



SPECIAL REPORT

***TURNING ARGUMENTS INTO
MEANINGFUL DISCUSSIONS***



Turning Arguments into Meaningful Discussions



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- De-escalation is key—your goal is to not fight.
- Seek to understand the other person and let that individual know you understand him or her.
- Find where your goals overlap and align with the other person's goals, and build your discussions from there.

To be successful, you often have to take definitive stands and stick to them. This can happen if you're an entrepreneur constructing a new strategy for your company. It can happen if you're a corporate executive leading a division. And it can happen if you're a parent trying to get a surly child to take any number of actions!

The complication is that you need to get results—that is what makes you successful, after all. Arguing with other people rarely translates into the results you are looking for. But if you take a page from highly successful people, it may be possible to turn arguments into discussions that are both meaningful and productive.

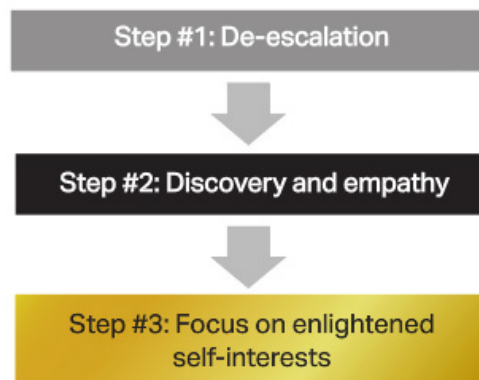


These types of discussions can lead to you getting other people to work with you more cooperatively and effectively—with less fighting and stress along the way.

A three-step process

One systematic approach to turning arguments into discussions that we see used by successful people is summarized in Exhibit 2. The starting point is de-escalation, followed by discovery and empathy, and then a focus on the enlightened self-interests you share.

EXHIBIT 2
A Three-Step Process for Turning Arguments into Meaningful Discussions



Step #1: De-escalation

You want to quickly and powerfully convey that you are not interested in fighting. An easy way to do this is to make one of the following statements:

- *"I'm not here to have an argument."*
- *"I'm not here to fight with you."*
- *"I'm not here for a competition."*

The reason to de-escalate is to sincerely show that your goal is to avoid arguing. You recognize that there is usually no way to get the results you are looking for if there is too much conflict. When things escalate, people get more emotional and their positions (which you disagree with) tend to solidify even more.

Another smart way to de-escalate a situation and keep it that way is to make sure you don't talk over the other person—as doing so conveys that you don't really care what he or she has to say. Try not to raise your voice, either.

If the discussion does start to get heated and appears to be turning into an argument, you can always lower the temperature by slowing things down. Take more time before answering a question or making a statement. Rapid-fire back-and-forth commonly contributes to fostering disagreements and tension.

are accurate. Sometimes your empathetic responses will be short and pithy; other times they might be long summaries. Many of the best empathetic responses include both what someone believes and the reasoning for that belief.

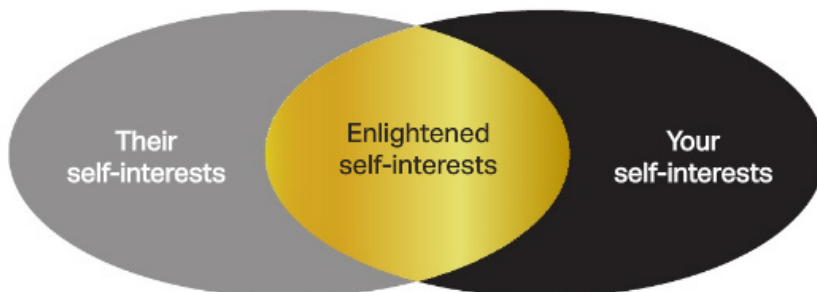
Being empathetic does not mean you have to agree with the other person. In a scenario in which two people are coming from two different places, you likely do not agree. Instead, empathy simply means showing the other person you really do understand where he or she is coming from. This way, you can never be accused of ignorance or stupidity—which are all-too-common conclusions in arguments.

Step #3: Focus on enlightened self-interests

In some situations, your beliefs are not going to change—nor are the other person’s beliefs. It is just not going to happen, in either direction. In these situations, all attempts to win over the other person are exercises with very high probabilities of failure.

A fundamentally different approach is required. You need to appeal to the other person’s self-interests that overlap with your own self-interests. This is referred to as enlightened self-interests (see Exhibit 3). It can help turn a potential argument into a discussion about possibly mutually beneficial courses of actions.

EXHIBIT 3
Enlightened Self-Interests



The more overlap you can find between what you want and what the other person wants—and the more it is that your respective actions can further your shared goals—the easier it can be to actually reach agreements.

What makes this approach so powerful is that when you appeal to people’s self-interests, you are not trying to change their minds. It’s not persuasion or some form of sales strategy. Through your discovery process, you have likely unearthed areas of overlap between you and the other person. Now, you accentuate the areas where you have some level of agreement and concentrate on the opportunities and possibilities that *actually do exist*.

Step #2: Discovery and empathy

You might believe that you understand the other person's point of view—his or her positions and rationale. And you might be accurate. Nevertheless, it is critical to be "professionally ignorant." This means going into the discussion as though you know little or nothing. There are two main reasons for being professionally ignorant:

- You want to confirm that you understand the other person's thinking as well as the premises and logic behind that person's positions. The best (and sometimes the only) way to get this information is directly from the person. Doing so also makes sure you are dealing with that individual and not with other people who have similar positions.
- You want to make sure the other person knows you understand his or her viewpoints and what that individual sees as support for those views. Until the other person truly believes you really understand those views, you cannot have a meaningful discussion. Instead, you might often hear the refrain: "You just don't understand."

Discovery is how you *confirm* your understanding. Empathy is how you *show* it.

In a discovery process, you commonly employ open-ended questions to elicit information. You want to find out as much as you can about someone's thought processes and conclusions. Some questions that can be useful include:

- *"Where did you get that information?"*
- *"How did you come to those conclusions?"*
- *"How confident are you in that information?"*

Don't be critical or confrontational when asking these types of questions. Instead, communicate that you are seriously trying to understand the ideas and viewpoints of the other person.

You will likely want to dig deeper into the responses the other person initially gives you, as it can be very helpful to get extensive answers. This can be easily accomplished with an open-ended question such as: *"Can you tell me more about that?"*

While discovery is how you learn and grasp someone else's worldview, empathy is how you communicate to that person that you actually grasp that worldview. You can think of your empathetic responses as trial balloons—ways of confirming whether you are on the right track. Empathy helps reduce errors and misperceptions.

Important: Empathy is not just parroting back what someone said. You'll get better results when you distill someone's core messages into your own words and then see whether you



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Of course, there will likely be areas where you strongly disagree with the other person. There are likely going to be times when you will confidently need to stand by your positions. But even at these times, it is important not to come across as confrontational. An effective way to do this is with the following statement:

"Yes, _____, but _____."

Here, you highlight where you agree ("Yes, _____"). Then you cite where you do not agree ("*but* _____"). Again, the emphasis is on areas of agreement.

Conclusion

For all of us to become more successful, it is often necessary to find common ground—even with people with whom it first appears there is no common ground. It's all too easy to argue, to disagree, and to support and defend a position without question. It is much harder to find ways to work together.

Transforming a potential argument into a meaningful discussion is one way to move toward working together and setting the stage for all involved to get at least some aspect of what they want. Make no mistake: It takes a concerted effort not to get drawn into arguing. It takes time to learn about another person's worldview and to make sure he or she knows you understand that view. And it takes work to find where self-interests overlap. But the good news is that all of that is possible—and the results tend to benefit everyone involved.

