

Holiday Conversations Survival Guide

The holidays bring big gatherings with family and friends — including those who may hold very different views. The conversations that come up can be difficult or even stressful, especially given this season’s post-election climate. But there are ways to keep conversations constructive and positive.



At The Opportunity Agenda, we research values-based communications strategies and train advocates in proven techniques. We’re sharing some of this expertise to help you speak up for social justice in ways that can connect and resonate.

Here are our tips for navigating – and surviving – your holiday conversations:

1) Decide Whether to Engage

Remember, it’s okay to set boundaries. If a conversation feels likely to start a heated argument or affect your mental health, you don’t have to engage. Excuse yourself or redirect the conversation to more neutral topics. Your peace of mind is essential, especially during the holidays.

2) Approach with Curiosity

If you choose to engage, try coming from a place of genuine curiosity. Asking questions and listening can often reveal shared values, even within different perspectives. This approach can be transformative, fostering understanding and making conversations more meaningful.

3) Start with Shared Values

At The Opportunity Agenda, we believe shared values are a powerful foundation for connection. When conversations start from common ground, it's easier to foster empathy and understanding, even on tough issues. Reflecting on values like family, fairness, and kindness can make navigating difficult topics more constructive.

4) Use Stories, Not Just Facts

Studies show that if we present only a litany of facts and rhetoric, we run a high risk of losing people. Rattling off statistics, detailing unfamiliar policies, or presenting information that conflicts with deeply held beliefs can lead others to tune out or dig in their heels.

Instead, frame complicated issues in terms of shared values, stories, and metaphors. In this way, you can foster personal connections and build understanding and support for the issues we care about.

For instance, themes like Human Dignity can resonate across diverse audiences, bridging topics such as racial justice, immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and more. These shared values help highlight how social justice issues intersect and affect everyone.

5) Avoid Mythbusting

Research has shown that directly debunking myths can reinforce them instead of dismantling them. When we repeat myths, even to disprove them, we might inadvertently introduce them to a new audience or strengthen their hold. Instead, tell positive stories that reflect your beliefs and values. Highlight contributions – like the benefits of inclusive democracy or the positive contributions of immigrants – to shift the narrative without reinforcing opposing frames.

6) Use "I" Statements to Express Your Perspective

When sharing your own views, try framing your statements from a personal perspective by using “I” statements, like “I feel” or “I believe.” This approach keeps the conversation non-confrontational and minimizes defensiveness. For example, saying “I feel strongly that everyone deserves dignity and respect” can often resonate more deeply than a more direct counter-argument.

7) Practice Active Listening

Active listening is one of the most powerful tools for navigating difficult conversations. It involves truly focusing on what the other person is saying, without immediately formulating your response. Nodding, making eye contact, and occasionally summarizing their points shows respect and openness, which can go a long way in creating a productive dialogue. Often, when people feel heard, they become more open to hearing others in return.

8) Focus on the Bigger Picture

Sometimes, zooming out and framing a discussion in terms of the bigger picture — the vision for a just and inclusive society, for example — can help steer the conversation away from divisive specifics. By emphasizing broader aspirations like fairness, safety, and equality, you may find common ground even with people who disagree on particular policies or ideas.

9) Set Limits and Take Breaks

It’s easy to get caught up in intense discussions, especially when the stakes feel high. To protect your own well-being, know when to take a break. It’s okay to say, “Let’s come back to this later” or “I’d love to keep this conversation going, but I need a quick break.” Or even, “I think we should change topics.” Stepping away can help you recharge and come back with fresh energy.

10) Create Space for Grace

While nobody is obliged to tolerate offensive opinions, giving people space to reconsider and evolve their perspectives can be powerful. If you notice someone shifting their stance, offering grace can help encourage that change. Transformation often requires time and patience.

11). Accept When You Need to ‘Agree to Disagree’

Sometimes, it’s best to acknowledge when reaching an agreement isn’t possible. Acknowledge the other person’s right to hold their views, and respectfully conclude the conversation by focusing

on what you do agree on, or simply by saying, “We just see this differently.” Agreeing to disagree allows both parties to maintain their dignity and respect, even in disagreement.

By using these strategies, you can make holiday gatherings an opportunity for connection and understanding, even when discussions touch on challenging topics.

For more resources on social justice communication approaches, we encourage you to explore the below messaging guides, which offer inroads on some of the most difficult — yet important — topics that arise in conversations today.

Messaging Advice

- [10 Lessons for Talking About Race](#)
- [Beyond Democracy: Mobilizing BIPOC Voters in the South – A Narrative Guide](#)
- [Messaging on Affirmative Action](#)
- [Responding to The Attacks on Honest and Inclusive Education](#)
- [Rise Above: Countering Fear-Based Messaging](#)
- [Social Justice Phrase Guide](#)
- [Talking About Justice and Equity Through Sports](#)
- [Telling an Affirmative Story](#)
- [Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit](#)

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