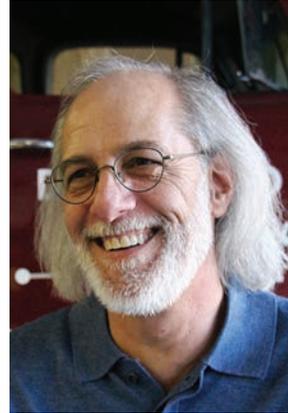


## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

### Robert Garmston



### Kendall Zoller



## Respectful disagreement closes the gap between points of view

**E**ducators, more than in most professions, have an opportunity — actually, a responsibility — to practice and model constructive ways of disagreeing. We wish to frame the context for this obligation and suggest ways we can all get better at respectful disagreement.

To disagree well, one first must listen. Listening conveys respect of the person speaking, especially when your listening includes restating ideas to confirm understanding and let the speaker know you are making this effort.

Most of us know this, but still can get caught in angry, argumentative, or defensive engagements. You may know someone who unfriended a person on Facebook because of comments about politics, religion, or even food or child care. This is indicative of a new norm emerging in much political discourse, which is amplified on talk radio and television, and diminishes civility in many quarters. So what can educators do to release us from this seemingly unavoidable trap when speaking with someone who has strong views different from our own?

While preparing seminars on this topic, we've discovered three things:

1. Emotions are more persuasive than facts.
2. Group affiliation mires speakers in conceptual quicksand from which it is hard to escape.
3. Guidelines for “fighting fair” do exist, but they are hard to maintain in the heat of interaction.

Because facts take a lesser role than emotion and group affiliation can determine people's decision-making, disputed viewpoints often trigger reactions similar to when one is in physical danger. This partially explains the findings that to debate another's opinions deepens the other's attachment to them (Maeli, 2016).

When triggered, our brains shift to high alert as in a threatening situation: We hear less and think less clearly. Breathing quickens, the oxygen supply is diminished in our neocortex, and our capacities for rational thought and empathy are reduced. Finally, we see the person as “other than me.” You can test this by noticing your reactions when hearing opinions on television or radio.

Here's an example of how extreme reactions can become. Rumors surfaced that Barack Obama was born outside the United States and, as such, not qualified to be president. A birth certificate documenting his birth in Hawaii elicited this response: “Anyone can counterfeit a birth certificate. It's fake.” This is not rational, yet from the orientation of group identity, it makes sense.

Group identity, or tribal affiliation, as some authors refer to it, makes it important that we stay within group boundaries of the collective truth or risk expulsion. When humans are divided into groups of any kind, the group outside one's own is subject to dehumanization and regarded without empathy.

### SO HOW DO WE RESPOND?

So how do we respond to the person who argues blindly for a point of view different than our own? Here are some little-known but practical ways of closing the gaps between points of view.

Let's start with the extreme case of zealots. David Brooks (2017) asserts that, “It's fruitless to engage with people who are impervious to facts.

There are some ideas — like racism — that are so noxious they deserve no recognition in any decent community.”

Fortunately, it would be rare to encounter people like this in our work. They are recognizable because in conversations they work to destroy the rules of social etiquette. For such extremists, Brooks cites Stephen Carter, who wrote in his book *Civility* (1998) that the only way to confront fanaticism is with love. Ask genuine questions. Paraphrase so they know they’ve been heard. Show some ultimate care for them even if you detest what they are saying.

But, for the most part, we rarely encounter zealots in our work. We are more likely to interact with people with strong, seemingly immovable, positions. People so intent on sending their truth, they lack ability to hear ours. So what can we do?

As Carter suggests, start with love. This is the foundation of the martial art aikido: to love the combatant one faces, wishing him no harm, but moving in harmony with the person’s own energy in order to deflect him to another path.

Next, look for ways you can become one of his tribe. We all belong to many — for example, parent, sibling, sports fan, quilter, or auto enthusiast. Find a place where you share a community with the other person. Connect and spend some time there establishing a relationship.

A third step is to consider the possibility that you are wrong, opening your mind to that possibility and modeling for the other that movement is possible. Become curious about the other’s point of view and seek to understand it.

Certain ways of listening put you in a better position to attend to



the other person without inserting yourself in his views. Autobiographical listening, or “me, too” listening, engages you internally in your own stories rather than attending to what is being said. “Me, too” listening can help make social connections as you are mentioning your membership in, say, a community of parenthood. The trick is to notice the moment you’ve gone autobiographical and step out of that frame so you can attend to the other.

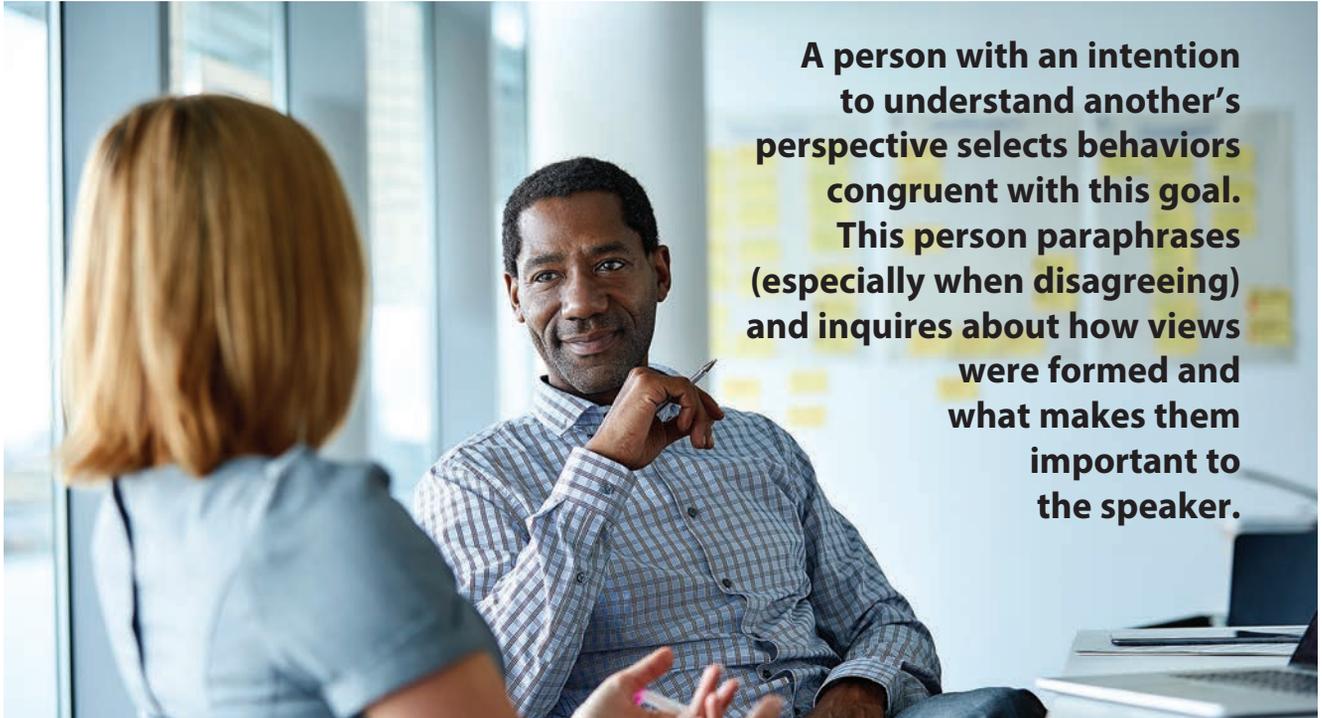
Solution listening is a great way to miss what the other is saying. When solution ideas trigger inside your mind, you can no longer hear the other and you have predisposed a mindset on what they are saying.

Finally, know your intentions in

the conversation and choose congruent behavior. The first part is the hardest. Often we interact without being aware of what intentions live beneath the surface of our behaviors. Take a moment to ask yourself: “What do I intend?”

If your intention is to convince the other person your view is correct, you are probably doomed to failure, as this is a position opposing the energy coming toward you. To resist the other person’s views are to help them persist. They will soften only by being listened to.

The word intention is from Latin — *intendere*, to stretch toward, to aim at. It is characterized by a desire to reach a specific end. Knowing what you intend allows the selection of behaviors that help you achieve your goal. Not



**A person with an intention to understand another's perspective selects behaviors congruent with this goal. This person paraphrases (especially when disagreeing) and inquires about how views were formed and what makes them important to the speaker.**

knowing what you intend promotes random, ineffective interactions with others.

A person conversing with others who intends to be observant will select behaviors that will serve this end. Those behaviors are: Be quiet, listen carefully, and watch all the speaker's messages, including the nonverbal.

A person with an intention to understand another's perspective selects behaviors congruent with this goal. This person paraphrases (especially when disagreeing) and inquires about how views were formed and what makes them important to the speaker.

Unless we are a coach, counselor, or therapist, our intentions typically go beyond understanding. Wishing our views to be heard or desiring a blending of ideas still requires listening first to the other.

To get your views heard, voice them softly, avoid the deity voice — sounding like you are God with the ultimate and only truth — and be clear that this is not the “truth” but the way you are thinking at the moment. State

your assumptions to allow the other a window into your mind. Allow ideas in their tentative form to be heard. Remember that if you think this is about winning, you lose. Seek common ground or, if not possible in the moment, some understandings.

Tali Sharot, author of *The Influential Mind* (2017), feels that we all have an obligation to affect others. According to Sharot, most efforts to change the minds of others are ineffective because they are incompatible with the way the mind works. One pattern that does work is to find a point of view both parties can agree on and make that the heart of your argument.

A back-and-forth of “Is not!” and “Is too!” might be appropriate for very young children but is destructive when adults engage in this form of conversation. We teach others when we raise the dignity of discourse at work, at home, and in our social lives.

#### REFERENCES

Brooks, D. (2017, October 23).

How to engage a fanatic. *The New York Times*. Available at [www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/opinion/engaging-fanatics.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/opinion/engaging-fanatics.html?_r=0).

Carter, S. (1998). *Civility: Manners, morals, and the etiquette of democracy*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Maeli, J. (2016, March 28). The backfire effect: The more your beliefs are challenged the stronger they become [Web log post]. Available at <http://thepoliticalinformer.com/the-backfire-effect>.

Sharot, T. (2017). *The influential mind: What the brain reveals about our power to change others*. New York, NY: McMillan.

•  
**Robert Garmston (Fabobg@gmail.com) is professor emeritus at California State University, Sacramento, and an educational consultant. Kendall Zoller (kvzollerci@gmail.com) is president of Sierra Training Associates and an associate professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills. ■**