rebuked me for the consequences of a decision that they had voted in favor of.”