

Guidelines for Productive Disagreement

8 things to practice that will turn sprawling disagreements into opportunities for insight, connection, and enjoyment.



01 Watch how anxiety sparks

These sparks are signposts to our own internal map of dangerous ideas. Notice the difference between big sparks and small sparks. Work with them, not against them.

02 Talk to your internal voices

Most of us have internal voices that map to the voices of power, reason, and avoidance. Get to know yours so you can recognize their suggestions as merely suggestions, not orders. There may also be a quiet internal voice that maps to the voice of possibility. Listen for it.

03 Develop honest bias

There is no cure for bias, but we can develop an honest relationship to our own bias with self-reflection, frequent requests for thoughtful feedback, and a willingness to address feedback directly, however it comes.

04 Speak for yourself

Don't speculate about others, especially groups that you don't belong to. Instead, seek out a member of any group you might otherwise speculate about and invite them to your table to speak for themselves. Listen generously.

05 Ask questions that spark surprising answers

Think of big wide-open questions that create space for divergent perspectives to be heard. Measure the quality of your questions by the honesty and eloquence that they draw out from the person answering them.

06 Build arguments together

Structure arguments into evidence of the problems and opportunities (to support conflicts of head), diverse perspectives within the argument (to support conflicts of heart), and proposals to address the problems and opportunities (to support conflicts of hand). Use the monkey's paw and disagreement among participants to identify and discuss blind spots in each area, then make them better.

07 Cultivate neutral spaces

A neutral space is inviting; it opens up big questions and allows arguments to strengthen and the fruit of disagreement to grow. It creates wiggle room for perspectives to shift and expand without punishment or shame. It reminds us that it's okay to be uncertain indefinitely, and it's okay to act while uncertain.

08 Accept reality, then participate in it

We can't change reality from the realm of wishful thinking and willful blindness. We can't hide from dangerous ideas. We're right in the mess with all of it, getting our heads, hearts, and hands dirty. The only way out is through.