



KNOWING YOUR INTENTIONS: DEBATE VS. DIALOGUE

While many of us use the terms dialogue and debate somewhat interchangeably to refer generally to a process of talking about divisive issues, in reality, they represent fundamentally different orientations to engaging difference. And these diverging orientations are highly consequential.

Dialogue and debate are processes that—at their cores—are undergirded by very different goals and intentions.

In turn, these different goals and intentions lead to very different kinds of outcomes. To help make this distinction, below is a checklist to help you better understand your own intentions—and the possible consequences—when approaching a conflictual conversations.

GOALS OF DIALOGUE	GOALS OF DEBATE
<input type="checkbox"/> To work collaboratively toward a common understanding of the issues—even if we don't reach an agreement on the way forward.	<input type="checkbox"/> To engage in a competition in order to prove the accuracy and superiority of our own positions.
<input type="checkbox"/> To identify some areas of common ground.	<input type="checkbox"/> To win the debate.
<input type="checkbox"/> To listen carefully in order to understand one another, and to listen past positions for the meanings and values behind them.	<input type="checkbox"/> To listen carefully in order to find flaws and errors in one another's positions, and to provide effective counter-arguments.
<input type="checkbox"/> To enlarge both of our understandings of the whole landscape and the issues at play.	<input type="checkbox"/> To affirm our own pre-existing understandings and positions.
<input type="checkbox"/> To surface and unpack assumptions so we can check incorrect understandings of one another.	<input type="checkbox"/> To prove and reinforce the truth of our positions.
<input type="checkbox"/> To encourage each of us to look critically at our own positions.	<input type="checkbox"/> To critique each other's positions and to poke holes in the other argument.



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GOALS OF DIALOGUE

- To potentially arrive at an unexpected, creative new perspective that has space for both of our viewpoints.
- To engage with an open-mind and a willingness to evolve our own thinking.
- To identify strengths in each other's viewpoints.
- To begin from a place of mutual respect and concern for one another.
- To learn from one another.
- To open space for an ongoing process of communication.

GOALS OF DEBATE

- To defend our own positions as the best possible solution between the two options presented.
- To engage with a confident and unshakeable conviction in what we believe.
- To affirm the dominant strength of our own positions.
- To focus on undermining the opposing idea, without attending to the feelings of or relationship with our opponent.
- To achieve an acknowledgement of the superiority of our own ideas.
- To reach a conclusion in which our own views are affirmed.