

# To have better disagreements, change your words—here are 4 ways to make your counterpart feel heard

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Your 18-year-old daughter announces she's in love, dropping out of college and moving to Argentina. Your yoga-teaching brother refuses to

get vaccinated for COVID-19 and is confident that fresh air is the best medicine. Your boss is hiring another white man for a leadership team already made up entirely of white men.

At home, at work and in civic spaces, it's not uncommon to have conversations that make you question the intelligence and benevolence of your fellow human beings.

A natural reaction is to put forth the strongest argument for your own—clearly superior—perspective in the hope that logic and evidence will win the day. When that argument fails to have the intended persuasive impact, people often grow frustrated, and disagreement becomes conflict.

Thankfully, recent research offers a different approach.

For many years, psychologists have touted the benefits of making [parties in conflict feel heard](#). Making someone you're arguing with feel that you're listening can calm the troubled waters, allowing both parties to get safely to the opposite shore. Two problems can get in the way, though.

First, when encountering disagreement, most people jump into "persuasion mode," which doesn't leave much room for listening, or even for pursuing other goals for the interaction. Any conversation could be an opportunity to learn something new, build a relationship that might bear fruit later, or simply have an interesting experience. But most of those goals get forgotten when the urge to persuade sets in. Second, and just as important, is that even when people do wish to make their counterparts feel heard they don't know how to do so.

[I lead a team](#) of [psychologists](#), [negotiation scholars](#) and [computational linguists](#) [who](#) have spent years studying ways that parties in conflict can behave to make their counterpart feel they are thoughtfully engaging

with their perspective.

Rather than trying to change how you think of or feel about your counterpart, our work suggests that you should focus on changing your own behavior. Focusing on behavior rather than thoughts and feelings has two benefits: You know when you are doing it right, and so does your counterpart. And one of the easiest behaviors to change is the words that you say.

## **A conversational toolbox, based on what works**

We used the tools of computational linguistics to analyze thousands of interactions between people who disagree with each other on hot-button social and political issues: police brutality, campus sexual assault, affirmative action and COVID-19 vaccines. Based on these analyses, we developed an [algorithm that picks out specific words and phrases](#) that make people in conflict feel that their counterpart is thoughtfully engaging with their perspective.

These words and phrases comprise a communication style we call "[conversational receptiveness](#)." People who use conversational receptiveness in their interactions are rated more positively by their conflict counterparts on a variety of traits.

Then we experimented with training people to use the words and phrases that have the most impact, even if they're not naturally inclined to do so. For example, [in one of our earlier studies](#), we had people who held different positions about the Black Lives Matter movement talk to each other.

Those who received a brief conversational receptiveness training were seen as more desirable teammates and advisers by their counterpart. Training also turned out to make people more persuasive in their

arguments than those who did not learn about conversational receptiveness.

We [encapsulate this conversational style](#) in the simple acronym H.E.A.R.:

- **H = Hedge your claims**, even when you feel very certain about your beliefs. It signals a recognition that there are some cases or some people who might support your opponent's perspective.
- **E = Emphasize agreement**. Find some common ground even when you disagree on a particular topic. This does not mean compromising or changing your mind, but rather recognizing that most people in the world can find some broad ideas or values to agree on.
- **A = Acknowledge the opposing perspective**. Rather than jumping in to your own argument, devote a few seconds to restating the other person's position to demonstrate that you did indeed hear and understand it.
- **R = Reframing to the positive**. Avoid negative and contradictory words, such as "no," "won't" or "do not." At the same time, increase your use of positive words to change the tone of the conversation.

## Measuring benefits of the tools in practice

[In a recent set of studies](#), my colleagues and I recruited people who were supportive of or hesitant about getting COVID-19 vaccinations. We paired vaccine-supportive participants with the vaccine hesitant and

instructed them to persuade their partner to get the shot. Before the interaction, we randomly assigned the vaccine supporters to receive brief instructions in conversational receptiveness or guidance simply to use the best arguments they could think of.

We found that participants who received a couple minutes of instruction in conversational receptiveness were seen as more trustworthy and more reasonable by their counterparts. Their counterparts were also more willing to talk to them about other topics.

In a subsequent study, we explained the concept of conversational receptiveness to participants on both sides of the issue. Just knowing that they'd be engaging with someone trained in this technique made both parties report being 50% more willing to have a vaccine conversation. People felt more confident their discussion partner would hear them and less worried they'd be a dismissive jerk.

## **Dialing down the acrimony**

This approach might be especially beneficial in conversations in which one party is highly motivated to engage while the other is less so. When such conversations turn contentious, the less motivated person can simply walk away.

That's an all-too-familiar experience for parents of teenagers who seem to have advanced degrees in ignoring unwelcome advice. Health care providers often face a similar challenge when they try to persuade patients to change behaviors they do not wish to change. In the workplace, this burden is most acutely felt by people lower in the hierarchy trying to have their views heard by higher-ups who just don't have to listen.

Conversational receptiveness is effective because it makes the

interaction less confrontational and therefore less unpleasant. At the same time, it allows both parties to express their perspective. As a result, it gives people some confidence that if they approach a topic of disagreement, their partner will stay in the conversation, and the relationship will not sustain damage.

In recent years, many scholars across the social sciences have expressed concern about Americans' seeming [inability to talk to their political opponents](#).

Yet the skills that are necessary for Democrats and Republicans to engage with one another are similarly lacking in our families and in our workplaces.

Our work on conversational receptiveness builds on extensive prior research on the benefits of showing engagement with opposing perspectives. By focusing on language that can be easily learned and precisely measured, we offer people a broadly applicable toolkit to live up to their best conversational intentions.

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