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# *Having a Discussion*

*Our effectiveness in discussion can have a vital bearing on our lives, but most of us give little thought to the process. Here we examine how people can talk things over together with an eye on the motto, 'We can work it out'*

One reason why discussions so often fail to get results is that people mix them up with other forms of discourse. Because of this, a discussion is perhaps best defined by what it is not.

First, a discussion is not a conversation. While a conversation may range over a variety of subjects, a discussion is focussed on a specific topic or list of topics. When, as they would in a conversation, people talk about matters other than the question being discussed, they throw discussions off the track.

A conversation generally has no particular purpose, but a discussion is aimed at a definite objective. It may be to solve a problem, to decide on a course of action, or to reconcile conflicting opinions. To discuss something is, by definition, to work towards resolving a question through a mutual examination of facts, ideas, and views.

Though the parties to it may argue their cases by advancing propositions which support their points of view, a discussion is not an argument. In the generally-understood sense of the word, an argument is a verbal dispute. A discussion may contain an element of conflict, but not necessarily.

Above all, a discussion is not a debate — that is, a contest in which one side strives to conquer the other through rhetorical skill and mental agility. The parties to a debate are adversaries. The parties to a discussion are joined in a kind of partnership by working towards a conclusion acceptable to all sides.

Why should it matter what a discussion is and what it is not? Because discussions play a prominent and significant part in our lives. We discuss things all the time without identifying the process. Every time one person says to another, "What should we do?" or "What do you think about so-and-so?" a discussion ensues.

People engage in more or less formal discussions in their work, or if they are active in associations, clubs, unions, school boards, municipal councils, etc. But the most vital colloquies they may ever have may be across a kitchen table, when, for instance, one spouse says ominously to the other: "We have to talk."

It would be impossible to raise children without discussing everything from the need to eat leftovers to profound questions of ethics. So the success of some of our most important relationships as well as our careers may depend on our success in discussing things.

Can we develop our abilities in this regard? Undoubtedly. The starting-point is simply to be aware, as we go through the process, of what it is all about. When we enter into a discussion, we should always keep in mind that we are aiming at reaching an understanding with the other party or parties. The motto of effective discussion should be, "We can work it out."

This is not to say that conflict should be avoided. On the contrary, it is usually best for people to speak frankly — if not so bluntly that they offend others and thereby blight the feeling of partnership. Discussions often bring out hidden disagreements which might otherwise be left to fester unhealthily in silence. A discussion should embrace all points of view, even if some are objectionable to one or more of the participants. If salient opinions or facts are left unspoken out of politeness or tact, the resolution of the question may never be complete.

But when conflict occurs, one must guard against the urge to press one's cause through to total victory. The victory is likely to be Pyrrhic anyway, Pyrrhus being the ancient king who won a battle at such heavy cost that, in effect, he lost. As Douglas Jerrold wrote in the domestic context referred to above, " 'The last word' is the most dangerous of infernal machines; and husband and wife should no more fight to get it than they would struggle for the possession of a lighted bomb-shell."

Granted, people enter into discussions with a view to getting their way, but in a civilized society, the person who gets his or her way is expected to deserve it by objective standards. Hence there is no place in a productive discussion for the rhetorical trickery employed in competitive debating. (For an example of how *not* to conduct a discussion, tune in some time to the televised sessions of Parliament or other legislative bodies. There, sad to say, you will all too commonly see debaters who are primarily interested in scoring points, regardless of logic or truth.)

*While some pound away with heavy artillery, others snipe with wit*

Still, humans are only human, and it is tempting to use any tactic available when they feel there is an advantage to be gained. Probably the most common of these is the frontal assault, or simply shouting opponents down.

People who take this combative approach are also inclined to contradict others mid-way through the exposition of their cases. This has the effect of shattering the discussion into little pieces which may never be picked up and put together in a logical resolution of the issue being discussed.

Often, too, they will exhibit indignation and anger, feigned or otherwise. Such vehemence is liable to have a boomerang effect. It could very well provoke those being attacked to respond in the same manner. When that happens, the point of the aggressor's case becomes obscured in the smoke of battle even when he or she is in the right.

People who regard a discussion as a battle to be won often try to win it by attrition. They will make the same point over and over again in attempts to wear their perceived opponents down. The opponents may appear to give in from sheer fatigue, but the effort has been wasted. The point of dispute is bound to crop up again when the apparently defeated party regains his or her stamina.

While some destroyers of discussion pound away with heavy verbal artillery, others prefer to snipe at opposing parties with scorn, sarcasm, and facetious put-downs. A little comic relief is welcome in serious deliberations, but there is a fine line between a jest and a jeer. A discussion should not be taken as an occasion to show off one's wit — or to show off anything else, such as superior knowledge. It may be, however, that an injection of harmless humour seems called for to smooth out the proceedings. In that case, the words of the 17th century English author Owen Feltham are relevant: "A jest should be such that all shall be able to join in the laugh which it occasions; but if it bears hard on one of the company, like the crack of a string, it makes a stop in the music."

This touches on the chronic problem of how to keep discussions from getting personal. Most sarcasm or sharp criticism is aimed at individuals, and a person wounded by a jeer or a sneer is more than likely to retaliate. Such is the visceral antipathy between some persons that they just can't seem to help throwing barbs at each other, but incompatibility need not be an obstacle to successful discussion. W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan loathed each other, yet they formed one of the most fruitful partnerships in the history of the musical theatre. Presumably they both adhered strictly to the rules of logical discussion, for together they achieved great things.

Nevertheless, we all have a natural tendency to depart from the issue being discussed and pounce on the weak and sore spots in others' personalities. We should strive to keep this instinctive reaction in check. Even in those critical discussions which begin with "we have to talk," it should be borne in mind that the issue is the offending person's behaviour, not the person. There is a big difference between saying "there's something wrong with the way you've been acting" and saying "there's something wrong with you." The latter strikes at the heart of a person's self-image as someone who is basically good but whose conduct may occasionally leave something to be desired.

When a discussion gets personal, people will resort to unworthy devices like calling names, making accusations, reviving disputes from the past, rubbing it in ("I told you so"), ascribing malicious motives, wilfully misunderstanding what their interlocutors are saying, and throwing embarrassing facts in their faces. Many of the debating gambits condemned by ancient logicians as sophistry depend on shifting the discussion away from the issues and onto personalities. These have imposing Latin names, but in modern terms, they might be stated as: bullying; blackmailing; trying buy people out; preying on their

vanity; appealing to their instinct to conform; holding them up to ridicule; and making irrelevant comparisons: e.g., "You're a lot worse than I am." (For a fuller exploration of the rules of logic, see *Knowing How to Think,* RB Letter, May/June 1992.)

In the 1940s Professor Irving Lee, the American author of *How to Talk with People*, conducted a systematic study of why discussions fail by monitoring fifty groups in various situations. At the top of his list of causes of "discussion breakdown" was the shift from the issues to personalities. Many of the other causes stemmed from personal pride: "...when a colloquy between factions is marked by such 'ego-statements' as 'You're absolutely wrong,' 'I've had years of experience on this,' 'I know what I'm talking about,' etc.; when a speaker identifies himself so thoroughly with an issue that criticism of it is construed as an attack on him; when one participant fails to deal with a question or argument raised by another who continues to call attention to the failure; when inaccuracy or falsification is charged..."

Accusations of dishonesty — indeed, accusations of any kind — are almost guaranteed to cause the accused to withhold co-operation. There may be times when confrontations are called for when people are trying to dodge the issue or cover up unfavourable information, but they are to be avoided as a general rule. But people sometimes really do lie, or at least grossly exaggerate: what do you do in that case? The best course is tactfully to ask for further proof of what they are saying, allowing them time to think of a face-saving way out.

*Averting those ridiculous verbal Ping-Pong games*

Short of deliberate untruths, people will say things which they honestly believe to be true, but which are seriously open to question. When others challenge them on the validity of their statements, they may stand on their pride and tacitly refuse to co-operate. If time allows, this form of breakdown can be avoided by putting the question aside until the facts of the matter can be ascertained. Otherwise the proceedings will disintegrate into one of those ridiculous "'tis so," "'tis not" verbal Ping-Pong games.

One of the basic rules of discussion is to try not to confuse assumptions with facts. A fact is something that is capable of verification by demonstration. If the truth of a notion cannot be demonstrated, it is merely being assumed. If you are not sure whether something is true or not, say so. Never pretend to know something you actually don't know to serve your vanity or to save yourself from embarrassment.

If facts should not be assumed, neither should they be twisted to fit one's opinions. This is often done quite unconsciously. No matter how objective we like to think we are, our convictions are bound to be subject to a degree of distortion arising out of our backgrounds and interests. We should make ample allowance for our prejudices and emotional hang-ups. Discussions give us a chance to test our own fallible beliefs against the facts and the logic of our interlocutors.

*Listening rather than mentally rehearsing what to say next*

It is because some people are blinkered by their individual world-views that they talk in declarations. "I'm not arguing with you, I'm telling you," they will say. So convinced are they of their particular versions of the truth that they leave no room for adjustment in the light of facts and ideas raised by others. Whenever we talk *at* people in this way, we turn what should have been a dialogue into an diatribe. As the above-mentioned title of Prof. Lee's book suggests, we should be talking *with* them if we expect to get results.

Whether it is a one-on-one encounter or it takes place within a larger group, a discussion is a matter of alternately speaking and listening. Thus a prime qualification for being a good discusser is to be a good listener. Listening is not as easy as it seems; a study of "listening efficiency" some years ago estimated that people in North American industry understood only half of all that was said to them in their work.

The starting-point in any effort to listening properly is to train yourself to concentrate on what the other person is saying, and stop mentally rehearsing what *you* intend to say when your turn comes. By assiduously following what is being said, you can ensure that your own remarks are to the point when you are on the speaking side.

Listening skills can be improved by asking questions whenever you are unclear about the meaning of a statement and by summarizing your understanding of it to verify that you have heard it accurately. This should usually be done after a person has completed a statement, but if a dissertation goes on so long that you are in danger of forgetting how it began, it is permissible to interrupt and say: "Hold on a minute. I'm not sure I followed what you just said."

To listen properly, you must be eternally on guard against the tendency to filter what you hear through

your own prejudices and preconceptions. When listening, people are subject to a form of wishful thinking, changing the meaning of what is being said to what they would like to hear.

An anonymous quotation that has been going the rounds of business offices in the past few years comically illustrates the difficulty of listening accurately: "I know you believe that you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure that you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." The reason listening is so fraught with confusion is that people assume that others assign exactly the same meanings to words as they do.

"Most controversies would soon be ended, if those engaged in them would first accurately define their terms, and then adhere to their definitions," wrote the American theologian Tryon Edwards. At the risk of falling into arguing over semantics, the parties to a serious discussion should agree at the outset on the meaning of the key words they use — or at least determine where they disagree.

*Good discussion habits go against human nature, but still...*

As a rule, the refining process that takes place when people define their terms will lead to the use of more specific language. By replacing the general with the specific, we render ourselves less likely to commit such logical errors as jumping to conclusions, ascribing guilt by association, making black-or-white judgments, or basing our arguments on imaginary or supposed "facts."

In short, more precise language leads to more precise thought. Most of the grand words employed in political rhetoric — words like "rights," "freedom," and "justice" — are based on individual subjective judgments about the conditions they represent. If we expect discussions to come to the right conclusions, the last thing we want is to rush to generalized judgments. Experts in semantics therefore advise that deliberations should be guided not by judgments but by descriptions of the situation being discussed.

For example, let us say that we are thinking about hiring John, but a member of our group says that John has too glum a personality to deal with the public. A second member, who has always found John a pleasant enough chap, asks the first why she thinks John is glum. Well, she met him on the street, and he just grunted and walked right past her. Where on the street? In front of the dentist's office. When? Last Thursday. Then a third member recalls that John had told her that he was having some root canal work done on Thursday. You'd look glum, too, she points out, if you'd just emerged from that kind of an ordeal. So, thanks to the move from the judgmental to the descriptive level, the assumption that John is a sourpuss is exposed as an unwarranted conclusion. He gets the job, which he would not have if the initial judgment had been accepted right off.

All this goes to say that effective discussion demands rigour and discipline. In the ideal discussion, assertions are checked for thoroughness and accuracy, ideas are presented one at a time, arguments are developed step by step, questions are asked to ensure comprehension, and everyone sticks to the subject at hand. At the same time, there is sufficient flexibility to stimulate the creative synergy which arises when one thought leads to another in the course of a verbal interchange.

Unfortunately, discussions in real life are rarely ideal. People ramble, they bicker, they refuse to follow a logical sequence, they base their thinking on misguided assumptions, they interrupt, they talk so long that everybody forgets the point they started out to make. They may be in a bad mood; they may dislike one another; they may be angry or upset or hurt by the words of others. They may stubbornly stick to a position even when it has been shown to be illogical. They may allow their prejudices and interests to dominate their thoughts.

Since it seems to be fighting human nature to get people to discuss things in a systematic way, it is reasonable to ask why anyone should try to improve his or her discussing habits in the first place. The most basic of reasons is in the spirit of Thomas Carlyle when he wrote: "Make yourself an honest man, and then you may be sure there is one less rascal in the world." Make yourself a good discusser, and you can be sure that there will be one less poor discusser. And if you suppress your own bad habits in discussion, your example may lead others to do so as well.

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