

Conversation in a Time of Polarization¹

Thoughts compiled by Barry C. Bartel October 27, 2024²

Facets of Communication	Considerations for your own communication	Corresponding suggestions for responding to unhelpful communication
<p>Before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the forum and audience (colleagues, friends, family). Consider motivations and focus internally.³ Consider structure and/or ground rules.⁴ Consider that laughter can diffuse tension and show humility.⁵ It is especially important to seek information that is vetted and as accurate as possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-person shows non-verbal cues and tone. Written gives time to reflect and select wording. Social media may be public. Is relationship key here? How does that affect my communication? Why am I interested in this discussion? Unlikely to convince the other, my motivation is...⁶ Intuitive responses are shaped by worldview, life story, and experiences.⁷ How might differing intuitive reactions affect this conversation? Discuss issues, avoid the personal. In an age of misinformation, there is still objective truth!⁸ Consider how to deal with “facts.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I prefer that we discuss this in person some time.” “I get overwhelmed by long, detailed e-mails. Could we ...?” “Can we agree to some ground rules for our discussion?” “I value our relationship and would like to focus our discussion to understand each other and strengthen our relationship.” “I don’t expect that either of us will persuade the other. Perhaps we can gain a bit of insight into the other’s view. Can we commit to that as a goal?” “I’m concerned that we have different understandings of some basic facts. How can we address that?” I don’t appreciate that accusation. It isn’t what I believe.” Note that dealing with someone who is intentionally bullying or trying to intimidate is not covered by this chart.⁹
<p>Speaking/Writing: Specific “I” Message¹⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> States feelings or needs of the speaker, is specific, and states consequence. For example, “I get irritated when you make this so personal because it seems like you don’t respect what I am saying.” Passive language is also good sometimes: “This issue is a difficult one to discuss.” Putting “I” before an accusation does not improve it: “I feel that you are a lunatic” is just a “You” in “I” clothing! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often messages beginning with “You...” are (or sound like) accusations and raise the level of tension. Consider why you want to do that and whether there is a more effective phrase. Generalizations are easy, but are they helpful? Consider ways to be specific. What generalizations do you want to avoid in this conversation? Seek common ground: “We have such different perspectives, yet I believe we have a lot in common. Can we try to articulate several things that we agree on about this topic?” Consider patterns of communication with this person and how to improve your skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I’m not sure I understand completely. Would you be willing to let me summarize your perspective until you feel I am doing so accurately? And then would you be willing to do the same for my perspective?” “I’m uncomfortable when I feel attacked, and I know I get defensive. Can we focus on the issue?” “I’m concerned that you feel so strongly about this that you are willing to attack me like that.” “I’d like to talk further, and I think it would be helpful to pause and continue this discussion when we can do so more calmly.” “That’s a pretty broad statement. Can you give a specific example?”
<p>Listening/Responding: Active Listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often we hear but don’t listen, and rather seek to develop our next argument.¹¹ Active listening involves responses that show that you are listening; a response can paraphrase, inquire, evaluate, interpret, or reassure. Paraphrasing can be effective if genuine and does not sound forced and gimmicky. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice Parker Palmer’s method of preventing disagreement from erupting into conflict by “turning to wonder,” as in “I wonder how they came to this belief.”¹² Asking questions of clarification can show interest, draw people out, even lower the intensity. How might you invite feedback to seek understanding? “You” messages ok if reflective, invites follow-up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “You are really upset about this!” “This really upsets you!” “Can you clarify; when you say ..., are you saying...?” “I’m wondering what you mean by?” “I’m not sure you are understanding what I am saying.” “It seems that you are responding with generalizations and even bringing back things that happened years ago. Can you respond to my specific statement that?”
<p>After:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the forum and relationship, consider what kind of follow-up makes sense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have someone read your exchange and give you feedback.¹³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I am uncomfortable with our last e-mail exchange. Can we set some ground rules about our communication? Our relationship is important to me.”

¹ Polarization is a natural result of a political system that tends to create elections with two choices, but there appear to be explicit efforts to create division in recent elections. And so the media convinces us that we are polarized. At the two-party level, and in discussions of labels like conservative and liberal, polarization is evident. And in fact, John Paul Lederach recently published *The Pocket Guide for Facing Down a Civil War: Surprising ideas from everyday people who shifted the cycles of violence* (July 2024) (available in Kindle Edition and as a pdf on his web page at <https://www.johnpaullederach.com/2024/07/pocket-guide/>). Nevertheless, at the individual level, we are likely not nearly as polarized if we seek conversation and understanding. That is the goal of this chart and discussion.

² There are also helpful collections of resources available at: Amy Zimbelman, “Conference Minister’s Corner: Resource Roundup for Divided Times,” MSMC *Zing!* October 2024, available on the MSMC web page <https://mountainstatesmc.org/>. In particular, Amy suggests this TED Talk by Megan Phelps-Roper on how to talk across divides (she was raised in the famous fundamentalist church Westboro Baptist): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVV2Zk88beY>. Melissa Florer-Bixler posted on Facebook that she wrote *How to Have An Enemy: Righteous Anger & the Work of Peace* (Herald Press 2021) “after years of frustration from hearing pastors tell their churches that politics shouldn’t divide us. I needed a place to make sense of enmity in the Bible. I wanted to explore the theology of people for whom ‘politics’ is not casual, but a matter of life and death.” MSMC is hosting a Faith and Life Forum November 2, 2024, on “Learning to Hope in the Dark: Practices of Faith for Uncertain Times,” with Shannon Dycus.

³ I particularly like the list of suggestions for preparing yourself for a conversation provided at <https://mediate.com/we-have-to-talk-a-step-by-step-checklist-for-difficult-conversations/#:~:text=We%20Have%20to%20Talk%3A%20A%20Step-By-Step%20Checklist%20for,Now%20you%E2%80%99re%20ready%20to%20begin%20building%20solutions.%20> I also addressed this in my chapter on “What if the other person is a Complete Idiot?” in *Let’s Talk: Communication Skills and Conflict Transformation* (Faith and Life Press 1999) at page 52.

⁴ Braver Angels uses a process of structured dialogue in support of its mission of “bringing Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic.” <https://braverangels.org/our-mission/> NPR recently did a story that included information about Braver Angels. See <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2024/10/14/nx-s1-5057929/anxiety-stress-politics-election-2024-polarization>. See also Barry C. Bartel, “A Procedure for Discussing Interpersonal Conflict,” *Let’s Talk: Communication Skills and Conflict Transformation* (Faith and Life Press 1999) at page 53; on discussing politics with family members, see <https://time.com/5937398/how-to-talk-to-family-members-about-politics/> and <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-have-political-argument-without-ruining-relationships-2018-11>

⁵ Consider Ryan Koch’s October 20, 2024, sermon at GHMC titled “Wisdom: Learning How to Laugh.”

⁶ In his sermon on September 15, 2024, Ryan Koch stressed the need to “seek wisdom, not victory.”

⁷ See resources from the GHMC Fall 2017 Adult SS Series on *Building Relationships With Differing Perspectives*, led by Duncan Smith, Charlene Epp, and Barry Bartel. See also Barry C. Bartel, “With Care.. Who We Are,” MSMC *Zing!* March 2017.

⁸ “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn’t.” This is often attributed to Mark Twain, see <https://www.socratic-method.com/quote-meanings-interpretations/mark-twain-truth-is-stranger-than-fiction-but-it-is-because-fiction-is-obliged-to-stick-to-possibilities-truth-isnt> For more background history, see <https://wordhistories.net/2023/03/14/truth-stranger-than-fiction/>. Truth is a virtue, yet few actually consider it an absolute. Most would admit that they are ok with little white lies, <https://www.verywellmind.com/is-it-ever-okay-to-lie-5118228#:~:text=A%20white%20lie%20is%20a%20lie%20that%20is,%22morally%20pure%22%20and%20that%20black%20symbolizes%20%22sinister%20intent.%22,> or perhaps a lie would be ok to save a life (WWII: “Are there Jews in your house?”). Many consider that the ends justify the means (as in war), https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_end_justifies_the_means, so is a lie as a means to a greater end (election) justified, as Vice Presidential candidate JD Vance suggested? See <https://www.politifact.com/article/2024/sep/16/4-fact-checks-from-jd-vances-cnn-interview-with-da/> And what may be considered a lie by some may be called hyperbole by others. Yet truth is not merely relative; there is objective truth. There is also the issue of “false equivalence,” defined as “making it appear that both sides of an argument have equal merit when one side relies on factual evidence and the other does not.” See <https://www.pbs.org/standards/blogs/standards-articles/avoiding-false-equivalence/>

⁹ There are resources on dealing with manipulation in the family context. See, e.g., “Family Manipulation Tactics and How to Respond to Them,” at <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/family-manipulation>; <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/family-manipulation>; <https://psychcentral.com/blog/imperfect/2018/03/dealing-with-difficult-family-members-dont-justify-argue-defend-or-explain>.

¹⁰ These are common yet fundamental communication techniques. Are they second nature to you so that they need not be discussed? I described these techniques in *Let’s Talk, Communication Skills and Conflict Transformation* (Faith and Life Press 1999), and they are described in many communication resources.

¹¹ See Charlene Epp, “With Care... Empathic Listening: Seeking to Understand,” MSMC *Zing!* February 2017.

¹² See Barry C. Bartel, “With Care.. Who We Are,” MSMC *Zing!* March 2017.

¹³ I welcome responses to this request: “**Request from Barry:** I will be leading adult SS discussions [October 27](#) and [November 17](#) on conversation in a time of polarization. We’ve all had them or avoided them! Please help me prepare **by sending/forwarding to me an e-mail or chat string with interactions with friends, colleagues, or mostly family** that was particularly upsetting or surprisingly helpful (no names will be used without your permission). In addition to the actual communication, please e-mail me your thoughts on 1) if you avoid these conversations, why is that and what could change that? 2) if you have had a particularly aggravating exchange, why do you think it was that way? and 3) if you have had a productive exchange, what tips would you offer others? Please send your thoughts to my e-mail at barry.bartel@gmail.com Thank you.”