

The L.A.R.A Process

The guidelines of respectful dialogue are in full harmony with those of L.A.R.A., as described by Bonnie Tinker who created it:

- “**Listen** behind the words until you can hear how a person of principle could possibly hold the view being expressed. Listen until your heart understands how what they are saying connects to something you believe to be true. Don’t say anything until you have heard this.” [*Similar to the first guideline above.*]
- “**Affirm**, with the first words out of your mouth, that you share some principle or value with this person. Don’t talk about the shared belief, but demonstrate it by using an ‘I’ statement.” [*Similar to the second guideline above.*]
- “**Respond** with a direct answer to the concern expressed. By not dodging the question or issue, you show that you respect the other person, and you show that you are not afraid of their opinion.”
- “**Add** some new fact, or better yet, something from your personal experience that gives some new information, or a different point of view.”
“Repeat this process for as long as you are willing and able to engage with an open heart and clear mind.”

Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication

*The four main elements of Marshall Rosenberg’s **Nonviolent Communication -- Observation, Feeling, Needs, and Request** -- elaborate and go beyond the principles of respectful dialogue. They are especially useful in helping people learn how to use nonviolent communication during difficult interactions.*

- Participants distinguish **observations** from *evaluations*, and *do not judge* whether others’ behavior appears “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong.”
- As they listen, they try to sense the **feelings** and **needs** behind the other’s statements. In turn, they try to express and respect their own inner feelings and needs.
- By listening for feelings and needs, participants seek to build and sustain *empathy* -- a key element. Another important ingredient is that they express *appreciation*.
- Finally, they make **requests**, not demands, for positive and concrete actions.

PRINCIPLES OF RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

Suggested Guidelines for Effective Communication on Controversial Issues

The purpose of these guidelines is to build an atmosphere of security and mutual respect among members of groups that are addressing potentially divisive topics.

A climate of trust can help groups move toward their goals -- whether they are seeking common ground on principles and policies, striving for consensus on plans for action, or exchanging divergent viewpoints in order to deepen mutual understanding.

These guidelines build on prior programs such as “**Nonviolent Communication**” by Marshall Rosenberg; “**Compassionate Listening**” by Gene Hoffman with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC); “**Communication Across Divides**” under the Public Conversations Project; the **Jewish Dialogue Group** based in Philadelphia; and the **L.A.R.A. Process** developed by Quaker Bonnie Tinker for the “Love Makes a Family” project.

The guidelines were formulated by Don Pelz and Anne Remley drawing ideas from the above and other sources, with special thanks to Lauren Helwig's booklet "Compassionate Listening & Public Conversation." Comments are wanted and welcome. Email: <donpelz@umich.edu> or <agr1@mac.com>.

Principles of Respectful Dialogue

- A first guideline is that each person *listens closely* to what each of the others is saying, without interrupting, challenging, or judging others' views. Each avoids arguing or attempting to convince others of a different opinion.
- A second guideline is that after listening, each person *affirms* perceptions, principles and values that are held in common. Each tries to appreciate where the other is coming from, as together they seek to find what they can agree on.
- In all of these interactions each person *uses "I" language based on their personal experience*. Examples would be: "In my opinion...", "As I understand the facts"

A participant does not say: "The indisputable truth is that ..."
but rather: "I believe it to be true that ..."
Each respects the fact that others may have a different perception, or information, or sense of truth.
- Furthermore, each person *avoids negative "you" or "he/she" language* such as: "You are wrong" or "He doesn't know the facts about ..."
Such accusations tend to cloud participants' ability to think clearly, and to impede progress toward finding solutions.

Likewise, each avoids assertions about others' motives, such as: "She wants to undermine the group."
Rarely can a person's motivation be accurately known by someone else. And when people are thus labeled, they may try to defend themselves instead of working to find agreement.
- In contrast, expressions of *appreciation*, as well as *affirmation* and *empathy*, help to set the secure atmosphere that is important for reaching common ground.
- It is important to accept and honor *negative emotions* about social issues. A facilitator or group member may respond, "Yes, this topic can often be emotional" or "You sound pretty annoyed about it."
If someone is raising a specific issue about a topic the group is discussing, it should be added to the agenda, giving assurance that it will be duly addressed. Such a response can help strengthen an atmosphere of respect and empathy.
- When speaking about a person or group outside of the meeting, members follow the *same respectful guidelines*

and avoid derogatory assertions about an absent party.

- When a group is seeking action ideas, respectful dialogue emphasizes a search for *positive proposals* rather than focusing on criticism or blame. Many people may have pieces of the answer and, working together, they may be able to reach a solution that reflects their common principles.
- Each person is assured an opportunity to speak. A facilitator may ask dominating individuals to respect the equality of all voices, perhaps asking that all may speak once before anyone speaks twice, and that members keep their contributions concise.
- All members are *co-responsible for implementing the guidelines*. If mutual accusations arise, anyone may call for time out so as to reestablish respectful dialogue. Or the group may select a phrase like "Guidelines!" or "Positive please!" to serve as a reminder.

Constructive group practices

- An initial meeting might begin with selection of a goal for the session and a review of the guidelines, establishing members' comfort with those. Members may wish to practice with back-and-forth discussion until they begin to develop a "shared culture" of respectful speaking and listening.
- During meetings aimed at consensus on a statement of shared policies or plans for action, no evaluations of ideas - positive or negative - are made until many ideas have been shared. Then members identify strengths and commonalities in the various proposals and suggest wording for a consensus. This process may be repeated many times until agreement is reached.
- Successive meetings would review the dialogue process and agreements reached in prior sessions. Members would then decide what to focus on next.
- Throughout the total process, members agree that participants *will not be quoted outside the meeting* without getting advance clearance from the person to be quoted. Similarly, any recorded notes will avoid mentioning anyone's specific opinions and will focus instead on topics considered and consensus reached.