

# TOOLKIT FOR ACTION



## HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



*Discussions during Occupy*

As Quakers, the views and opinions we may hold often run counter to the mainstream. Whether we are talking about nuclear weapons, climate change, refugees, inequality or some other controversial topic, it can sometimes be difficult to have a conversation that feels positive and productive rather than the opposite.

This toolkit provides some tips for how to make those conversations as productive and constructive as possible. There are ways to introduce new facts and arguments that are less likely to put people on the defensive and more likely to make them receptive to what you have to say. You may not be able to persuade others to your point of view, but you can help them to question their own assumptions and to begin a journey of finding out for themselves where the truth lies in relation to a particular issue.

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How we conduct these individual one-to-one conversations will determine how much we influence public opinion as a whole. How we conduct the more public conversations that take place is also important. This toolkit ends with suggestions for how to turn the traditional 'debating' format into more of a 'Triologue' that brings out different points of view and also allows a voice for those who have not formed a strong opinion one way or the other.

### Who to engage in a difficult conversation

People rarely come to hold the positions they hold on the basis of rational argument or debate. It is well known that the type of adversarial debate which takes place in courtrooms, hustings and on the floor of parliament is about the least conducive environment for changing someone's mind as it is possible to have. Adversarial debate tends instead to polarise people into camps, strengthening and reinforcing the views which they already had, even if they had little or no basis for holding those views beforehand.

People generally come to their views, opinions and positions about things, not because they have been convinced by rational argument but because other people in their lives happen to hold those views, opinions or positions. Sometimes people come to these through gut reactions, feelings and associations they get from those



### Ten pointers for more productive conversations

- ➔ Prepare
- ➔ Opening
- ➔ Listen
- ➔ Affirm
- ➔ Clarify
- ➔ Question
- ➔ Follow-through
- ➔ Share
- ➔ Explore
- ➔ Summarise



views, opinions or positions. Most of us only rationalise our views to ourselves or to others *after* we have decided what we think about them, not beforehand.

We read books, we follow debates and discussions in the media, we listen to pundits, we converse with colleagues, all with the tacit assumption that we are capable of being influenced by what others say. And of course, to a certain extent we are influenced by what they say, even if rarely to the extent of actually changing a long-held view or position.

If what has the most influence on people is not what is said so much as who says it, that means you yourself can influence people who like and admire *you*. In fact, those are probably the only people you, or any of us, have any chance of influencing: our friends, our family, our colleagues, our neighbours, our acquaintances...

Even if someone likes and admires you, they are not going to listen long to your arguments about a controversial issue if you do not show some understanding and respect for what they have heard and/or already taken in from others about this subject. Indeed, if you are not careful, you might lose friends rather than gain their opinion if they feel threatened or abused by what you say to them. *How* we communicate about things is therefore just as important, if not more so, than *what* we communicate about it.

## Ten tips for a more productive conversation

**1. Prepare** – Before the difficult conversation starts, you need to know the person you are going to talk with, where they are coming from and preferably what they think about some of the issues involved. Learn the common arguments that are likely to come up and prepare ideas for responses. The best preparation is *practising* having the conversation. This can be by attending a training course or by role-playing with someone else different ways the conversation might go. You can learn from your gaffes and mistakes how to handle a conversation differently and keep on improving.

**2. Opening** – Sometimes having a prop of some kind can help start a sensitive conversation. Bring a book or a recent newspaper article or something else authoritative you've read with you on your first encounter with someone you are going to talk with. Refer back to it, ask if they've seen it, tell them you've just read it, remind yourself of sections you want to draw from. You might want a few notes of your own.

**3. Listen** – Then, ask your friend what *they* think about the issue you want to discuss. What have they heard? What's their view? If they have heard, or internalised, any of the more mainstream arguments about the issue, they will almost certainly come out with these. Hear them out, be respectful, show that you are listening and not just waiting for the chance to contradict them. Only when they feel sufficiently heard should you go onto step four: *agree with them!*

**4. Affirm** - Agreeing with someone about something you profoundly disagree on is no easy task. You are not agreeing with everything they said or everything that may be implicit in what they said, but you are looking for something with which you *can* agree. Because without finding something on which you agree, it is very difficult to have a fruitful discussion, even with someone who is very close to you. Assuming the other person has raised one or more of the standard arguments about the issue to hand, you will be able to find something to agree about if you have done your homework and know what those arguments are. Sometimes affirming is not necessarily agreeing with the content of what someone says, but agreeing that they hold a legitimate opinion on the matter that you can accept as theirs, even if your opinion is different.

**5. Clarify** – Being a good listener involves reflecting back what you hear. This is to check if you have heard it correctly and to let the speaker know when you have heard what they are trying to say. Sometimes we are not as eloquent as we would like to be at saying what we want to say. In those cases, a listener can actually help the speaker to get across their message. Clarifying and paraphrasing what we hear is especially important when the issue is complex and contentious. We need to be sure we understand what someone is trying to say and not assume we are hearing the same thing we have heard many times before. Be on the lookout for nuance and shades of grey that you can pick up on later in the conversation.



**6. Question** – Step six is not about refuting what they've said, only raising a question mark about it. Once again, it is important not just to ask a question but also to listen to the response and then *show* that you have listened. You are now getting into a conversation, as opposed to a debate, and at this stage it's possible to start raising more questions, and also start sharing ideas and evidence that challenges the myths that are being presented.

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**Example: Having a difficult conversation about nuclear weapons**

Rather than challenging their 'facts' or assertions, you might try to ask questions, like:

- “How can you be sure that nuclear weapons have kept the peace since 1945?”
- “How would we know whether nuclear weapons had actually deterred another country from attacking us?”
- “So what does multilateral disarmament look like?”
- “When did the UK get a seat on the UN Security Council and when did it get its first nuclear weapon?”
- “How do you imagine Trident would protect us from another Hitler, exactly?”

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**7. Follow-through** – Assuming you get past the questioning stage, which may be as far as you get, the gentlest way to get people thinking about their own assumptions and beliefs is to help them follow through their own arguments to their logical conclusions. What must also be true if what they are saying is true? We often have not thought things through to that extent, so by teasing out some of the implications of what we think, we raise further questions in people's minds about whether what they currently think is right or not.

**8. Sharing** – No one likes to admit they are wrong about something. Sharing new information to people rather than challenging the information they already have allows us to re-think our existing views without being pushed into the corner of being 'wrong'. What new information can you share with them? This is where doing your homework comes in handy. Unless the other person is already an expert on a particular issue, there must be new pieces of information you can share with them.

**9. Explore** – Step nine is where your creativity can run wild. Come at the issue from a different direction, explore alternative ways of looking at it, try out a 'counter-factual' approach. Exploring suits some people better than trying to talk only about facts and figures, especially when the other person is fixated on these and can't see past them. Make sure you are exploring *together*. This is where it needs to be a two-way conversation, not a monologue. A real conversation will involve mixing and matching these steps in no particular order as you work your way around the topic. Focusing on one aspect at a time can help but is not always possible.

**10. Summarise** – Ending a conversation about a difficult topic can be as difficult as starting one, especially if you still strongly disagree with each other. Is there anything you can now agree upon beyond what you may have identified in the 'affirming' stage (step 2)? If not, you can at least go back to what you affirmed then and leave it at that. A productive conversation is not about 'convincing' somebody else to come around to your point of view. It's about thrashing out an issue thoroughly and respectfully so that people can go away and think more about it for themselves. If people go away with new information they did not know before, or just a possibility they had not thought of before, or a question mark about a previously held assumption, then you have had a productive conversation!

## Public meetings and 'dialogues'

A 'dialogue' is different from a 'debate' in the sense that the former is about having an open and honest discussion while the latter is about scoring points and trying to 'win' an argument. In the case of a dialogue, two people are on the same 'side', looking at an issue or a problem together, while in the case of a debate, each person is on opposing sides in relation to the issue or the problem. Only one side can be 'right' in a debate, and even when people are naturally drawn to arguments or points raised by the other side, the tendency is to push these away in order not to be seen to 'lose' the argument.

It is possible for learning to take place in a debate, even for people to change their views. But it is not the norm. Instead, debate tends to polarise and consolidate people's existing opinions. People listen out for, and applaud, the things they already agree with. And they block out, ridicule or dismiss the things they already disagree with.

Debates are also generally between two people, or two camps. You are 'for' or 'against' the motion. But the most important people in any room are those in the 'don't know' camp. These are the people who are genuinely undecided, who come to learn, to find out, to ask questions, and then to make up their own mind on the basis of what they have found out.

That's where the third party comes in. A 'trialogue' is a meeting that takes place in the spirit of dialogue rather than of debate. It is an open and honest sharing of information and exploring together a controversial or difficult issue, in order that people may genuinely listen to each other and learn from each other. It is primarily for, and driven by, the undecided voices in the room.

Those who have genuinely not made up their mind about something and who have questions and concerns of their own should have an equal part to play in the discussion. It cannot just be between those in favour and those against. That is the idea of the 'trialogue'.

## Conversation workshops



*A Trident Conversations workshop at Yearly Meeting 2016*

QPSW and NFPB are offering one-day and half-day workshops to help people practise the tools in this toolkit. For more information, contact Tim Wallis at [timw@quaker.org.uk](mailto:timw@quaker.org.uk) or on 020 7663 1067.

