

## Fruitful discussions on controversial topics

Most of us have been taught to never discuss politics or religion, the most controversial of topics, in polite company. The usual justification is that you are likely to offend or threaten other people's deeply held beliefs. However, it's entirely possible to debate in a way that is instructive for all parties.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines controversy as 'a conflict of opinion; dispute' and defines controversial as 'subject to controversy; debatable'. We all have conflicting opinions and disputes. If we were all to agree on every subject, the world would be a dull place indeed. The trick to fruitful discussions on controversial topics lies in thoughtful rhetoric and a diplomatic approach.

Diplomats are people who are well schooled in negotiating the fine points of controversial topics at issue between people and nations with opposing views on the subject. The diplomat's objective is to bring the various facets of the topic out into the open, tactfully stating the facts and position of the opposing party's view. In this way, intelligent discourse of controversial topics can nurture a willingness that allows each party dignity and respect, along with an acknowledgment of legitimate differences. This respectful acknowledgment paves the way for negotiations whereby a solution through compromise is reached.

Many a discussion on a controversial topic fails due simply to a lack of respect for the other party's position. Controversial topics tend to inspire heated debates and dogmatic thinking. With proper respect and an open mind, such discussions can easily lead to better understanding and more informed conclusions. You might even find you have changed your perspective. Opinions are not facts and a change of opinion may only mean you or the other party has learned something new. So much the better!

One of today's most controversial topics is that of illegal immigration. If you enter into discussion on this topic, you'll find most people have made up their minds before they ever say a word. Remember, there are always two sides to every story and no one is ever completely right. This is because controversial topics are by definition, debatable. The debatable points center on opinion, not science. It's like the story of two men describing an elephant, one standing in front and one behind. The two descriptions will never match, because the perspectives are different.

So it is with the immigration issue. If you are the illegal immigrant, your experience cannot be the same as the American worker who has lost his job to

cheaper labor. The two situations do not negate one or the other. Effective resolutions cannot be achieved unless all sides can fairly express their views and reach compromises that work for the betterment of all.

The lesson here is to embrace controversial topics with an open mind and respect. Not only will you become better informed, but you'll learn that resolution is possible.