

# A CONSTRUCTIVE CYCLE FOR CONVERSATIONS

a post-election resource



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Communication patterns are self-perpetuating cycles. Every choice made during a conversation invites a certain kind of response. The key to shifting a conversation away from dysfunction is to understand the cycle and take steps to disrupt it.

Polarizing cycles of communication leverage a difference in values, beliefs, or identities to generate mistrust, animosity, and binary thinking. Examples abound. You're either with us or you're against us. You're either a real member of this community or you're a threat.

Constructive communication cycles, on the other hand, create the conditions to hold these important differences without the same kind of antagonism. Constructive cycles encourage complex mutual understanding, personal relationships, and a sense of shared community.

Crafted from years of work on some of the most difficult conversations, this resource will help you use powerful tools to have a more connected, meaningful, and constructive conversation. These can be used for everything from one-on-one conversations to formal dialogues. As you navigate a difficult conversation, keep in mind the four components of a constructive cycle:

1. **ASK** open-ended, curious questions.
  - Ask for stories, values, relationships
  - Avoid yes or no questions
  - Avoid questions with judgements implied
2. **LISTEN** to what is shared. Listen not just for the literal meaning of the words, but for the emotions and values people are trying to communicate.
  - Listen for what is most important to them.
  - Listen with generosity for the meaning and make space for differences in culture or missteps in knowing the most current language for sensitive topics.
  - Try not to argue with them in your mind while they speak—just listen.
3. Take a breath and **REFLECT** on what you heard and how that connects with your own experiences or beliefs.
  - If you find yourself provoked, take more than a breath. Really slow down.
  - If you are struggling to understand, you can ask a question for clarification before moving on to what you want to share.



4. **SPEAK** in ways that are more likely to be heard.
  - Reflect back what you heard the other person say.
  - Share your own perspective by telling stories, discussing your emotions, talking about the complexities and tensions you feel about the issue at hand, or all of the above.
  - Speak with the goal of being fully understood—not to convince.
5. **ASK** follow-up questions that connect back to what has been shared so far to trigger a repetition of the constructive cycle!





## Additional Tips

### **Start by connecting about something personal**

When you begin a conversation by connecting first, relationships form and deepen as people see each other in new ways, cutting across (rather than reinforcing) camps, cliques, or power dynamics. Consider asking:

- What is bringing you strength or hope these days?
- What is one way you are taking care of yourself?
- As you think about being together after the election, what is one thing you're hopeful for? What is one thing you're worried about?
- Can you share a story from your past that you think of as one of the first moments you cared about an issue or political idea?

### **Keep the conversation slow and thoughtful**

Don't think about your next question while you're listening. Avoid temptation to jump in and respond right after the other person finishes speaking. Resist asking questions that don't follow up with curiosity about something someone else has said.

### **Questions to begin a conversation about the election**

- What is one value that is important to you in a political candidate? Can you share a time from your life when you feel that you lived out that value well?
- What would you like others to understand about an aspect of the election that matter most to you? What feels most at stake? What's having the most impact on you right now?
- Can you share a story from your experience to help others understand what's at stake for you, your relationships, your community, or this country as we move forward from this election season? What does that reveal to you about your hopes or vision for the future?
- Now that the election is over, what is one step you want to take to bring strength and hope to your community?

### **Close with gratitude**

Take time at the end of the conversation to remember that you are a community, that you care about each other, and that your lives remain intertwined in some way—no matter how deeply you disagree. In a more informal conversation, you can close by saying something as simple as “Thank you so much for this conversation. I am still thinking about what you said about...” Some simple ways of asking for this is a group is to offer a prompt:

- One thing I am taking with me from this conversation is...
- One thing I am grateful for from this is...
- One thing I want to remember about you and one thing I want you to remember about me is...
- One thing I want to take from this conversation and continue to work on to make some part of this community a better place...