



Managing Difficult Conversations with Constituents

A Braver Angels Workshop for Elected Officials

Participant Guide

Part 1: Opening Principles

Workshop Goals

1. That you can show people who disagree with you that they have been heard.
2. That you can find areas of commonality or agreement when those are present.
3. That you can share your views in a way that is likely to be heard by the other person.

Agenda

- Introductions
- Ground rules
- Expectations to abandon
- Principle
- Skills

Ground Rules

1. We're here to talk about skills, not policies. So, let's not get into policy debates.
2. Let's help each other out as we work on the skills. It's not a competition.

3 Expectations to Abandon	Instead
You will persuade the other person they are wrong and you are right.	Hope they will see you as reasonable or at least willing to listen.
The other person will use the skills taught in this workshop.	Expect that you will have to do the heavier lifting.
These skills will work with large groups of people whose leaders are prepared to shut down real conversation.	These skills are for one-to-one and small group conversations with people who are at least willing to hear your viewpoints.

The Prime Directive: Connect First, then Explain Your View

- Disagreements generally go this way: You say up, I say down. You say left, I say right. **This costs too much. No, it doesn't.** The result is impasse or escalation.
- Instead say some version of "I hear you on...." If I get what you're concerned about, it's.... Do I have that right?
- When people feel heard, their negativity usually decreases.

Part 2: Four Skills: AAA-P (Acknowledge, Appreciate, Agree, and Perspective)

Acknowledge

Acknowledge the other person's view and the strength of their feelings about the issue.

"I hear you on...." "You come down on wanting the school board to" "I get that this is really important to you." A brief paraphrase of the person's view goes a long way for them to feel heard. Use a neutral tone of voice and avoid pat phrases such as "I understand" that don't show you've heard them.

Examples: "I hear you that government mandates are not the way to go" or "This new zoning ordinance is really bothering you." "If I understand what you're concerned about, it's the noise level plus the expense of the project."

It's important to pause after acknowledging rather than immediately give your own perspective.

The other person usually repeats or adds to their initial statement. Sometimes you didn't capture what they were saying, and they clarify. Listen and acknowledge again, then move on to the next skills.

Practice Acknowledge Skill

PROMPT #1

I think you are ignoring the crime problem that's rising in this community and scaring a lot of us. All I hear is Defund the Police or anti-law enforcement rhetoric. Of course there are some bad apples in law enforcement, but by and large officers are doing a good job. And it's demoralizing for them to hear that our elected officials don't support them. The public safety budget is coming up for a vote, and I hope you will do the right thing by expanding the law enforcement presence. I know our deputies and officers can't solve every problem, but they are our first line of defense and deserve our full support.

PROMPT #2

You seem to think that throwing more money into policing is going to solve the crime problem. Crime comes from poverty and discrimination, and it has to be solved by addressing those problems. Communities of color in particular don't trust law enforcement, and for good reason. One of the public safety bills under consideration will move funds away from law enforcement and into things like social workers responding to mental health 911 calls rather than armed officers showing up. And that bill will fund community agencies that can get at root causes of crime. I urge you to stop over-emphasizing policing and have a broader view of how to promote public safety.

Appreciate

Affirm the person for bringing their concern to you.

"I appreciate you for telling me what's on your mind about this issue."

"What you're saying is important for me to hear."

Of course, this must be real for you at the moment, or the person will sense it's fake. Appreciate later in the conversation if you can't muster it right away.

Agree (find something to agree with, if at all possible)

Listen not just for what you disagree with or how the other person is wrong, but for what you agree about, even if it's just a very small part of what the other person has said.

If nothing else, you might recognize a common value, aspiration, or concern.

Examples: "I agree with you that cost over runs are a real risk on projects like this one." "I'm with you that the health and safety of our kids has to come first."

“I agree that we have to be careful to not ask government to do what the private sector can do better” or “I agree with you that sometimes the government is the only way to handle a social safety net problem that personal charity can’t cope with.”

Practice Agree Skill

Perspective

Now you are ready to share your views. Here are the key Perspective skills.

Element	Examples
I Statements	“This is how I see it” “This is why I see it this way.” As opposed to “This is how it absolutely is.”
Name your sources	“I’m basing this on the Attorney General’s report on the current crime rate. I understand that you’re seeing something different where you live.” “I’ve been meeting with members in the community to get their perspectives.”
Try to incorporate a concern, value or belief the other person shared.	“I think we both want a safe community.” “It sounds like we both believe in parent involvement in their children’s education.”
Avoid jargon with constituents	“That’s a CDC mandate.” “Robert’s Rules of Order” doesn’t allow it.”
Avoid negative labels	“That’s racist/socialist.”

Practice Perspective Skills

Closure

Say what, if anything, you will do with what you have heard. You might:

- promise to think about it some more
- pass on the concern/complaint to someone for review/handling
- follow up on a source of information the other person shared
- shift how you talk about the issue in the future
- share that your view has shifted in some way

Managing Verbal Attacks

Principles:

1. Don't be either a victim or a counter-attacker.
2. Don't stoop to defending your character or integrity.
3. Stay calm and firm.

Exit Skills:

1. Soft exit: "This conversation is no longer constructive, so I'm going to move on."
2. Medium exit: "What you just said crossed the line into personal attack. If you want to stick with the issue you're concerned about, I can continue. Otherwise, let's stop."
3. Hard exit: "I am not going to stay in a conversation where my integrity is questioned, so we're finished."

The other person will almost always say something in reply. If it's anything other than an apology and a promise to dial back, then just repeat that you are done with the conversation and walk away/hang up/log off. Be careful not to keep engaging once you've said you are finished.

Part 3: Demonstration

Community Issue: Donated Land for Dog Park

A long-time, respected member of the community who was an animal lover willed a piece of land to the community with the specific intent of building a dog park. The County has been wanting to find land to do this for some time but had been unsuccessful, so the unexpected donation seemed like a godsend. However, once plans were announced the unforeseen issues started to emerge. The land is proximate (NOT abutting) to a playground and parents soon started complaining that among other things, the potential for loose dogs attacking their children was real, that the dog park would not be well-maintained, and their children would continually be exposed to noxious odors. The County does not want to give up the donation of land and promises that the park will be well-regulated. Here's a conversation where the elected official uses the Braver Angels skills with an upset parent. They know each other slightly.

Constituent: "The County is talking about building a dog park right by the playground my kid uses. This is insane! My Jimmy is already scared to death of dogs. He won't want to go near a playground with dogs yipping and yapping and leaving their poop behind!"

Official: "I hear you. You're worried about the dogs scaring your son and leaving dog messes near the playground."

Constituent: "Right. People unleash their dogs in dog parks, and some of those dogs could jump the fence."

Official: "I can understand your concern about safety, and I'm glad you brought it up to me."

Constituent: "We elected you to protect our community."

Official: "I agree that if we go ahead with the dog park, it has to be safe for children and adults, and sanitary as well."

Constituent: "Yes, but I don't think the county leaders are taking this seriously."

Official: "I understand your concern about not being listened to, and I'd like to share what I know about the situation. As you probably know, one of our long-term residents donated this parcel of land to the county in his will specifically for a dog park. That's the only thing we can use it for, according to his will. A lot of communities have dog parks now and it's a great way to help people connect with their neighbors. We've been looking for a location for one for a good while now. I. A lot of other counties have them, and people here have been wanting one for a long time. Yes, it's not ideal that the land is right by a playground, for all the reasons you just mentioned. However, I believe we can find workarounds suitable for everyone. Maybe higher fencing that dogs can't jump over would help. Or maybe we could put a basketball court next to it as a buffer to separate it from the younger kids' play equipment. We are looking to set up a group of citizens to help find solutions that will work for dog lovers and people in the neighborhood. Might you be interested in talking with that group, and maybe even being part of the group?"

Constituent: "Well, I'll think about it. I might be interested."

Official: "Great. Please give me your contact information and someone will be back in touch."

Constituent: "Okay, thanks for listening, but I'm going to keep track of this!"

Official: "I'm sure you will."