

IntegrityWorks: Tools and Skills to Build Integrity

Chapter 3. The Truth and Civil Debate

“Don't raise your voice; improve your argument.”^[1] —Desmond Tutu, Human Rights and Anti-apartheid Activist

“In all debates let truth be thy aim; not victory, or an unjust interest.”^[2] —William Penn, Quaker Leader and Political Activist

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries declared “post-truth” the Word of the Year. They define it as: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”^[3] Some people associate post-truth with politics, but it has a much broader application. This word exemplifies a problem that goes way beyond politics and which seeps into our daily interactions with one another. A post-truth era eats away at society's integrity.

According to *Forbes*, “the old adage was that we lived in an age of ‘information overload.’ Now we're dealing with ‘misinformation overload,’ says [neuroscientist and author Daniel] Levitin. It's easier, he says, to make a webpage that looks as authentic as a real news site like *The New York Times* or *FORBES*. Years before such pursuits were tougher: cranks churned out their missives on basement printing presses, easily identified by the smudged or crooked type . . . Viral untruths get even more credibility now with millions of likes and re-tweets.”^[4]

All this misinformation can lead to some heated, yet misinformed debates between people. How can we hear each other and get to the truth in these moments? Levitin thinks it's important to “get humble. ‘If you have humility, you're open to learning . . . If you think you know everything, it's impossible to learn. So approach new claims with some questions. “Who said so?” “What's the evidence for it?””^[5]

What is Civil Debate?

Levitin's thinking is at the core of civil debate. Civil debate is when two or more people sit down and have a discussion after which both parties feel as though they have had a chance to make their points. In a civil debate, people feel as though their ideas have been seriously considered by others with opposing viewpoints. No one feels as though they have been personally attacked in a civil debate. It allows us to dissect information, ask questions, and hear things we may not have heard before. In really effective civil debates, participants think of things neither side has considered before.

Getting to the truth is often very hard. We need help and thoughts from others. Some of the most evil times in human history occurred when thought was repressed and people were shouted down. We should all do our best to help debate become more civil with our fellow humans.

I've come up with some principles of civil debate, designed to help you practice this way of communicating your opinions. These principles will help you stay engaged, remain calm, and refine your argument. But civil debate is not just about playing nice—I want to win every debate I am in. *Feel free to want victory yourself.*

Roy-ism: Personal enlightenment and civil debate are inextricably intertwined.

Principles of Civil Debate

Try one or all of these tactics next time you enter into a civil debate:

- Before debating, describe your opponent's position to them until they think you have it right.
- Take joy in your opponent's ability to make a good point and tell them when they do.
- Take a break or ask to meet another time if either one of you becomes too frustrated.
- Avoid questioning motives, assume your opponent's disagreement might just be a lack of understanding.
- Use their disagreement as a seed of an idea to refine or clarify your point.
- When your opponent causes you to change your mind about an element of your position, tell that person.
- When your opponent wanders off from a good point he or she has been making, help steer the conversation back to what was originally being discussed.
- Occasionally ask your opponent to repeat what he or she has just said. This helps you listen to what that person has to say and buys time to formulate your next thought.
- It's easier to disagree with things you understand than things you don't understand, so *ask lots of questions*.
- Periodically start a sentence with, "So, what I hear you are saying is . . ."
- Smile—or at least make sure you're not frowning or showing concern.
- No debate should start without ample time to conclude it calmly. Never finish a debate in the heat of the moment.
- Do not debate in a place where your opponent may be uncomfortable, such as in public places.
- If other people complicate the civility of the discussion, stop.
- Have empathy for your opponent, particularly if debating is not their thing.
- Get background material. Ask for something to read that will help you better understand that person's viewpoint.

I am all for making your point in a debate. Share all your facts and evidence. Be passionate. Care deeply. Be forceful. Disagree all you want. Just do all that civilly when you debate, and the truth will have a greater chance of making an appearance in your life.

The Cancel Culture

One reason why it's so critical to ensure civil debate is alive and well, is because of what's become known as "cancel culture." This is when people are "canceled"—shut out from media, cast away from social and professional groups, and ignored or dismissed—for expressing questionable opinions and opposing viewpoints,

or for their criminal or unethical actions. It often happens to celebrities or other famous people. Their “canceling” is a form of boycott, which limits or eliminates their ability to work and reach the public. The “cancel culture” can put limits on what people feel comfortable saying publicly, and it can unfairly condemn people. It’s a quick judgment that doesn’t allow others to learn and grow from their mistakes as well.

This canceling and judgment is sometimes warranted, such as when people express bigoted or racist remarks, and we have good laws against hate speech. However, some people use this logic of “protecting people” to block the speech of people they simply disagree with. There are countries where people fear for their lives if they have publicly disagreed with their government. Their culture got to a fork in the road and justified banning speech and thought for whatever reason, and ended up oppressing people.

President Barack Obama described part of the cancel culture problem and its impact on civil discourse and social change best at an October 2019 Obama Foundation Summit:

This idea of purity and you’re never compromised and you’re always politically woke . . . you should get over that quickly. The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting, may love their kids and share certain things with you. And I think that one danger I see among young people, particularly on college campuses . . . I do get a sense sometimes now among certain young people, and this is accelerated by social media, there is this sense sometimes of: “The way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people, and that's enough” . . . That's not activism. That's not bringing about change. If all you're doing is casting stones, you know, you're probably not going to get that far. That's easy to do.^[6]

Leaders like President Obama are standing up to the problems limiting honest and integrity-filled civil discourse —such as the cancel culture phenomenon.

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