

Building Bridges:

A toolkit for meaningful conversations
and effective dialogue



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BUILDING BRIDGES:

A toolkit for meaningful conversations and effective dialogue

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Recognize the need for intentional and genuine listening in effective and productive communication.
- Understand the importance of and identify different kinds of nonverbal communication.
- Practice compassionate communication skills.

LEARNING OUTCOME

- Effectively communicate sustainability information and move people to action by appealing to your audience's values.

INSTRUCTIONS

This communication toolkit is designed to take around 2.5 hours for a small group to work through:

- 1.5 to 2 hours in individual preparation, reading and reflecting,
- And about 1 hour to discuss as a group.

Use the lined pages incorporated in Building Bridges communication toolkit to take notes, reflect on your discoveries, and complete the suggested activities. Bring this toolkit with you to your small group meeting for your own reference.

In order for everyone to get the most out of the discussion part of this toolkit, we suggest conversing in small groups of 5 to 10.

It is helpful if one person is designated as the discussion facilitator. They can use the guidelines below.

Guidelines for the Facilitator

Start your conversation with the Circle Question. Each person should take turns going around the circle and answering the question quickly, with no questions or comments from others. The Circle Question gets everyone's voice into the room and encourages an egalitarian conversation space.

Once you have all answered the Circle Question, move on to the other



Discussion Questions. Keep the group's conversation focused on the topic of effective communication. A primary goal is for everyone to participate and to learn from themselves and each other. Draw out quiet participants by creating an opportunity for each person to contribute. Don't let one or two people dominate the discussion. Thank them for their opinions and then ask another person to share.

Be an active listener. You need to hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Model this for others.

The focus should be on personal reactions to the readings and videos — on personal values, feelings, experiences, and commitments. The toolkit is not for judging others' responses.

Lastly, let everyone know you value their time, energy, and contributions by making sure the session ends on time.

Now, let's get started!

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

The past few years have brought us a world that seems more and more polarized. Whether the topic be climate change, business regulation, immigration, civil rights, or gun control, the public conversation is almost exclusively framed as either/or, choice A or B, right or wrong. Those who disagree are villainized by the parties they disagree with, and no nuance is tolerated. Social media only seems to intensify this division by creating echo chambers which keep us from seeing the posts of those who think differently than us. And even for those who largely agree on political ideology or practical solutions, minor differences often lead to seemingly irreparable rifts in communities or movements. There are many problems at play here, including actual political polarization caused by divisive rhetoric from talking heads and significant differences in daily lived experiences among demographic groups. But most of us have much more common ground than we realize when it comes to what we want for our futures, our families, and our communities.

Placing blame makes us feel righteous, but it does not usually further change. Finding and working together based upon common ground is a worthwhile but challenging process that requires effective and compassionate communication. Practicing the art of dialogue can help us listen to and understand each other more. Effective communication can be persuasive, clarifying, and unifying. But effective communication requires listening and knowing your conversation partners even more than it requires speaking eloquently. This communication toolkit will help you practice both listening and speaking to people who think differently than you on virtually any topic you hope to connect on with them. For best outcomes, give yourself plenty of time to review the content below and reflect on your answers to the exercises and questions before you meet with your larger group. Then, take time within your larger group meeting to practice some of the communication skills outlined in this guide.

Here's to better communication for a better world!

WHAT ARE YOUR VALUES?

By Mind Tools

How would you define your values? Before you answer this question, you need to know what, in general, values are.

Your values are the things that you believe are important in the way you live and work. They (should) determine your priorities, and, deep down, they're probably the measures you use to tell if your life is turning out the way you want it to.

When the things that you do and the way you behave match your values, life is usually good — you're satisfied and content. But when these don't align with your personal values, that's when things feel... wrong. This can be a real source of unhappiness.

This is why making a conscious effort to identify your values is so important. Values exist, whether you recognize them or not. Life can be much easier when you acknowledge your values — and when you make plans and decisions that honor them.

How Values Help You

If you value family, but you have to work 70-hour weeks in your job, will you feel internal stress and conflict? And if you don't value competition, and you work in a highly competitive sales environment, are you likely to be satisfied with your job?

In these types of situations, understanding your values can really help. When you know your own values, you can use them to make decisions about how to live your life, and you can answer questions like these:



- What job should I pursue?
- Should I accept this promotion?
- Should I start my own business?
- Should I compromise, or be firm with my position?
- Should I follow tradition, or travel down a new path?

So, take the time to understand the real priorities in your life, and you'll be able to determine the best direction for you and your life goals!

Defining Your Values

When you define your personal values, you discover what's truly important to you. A good way of starting to do this is to look back on your life — to identify when you felt really good, and really confident that you were making good choices.

STEP 1:**Identify the times when you were happiest.**

Find examples from both your career and personal life. This will ensure some balance in your answers.

- What were you doing?
 - Were you with other people? Who?
 - What other factors contributed to your happiness?
-

STEP 2:**Identify the times when you were most proud.**

Use examples from your career and personal life.

- Why were you proud?
 - Did other people share your pride? Who?
 - What other factors contributed to your feelings of pride?
-

STEP 3:**Identify the times when you were most fulfilled and satisfied.**

Again, use both work and personal examples.

- What need or desire was fulfilled?
 - How and why did the experience give your life meaning?
 - What other factors contributed to your feelings of fulfillment?
-

STEP 4:

Determine your top values, based on your experiences of happiness, pride, and fulfillment.

Why is each experience truly important and memorable? Use the following list of common personal values to help you get started — and aim for about 10 top values. (As you work through, you may find that

some of these naturally combine. For instance, if you value philanthropy, community, and generosity, you might say that service to others is one of your top values.)

Accountability	Discipline	Humility	Self-actualization
Accuracy	Discretion	Independence	Self-control
Achievement	Diversity	Ingenuity	Selflessness
Adventurousness	Dynamism	Inner Harmony	Self-reliance
Altruism	Economy	Inquisitiveness	Sensitivity
Ambition	Effectiveness	Insightfulness	Serenity
Assertiveness	Efficiency	Intelligence	Service
Balance	Elegance	Intellectual Status	Shrewdness
Being the best	Empathy	Intuition	Simplicity
Belonging	Enjoyment	Joy	Soundness
Boldness	Enthusiasm	Justice	Speed
Calmness	Equality	Leadership	Spontaneity
Carefulness	Excellence	Legacy	Stability
Challenge	Excitement	Love	Strategic
Cheerfulness	Expertise	Loyalty	Strength
Clear-mindedness	Exploration	Making a difference	Structure
Commitment	Expressiveness	Mastery	Success
Community	Fairness	Merit	Support
Compassion	Faith	Obedience	Teamwork
Competitiveness	Family-orientedness	Openness	Temperance
Consistency	Fidelity	Order	Thankfulness
Contentment	Fitness	Originality	Thoroughness
Continuous	Fluency	Patriotism	Thoughtfulness
Improvement	Focus	Perfection	Timeliness
Contribution	Freedom	Piety	Tolerance
Control	Fun	Positivity	Traditionalism
Cooperation	Generosity	Practicality	Trustworthiness
Correctness	Goodness	Preparedness	Truth-seeking
Courtesy	Grace	Professionalism	Understanding
Creativity	Growth	Prudence	Uniqueness
Curiosity	Happiness	Quality-orientation	Unity
Decisiveness	Hard Work	Reliability	Usefulness
Democraticness	Health	Resourcefulness	Vision
Dependability	Helping Society	Restraint	Vitality
Determination	Holiness	Results-oriented	
Devoutness	Honesty	Rigor	
Diligence	Honor	Security	

STEP 5:

Prioritize your top values. This step is probably the most difficult, because you'll have to look deep inside yourself. It's also the most important step, because, when making a decision, you'll have to choose between solutions that may satisfy different values. This is when you must know which value is more important to you.

- Write down your top values, not in any particular order.
- Look at the first two values and ask yourself, "If I could satisfy only one of these, which would I choose?" It might help to visualize a situation in which you would have to make that choice. For example, if you compare the values of service and stability, imagine that you must decide

whether to sell your house and move to another country to do valuable foreign aid work, or keep your house and volunteer to do charity work closer to home.

- Keep working through the list, by comparing each value with each other value, until your list is in the correct order.

STEP 6:

Reaffirm your values.

Check your top-priority values, and make sure that they fit with your life and your vision for yourself.

- Do these values make you feel good about yourself?
- Are you proud of your top three values?

- Would you be comfortable and proud to tell your values to people you respect and admire?
- Do these values represent things you would support, even if your choice isn't popular, and it puts you in the minority?
When you consider your values in decision making, you can be sure

to keep your sense of integrity and what you know is right, and approach decisions with confidence and clarity. You'll also know that what you're doing is best for your current and future happiness and satisfaction.

Making value-based choices may not always be easy. However, making a choice that you know is right is a lot less difficult in the long run.

If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends.
You talk to your enemies.

– DESMOND TUTU

Too often, we forget that we need each other.

– VAN JONES

PART 2: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Communicating with friends, family, and people you have a personal relationship with

WHAT IT TAKES TO CHANGE HEARTS AND MINDS

By Colin Beavan

Some years ago, the communications psychologist John Marshall Roberts said at a talk I attended that there are three ways of converting people to a cause: by threat of force, by intellectual argument, and by inspiration.

The most effective of these methods, Roberts said, is aligning communication about your cause with the most deeply-held values and aspirations of your friends, relatives, neighbors, and fellow citizens. To get people's total, lasting, and unwavering support, in other words, we should try neither to cajole them judgmentally nor convince them forcefully. We should inspire them toward a vision that they — not we — can really care about.

Which points to the potential problem of blindly using facts and science — be it climate science or demographic science — to “prove” the righteousness of our causes. Research shows that people tend to embrace data that support their life views and reject data that refute them. Whether we like this or not, it is a truth about how humans evaluate and make decisions. Having the “facts on our side” to make an argument more forcefully may not help if those facts and arguments refute someone's view of life and the values that are precious to them.

The communication challenge, then, is to use our facts and science to skillfully and compellingly connect our causes not to what we think our friends, relatives, and fellow citizens should care about, but what they already do care about.

During the Vietnam War, a dairy farmer told a friend of mine the story of how he got recruited into the anti-war movement. The farmer happened to sit on a plane next to an anti-war activist. They got talking, and the activist said that he was campaigning



WATCH: Thich Nhat Hanh on Compassionate Listening
tinyurl.com/juwwoq8

against the U.S. use of fire-bombing.

The cow farmer said, “I know it's awful, but we surely wouldn't use that weapon if we didn't need it to win the war.” The activist told him that crops were being burned and villagers were starving. The dairy farmer felt sympathetic but said the weapons might ultimately bring a faster end to the war. The activist mentioned children getting burned, forests turned to cinder. The farmer felt awful about the suffering, but his view remained unchanged. Finally, in frustration, the activist said, “Even the cattle are dying!” The dairy farmer said, “Wait! What?! They are killing the cows?!”

We may think the cow farmer should have cared about the crops, villagers, children, and forests. Yet trying to force more information — science and data — about them down his throat might have risked alienating him. Instead, finding his true soft spot — the cows — and being willing to enter into his life view was what eventually recruited him into the anti-war movement.

In another example, when activists with the California-based Leadership Lab knock on voters' doors in its efforts to defeat anti-LGBTQ prejudice, they don't start by talking about homophobia — they start by

asking what personal experience of prejudice and bigotry the voter has had. Then, Leadership Lab volunteers tell a story of an LGBTQ person experiencing homophobia. They ask a question: “Do you see a connection between the prejudice you experienced and homophobia?” Recognizing that prejudice is the same wherever it is found, many voters are inspired to combat it.

In converting friends and fellow citizens to our causes, we should not blindly attempt to use facts and science to bolster the arguments and stories that appeal to our own values and experiences. Instead, we are challenged to listen to and understand the people we are trying to convince. Then, we can marshal the facts and figures that prove that our cause can help support their values.

In the case of renewable energy, for example, our friends may care more about national security than climate change. We can tell them about the security advantages of generating energy at home; trying to force them to believe in climate change by explaining the scientific details of the greenhouse effect, on the other hand, may not help. The point is to begin by asking questions in order to understand the values we need to

appeal to, and then to use our facts to build a story that inspires the people we are talking to — rather than trying to force our own inspirations on them.

Facts and figures are wonderful tools, but they are not a communications strategy. Let’s not let our convictions blind us to the fact that other people have theirs. We need to hear our audiences’ stories and then retell ours in a way that mirrors their challenges and aspirations. We need to be empathetic and know that our stories are their stories. And that the challenges we face in being human are one.



COMMUNICATION TIPS: HOW YOU CAN USE THE NVC PROCESS

Clearly expressing how I am without blaming or criticizing	Empathically receiving how you are without hearing blame or criticism
OBSERVATIONS	
1. What I observe (<i>see, hear, remember, imagine, free from my evaluations</i>) that does or does not contribute to my well-being: <i>"When I (see, hear)..."</i>	1. What you observe (<i>see, hear, remember, imagine, free from your evaluations</i>) that does or does not contribute to your well-being: <i>"When you see/hear..."</i> <i>(Sometimes unspoken when offering empathy)</i>
FEELINGS	
2. How I feel (<i>emotion or sensation rather than thought</i>) in relation to what I observe: <i>"I feel..."</i>	2. How you feel (<i>emotion or sensation rather than thought</i>) in relation to what you observe: <i>"You feel..."</i>
3. What I need or value (<i>rather than a preference, or a specific action</i>) that causes my feelings: <i>"... because I need/value..."</i>	3. What you need or value (<i>rather than a preference, or a specific action</i>) that causes your feelings: <i>"... because you need/value..."</i>
Clearly requesting that which would enrich my life without demanding	Empathically receiving that which would enrich your life without hearing any demand
REQUESTS	
4. The concrete actions I would like taken: <i>"Would you be willing to..."</i>	4. The concrete actions you would like taken:

By Marshall B. Rosenberg. Used courtesy of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, www.CNVC.org
 5600 San Francisco Rd. NE Suite A
 Albuquerque, NM 87109
 Tel: +1.505.244.4041

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Please write your answers to these before you meet to discuss this guide.

1. Name a few of the values you have in common with some of your friends and family. Name a few of the values you differ on. Are you able to name the values of the people you love?

2. If you haven't tried compassionate listening, what might help you let go of any judgments or preconceived notions, and solely listen to a person just as they are in that moment?

3. What do you do well in communicating with the people you love? What could you improve upon?

PART 3: PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

Building the case — to your boss, co-workers, or partners

FIVE ASSUMPTIONS WE SHOULD TRY TO MAKE ABOUT EVERYONE

By Marsha Rakestraw

The most recent US election has highlighted a significant divisiveness. And the media and social media have been awash in hate speech and arguments, calls for healing and moving on, judgments, ideas about next steps, and assumptions.

Usually when we make assumptions about others, they're not positive ones.

We tend to make split-second judgments; build complex stories in the blink of an eye with them as villain and us as hero (or victim); attach nefarious motivations to their actions. We forget that we're seeing them through our own lenses, with our own stories and experiences as filters that influence what we think, believe, and notice.

As good as it can feel to unleash anger and blame at others, studies show that taking action that spurs people to feel judged and defensive not only decreases their willingness to consider change, but may make them more likely to dig into their current beliefs.

All of us who can (notably those who are not members of the most vulnerable groups) have a responsibility to engage with others — especially those who don't share our beliefs — in ways that create space for understanding, empathy, and positive change.

As part of that effort, here are five assumptions that we should try to make about everyone.

1. Everyone is doing the best they can at that moment.

We may be distressed by someone's actions or attitude — we may even find those actions abhorrent — but it can help if we remember that (almost) everyone is doing the best they can, given their current situation and circumstances.

People act and react out of pain, ignorance, and fear. And we often don't know the full context for the choices they make. So offering them patience and tolerance will help both them and



us. As Philo of Alexandria said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

2. People will respond better to compassion than to anger or hatred.

Humans do a lot of horrible things. To nonhuman animals, to the earth, and to each other. Just look at the recent outpouring of harassment and intimidation since the election. It's easy for our rage and despair to flare at the cruelties and injustices perpetrated. And when we act

from a place of hatred or righteous indignation, it can certainly make us feel better. But as anyone who has faced the brunt of others' ire knows (and as research shows) people are much more likely to open their minds and hearts when they encounter compassion and an openness to listening.

3. People are paying attention to the message we're modeling.

We're modeling a message with our every word and deed. And people are

WATCH: How to Serve Up a Values Sandwich
tinyurl.com/ryz7gwh

paying attention.

If we want a compassionate world, are we modeling compassion? If we want people to be their best selves, are we striving to be our best? Are we modeling a joyful, humane way of living that reflects our deepest values and that inspires others to want to join us? In all my years of activism I've had more people tell me they've been influenced by watching how I live my life and engage with others than by any particular campaign or strategy.

4. People are more than just the pieces of themselves.

I live in a co-housing community in which I've built relationships with people I probably never would have connected with in other circumstances, because the pieces of themselves that conflict with my own values would have hindered me from diving more deeply with them.

If I stop and judge people based on those parts of them that disturb me (the political affiliations of certain friends and family; the fact that my brother used to work in a slaughterhouse; the friends who have to buy the latest stuff) then I'm missing out on so much: the big picture of who they are; the chance to find common ground and connect; the opportunity to learn.

I certainly don't want people judging me by the pieces that get on their nerves; I hope they see beyond that to the whole — to the person I'm striving to become.

5. Everyone has something to teach us.

It may just be "Don't do that," but everyone has something to teach us. From the person spouting hateful remarks of prejudice, I can remember to check my own biases and to ensure

that vulnerable people around me are protected. From the person sharing wildly misleading news stories, I can remember to use my critical thinking skills and to hold myself accountable for ensuring that any information I share is accurate and credible. From the person stepping up to help someone in need, I can be inspired to take more time to help others.

Striving to make positive assumptions about others in no way condones inhumane or unethical behavior. But making those assumptions can help foster an environment in which creating space to connect with and listen to others — and modeling a humane message — leads to all of us striving to be our best selves — which can lead to a more humane world for all.

COMMUNICATION TIPS: BEHAVIORS THAT SUPPORT DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a method of communication in which participants seek to establish shared meaning and find a shared connection. The objective of dialogue is not to "win," but rather to understand and build a collective point of view. In contrast, debate is a method of communication in which the primary objective is to prove one's point and win a disagreement. For effective dialogue, listening is just as important as speaking.

Here are some behaviors that support effective dialogue, whether in a discussion group, in a meeting with co-workers, or in your own home.

Suspend judgment while listening and speaking. When we listen and suspend judgment, we open the door

to expanded understanding. When we speak without judgment, we open the door for others to listen to us.

Respect differences. Our respect is grounded in the belief that everyone has an essential contribution to make and is to be honored for the perspective which only they can bring.

Suspend roles and statuses. Again, in dialogue, all participants and their contributions are absolutely essential to developing an integrated whole view. No one perspective is more important than any other. Dialogue is about power with, versus power over or under.

Balance inquiry and advocacy. In dialogue, we inquire to discover and understand one another's perspective and ideas, and we advocate to offer our own for consideration. The intention is to bring forth and make visible assumptions and relationships, and to gain new insight

and understanding.

We often tend to advocate to convince others of our positions. Therefore, a good place to start with this guideline is to practice bringing more inquiry into the conversation.

Focus on learning. Our intention is to learn from each other, to expand our view and understanding, not to evaluate and determine who has the "best" view. When we are focused on learning, we tend to ask more questions, try new things. We are willing to disclose our thinking so that we can see both what is working for us and what we might want to change. We want to hear from all parties so that we can gain the advantage of differing perspectives.

Adapted from *The Magic of Dialogue* by Daniel Yankelovich and the Beyond War Study Series (<http://beyondwarnw.org/>).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Please write your answers to these before you meet to discuss this guide.

1. How could the tips in this guide help you to better communicate about sustainability issues, problems, or solutions?

2. How might it be difficult for you to make the “five assumptions” about others that Marsha Rakestram advocates?

3. What helps to persuade you when listening to other people’s positions?

PART 4: PRACTICE

Activities

Complete one or more of the activities below, then discuss as a group.

Family/friends

Communication: Complete this listening exercise with someone you care about outside of the meeting. Discuss the experience in pairs.

Communication across

Cultures: Complete this chart about communication preferences and nonverbal communication individually. Then discuss as a group.

Professional Communication

Practice: Use both feelings and facts, both story and data to build a case for something you care about.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CIRCLE QUESTION:

What most surprised or interested you in this communication guide?

1. Why is practicing good listening an integral part of being a good communicator?
2. How can curiosity help you to release judgment of another person's values or choices?
3. After completing the chart regarding your personal style of communication preferences (both verbal and nonverbal), have

you learned anything new about the way you communicate?

4. Do you think you communicate differently with different people? Why or why not?
5. Which questions from "How Could You? 19 Questions to Ask Loved Ones Who Voted the Other Way" seem easier to ask than others? Why do you think that is?
6. Rhetorically, how would you respond if someone asked you

one of the questions from "How Could You? 19 Questions to Ask Loved Ones Who Voted the Other Way"?

7. Why is communicating values, emotions, and facts important for effective persuasive communication?
8. Which of the tips or strategies from this guide do you plan to apply to your own communication?

CONCLUSION

It can be difficult, frustrating, and even triggering to talk about firmly held beliefs with people who think differently than you and whose beliefs are as firmly held as your own. As you complete these activities and this experience with your group, how do you envision using what you have learned in this toolkit with the people in your life?

Being a better communicator is a process and a practice. Take time to think about ways you can become a better communicator and listener. Identify opportunities to practice empathy, listening to understand, reframing, and nonviolent communication.

We hope you can use this toolkit often as a resource for better communication and to find common ground with those who think differently than you. Thank you for taking this step in making the world a more compassionate, productive place.

NOTES

The page contains 28 horizontal blue lines spaced evenly down the page, intended for writing notes.

all of us.
one better
shared future.

OUR VISION. We believe in a better shared future, one with fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, and a stable climate to live in.

OUR MODEL FOR CHANGE. And we believe that our individual behaviors are significant in creating this world, one that is realized by the collective impact of everyday people raising voices and taking action.

OUR APPROACH. We believe in solutions. Through our Ecochallenge Platform and Discussion Courses, we connect you with research-backed actions and with fellow humans who want to take these actions with you. We show you how our collective behavior — and your personal transformation — connects with something big, shared, and better.

OUR COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE & EQUITY. Our solutions-focused work encompasses upholding and revitalizing just and equitable systems. We know a better shared future can only exist when we hold in earnest all inhabitants on this dot we call *home*.

TOGETHER. We are connecting the dots between our actions, our impact, and our will to create significant global change. Each time our dots are connected, we take another step forward, toward our better shared future. So here we are. Let's begin.

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Together, we're connecting the dots.



TAKE ACTION WITH US. Join us for Ecochallenges, where everyday individuals from around the world gather together to take action to create more environmental and social good. Learn more at ecochallenge.org.

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