



THE MORTON DEUTSCH
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FOR COOPERATION AND
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10 Lessons from the Lab: How to have Constructive Conversations on Divisive Topics

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#1: It's right to feel anxious. Encounters over divisive issues are an increasingly common experience in families and among friends and acquaintances across this country, which is happening at a time of **extraordinary political polarization in our society** (we have not been this polarized in our voting since just after the U.S. Civil War in 1879). So **anxiety is normal** and is probably shared by your counterparts.

The feelings associated with tribal intergroup polarization can be **#2: It's emotional.** intense and personal and are typically unresponsive to facts, figures and logic (especially when science and the news media are under attack as fake). So **logical argumentation is often particularly unhelpful** in these conversations. What helps is **establishing a base of positivity**: Having or building relationships with others across the divide that have a sense of friendliness, trust, tolerance, rapport and, ideally, humor. But establishing these relations takes time.

#3: They've got a point. Despite your disdainful feelings, there are usually valid points on both sides. The world is changing at a dizzying pace and sometimes it is reasonable to need to hold onto a sense of past tradition in the face of such tumult. And we need to begin to accept inevitable change and necessary reform. Big government and wasteful spending can have adverse consequences on the efficient functioning of our society. And we desperately need such safety net programs as Medicaid, Medicare and the Affordable Care Act to function as a nation. These are all basic dilemmas all societies face and they must be understood as **dilemmas with trade-offs**. It is the oversimplification of such challenges that distorts public understanding and impairs our leader's abilities to find compromises or even integrative, win-win solutions.

The current divisions in our society **#4: This divide is bigger than all of us.** have been widening since the early 1980s. 9/11, the war on terrorism and the world financial crisis and economic collapse all **turned the heat up on our collective sense of threat and anxiety**, which has hardened these divisions. But we are also getting played. Our politicians play up these divides. The news media plays them for ratings. Social media algorithms sort our attention toward those who think like us. And our more tribal tendencies to seek out like-minded people seals the deal. These forces combine to create extremely strong normative tides that are hard to resist. The question for each of us to consider is: **Are we OK with being played? How and when are we feeding into this process?**

Sometimes we have opportunities to reset. How we choose to begin the next tough conversation – **how we initially engage with others and frame the conversation** – can go a long way in determining the climate of that event. If we enter ready for battle with our talking points sharpened and our statistics drawn, then battle we will. While it isn't easy to change a strong pattern of interaction, consider what you might do to set a different course.

#5: Initial conditions matter.

#6: It's complicated. The more serious problems we face in our world are **immensely complicated matters**. Because this complexity makes us anxious we are often comforted by overly-simplistic solutions offered by our side. But solutions to these problems will always be mixed with both good and bad consequences. Recognizing this from the beginning forces us to demand remedies that are more **feasible and sustainable** and to be less susceptible to snake oil salesman solutions.

We all have our own conflicting impulses and ideas and do things at times that go against our values and better intentions. Research shows that **being mindful of such contradictions within ourselves makes us more tolerant of people who are different from us**, and so better able to work with them on common problems.

#7: You're complicated.

#8: You see what you look for. Even when you feel like “truth” is on your side, remember our human tendency to selectively pay attention to information that supports what we already believe, and to avoid attending to information that challenges our beliefs—this is what psychologists call “**confirmation bias**,” and we all do it. None of us are neutral in the way we take in information, and that's ok, as long as we know it and can account for it in ourselves with **humility, honesty, and a little disciplined openness**.

Research tells us that over 90% of our daily behaviors are automatic— **#9: Pay attention.** things we do every day without thinking (like driving a car or reacting to our kids, neighbors, coworkers and family). **Many of our automatic behaviors contribute to widening our divisions.** So pay attention and **try something new**. When was the last time you listened respectfully to the POV of a member of the other party just to learn what they might have to offer? Not to sell or persuade or criticize or demean, but just to try to understand or discover something new?

#10: Believe in change. Research has shown that **when people believe that others can change, they tend to approach them more cooperatively**, see more value in engaging with them and voicing their concerns, perform better in negotiations, and have lower levels of intergroup hatred and anxiety and more willingness to interact or compromise with members of outgroups. As Nelson Mandela said, “**It always seems impossible until it's done.**”

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