

Conversational Receptiveness: Expressing engagement with opposing views

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Abstract

We examine “conversational receptiveness” – the use of language to communicate one’s willingness to thoughtfully engage with opposing views. We develop an interpretable machine-learning algorithm to identify the linguistic profile of receptiveness (Studies 1A-B). We then show that in contentious policy discussions, government executives who were rated as more receptive - according to our algorithm and their partners, but not their own self-evaluations - were considered better teammates, advisors, and workplace representatives (Study 2). Furthermore, using field data from a setting where conflict management is endemic to productivity, we show that conversational receptiveness at the beginning of a conversation predicts conflict escalation at the end. Specifically, Wikipedia editors who write more receptive posts are less prone to receiving personal attacks from disagreeing editors (Study 3). We develop a “receptiveness recipe” intervention based on our algorithm. We find that writers who follow the recipe are seen as more desirable partners for future collaboration and their messages are seen as more persuasive (Study 4). Overall, we find that conversational receptiveness is reliably measurable, has meaningful relational consequences, and can be substantially improved using our intervention.