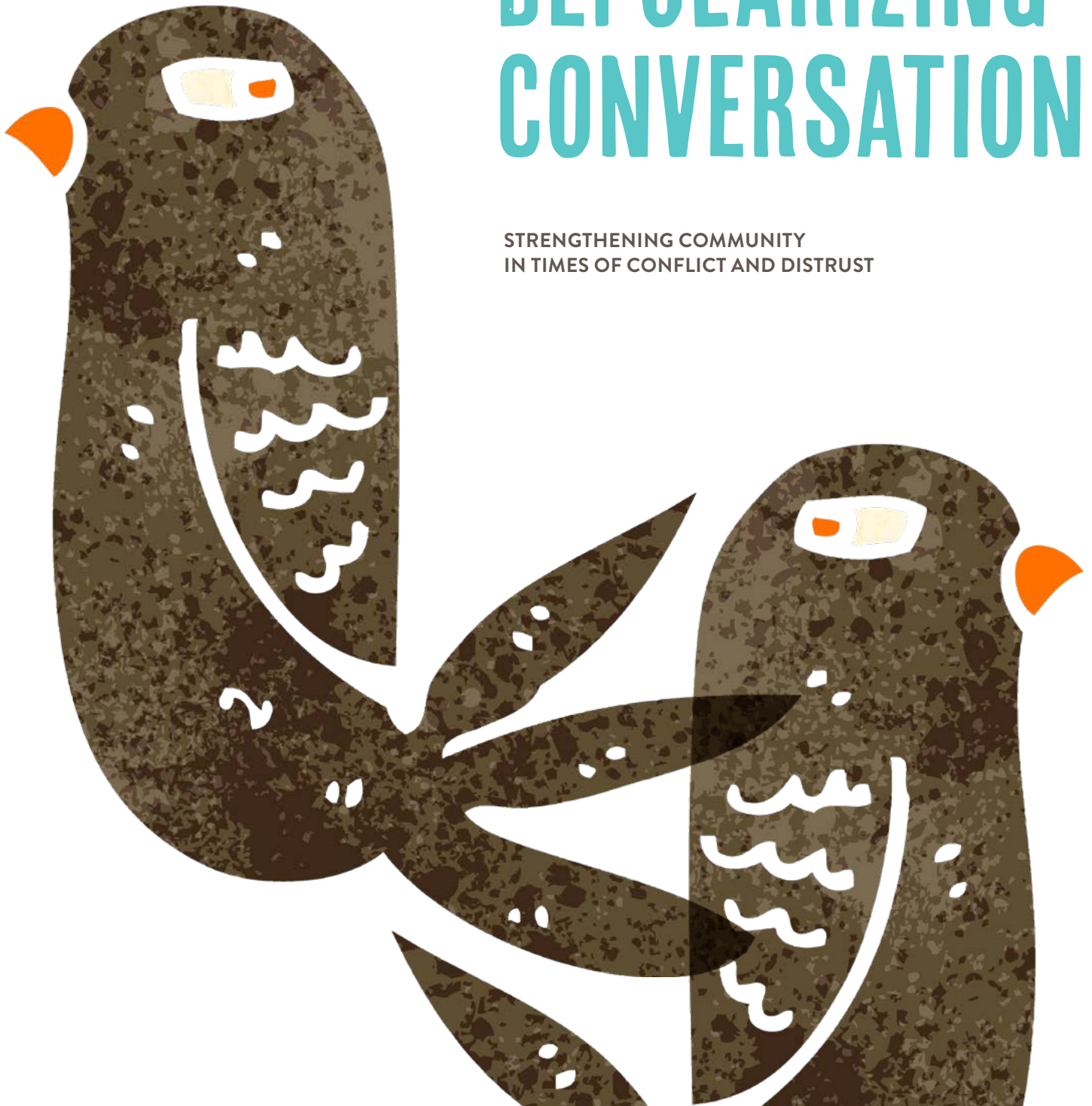


DEPOLARIZING CONVERSATION

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY
IN TIMES OF CONFLICT AND DISTRUST



Be curious,
not judgmental



TOOLS FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

THE ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM launched its Depolarizing Conversations work in 2021 in response to the contentious public dialogue emerging around the COVID-19 vaccine.

When we began this work, Alaskans were tackling challenging conversations about vaccination at home, at work, and in virtual meeting spaces. Whether we were figuring out how to come back to the office, navigating childcare, or planning family gatherings, talking about vaccination aroused powerful feelings about our safety, our health, our freedom, our autonomy, and our responsibility to the communities we care for.

Conversations like these often became heated quickly.

Faulty assumptions and loaded words frequently pushed our relationships into a vicious cycle of defensiveness, mistrust, and hostility. Our private conversations repeated and reinforced our public discourse: some Alaskans attacked “anti-vaxxers” who didn’t “believe in science” while other Alaskans felt that their concerns about the medical system and our government were being unfairly dismissed and mischaracterized. Still other Alaskans were fearful about speaking up at all, worried that they could be labeled ignorant, naive, or evil if they said the wrong thing.

This state of affairs serves no one. It tears at the social fabric of our community without making us safer or healthier.

We asked ourselves, how do we do better?

The guide compiles what we learned from that project about depolarizing contentious conversations of all sorts. In these pages, you’ll find concrete tools for navigating this kind of challenging conversation with coworkers, family members, friends, and acquaintances, regardless of the topic.

Importantly, these tools are for tackling conversations with people you are connected to and intend to stay in relationship with. They are tools for strengthening communities, and families, in times of conflict and distrust.



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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY (DE)POLARIZATION?

AMERICANS SEEM TO BE increasingly divided over politics, and Alaska is on track with the national trend.

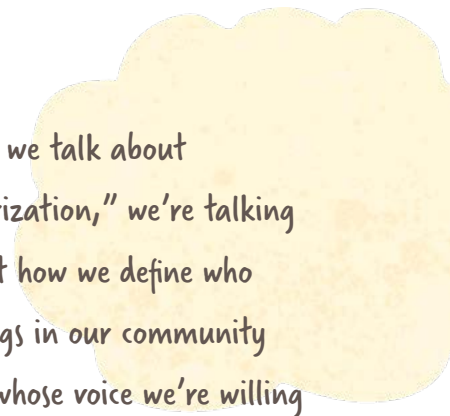
This division is beginning to seep into other areas of our lives: it's not just that we disagree about what issues matter and how we, as Alaskans, should respond to the challenges our communities face. We also disagree over what sources of information to trust and even about the facts themselves. At times, it can seem like we're living in different realities.

When we talk about "polarization," we're not talking about the inevitable disagreements and conflicts that arise in any diverse community. Instead, when we talk about "polarization," we're talking about the ways we regard the people we disagree with and our stamina for maintaining relationships with them. We're talking about our habit of stereotyping people with different politics, of talking more about them than with them, and our impulse to stop talking to them altogether. When we talk about "polarization," we're talking about how we define who belongs in our community and whose voice we're willing to listen to.

Polarization tears at the social fabric of our community. **Depolarization** is the process of strengthening community by mending those tears. Depolarization is not the same as conflict

avoidance. It requires acknowledging conflict, leaning in, and getting deeply curious about it. Depolarized conversations are hard on systems and structures, but generous towards people. They require us to be honest about condemning beliefs we find reprehensible while at the same time staying in relationship with the people who champion those beliefs.

Depolarization is difficult, slow, and often emotional work. So is it worth it?



When we talk about "polarization," we're talking about how we define who belongs in our community and whose voice we're willing to listen to.

WHY DEPOLARIZE?

OUR INCREASING “us versus them” mindset and political identity is showing up in everything from increasingly partisan media to Americans’ decreasing willingness to marry someone from the opposing political party. Not only are these dynamics contributing directly to a steep rise in political violence, comparative studies show that toxic polarization is directly linked with an erosion of the individual rights that underpin democracy.

When people in our own community disagree with our most deeply held beliefs, it’s easy to see them as threats to a thriving future and to fall into patterns of demonizing and dismissing them. But when we regard large swathes of our fellow community members with that kind of contempt, we are giving up on the democratic ideals our country aspires to. We are giving up on community.

When we depolarize, we expand our shared sense of belonging, we develop deep connections that transcend common ground, and we practice democracy at its most basic level.

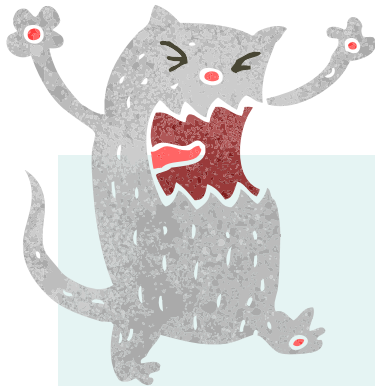
Why depolarize? To strengthen community.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CYCLE OF CONFLICT

WHEN WE ENCOUNTER CONFLICT in a relationship, it’s natural to react defensively. As Kern Beare, author of *Difficult Conversations*, explains, “our lower brain is unable to parse the difference between a threatening bear and a threatening belief—and responds to both with the same limited set of responses: fight, flee, or freeze.”

When our fight/flee/freeze response is active, our survival drive temporarily shuts down the connection that our lower brain (the part that registers threats) and our mid-brain (the part that registers emotion) have with our upper brain (the part that registers reflective thought and critical analysis). With this connection severed, our upper brain can no longer help moderate the sense of threat that our lower brain is highly tuned to and we tend to become emotionally flooded.

When we
depolarize,
we practice
democracy
at its most
basic level.



FIGHT

We argue aggressively to win the argument.



FLEE

We avoid or give up on the conversation altogether.



FREEZE

Dumbstruck, we fail to respond at all.

Our survival drive makes us hyper-vigilant to new threats, and we are more likely to interpret innocent behaviors as threatening, which then pushes us further into our fight/flee/freeze response.

Polarized issues are often issues of life and death, so isn't our instinctive survival drive appropriate?

The question is **not** whether it is appropriate, rational, or justified. The question is whether our survival drive offers an effective response. But in order to evaluate whether our response is effective, we have to examine our goals. What do we hope to achieve by responding? And what can we realistically achieve?



Once set in motion and repeated, interactions growing from threat become patterns that are very resistant to change.

WHY OUR TYPICAL CONVERSATION GOAL FAILS

TYPICALLY, when we discover someone we care about disagrees with us about something we care about, we want to change their mind (“win” the argument). This is a natural response! And sometimes, particularly when the other person is already feeling unsure or conflicted, we succeed.

But when was the last time you changed your mind about a deeply held belief? The fact is people don’t change their minds about things they care deeply about very often. Why does persuasion so rarely succeed? Let’s begin by exploring the most common persuasion tactics:

DATA, FACTS, AUTHORITIES, AND EXPERTS

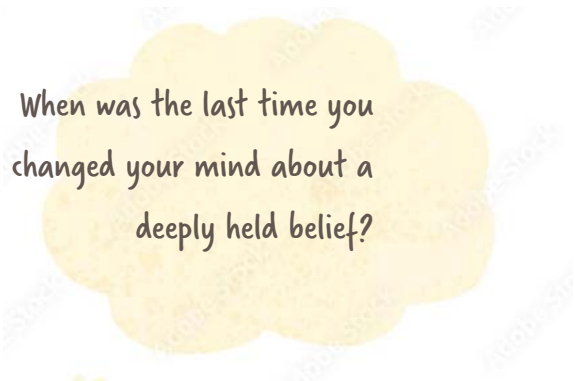
When an issue is polarized, we tend to be listening to different experts and information sources from the people we disagree with. We also tend to start out with different beliefs and assumptions about the topic, which affect how willing we are to believe new information. As a result, data, facts, authorities, and experts are unlikely to change anyone’s mind during a polarized conversation. And focusing on facts and experts can backfire deepening the other person’s distrust in your sources.

SHAME

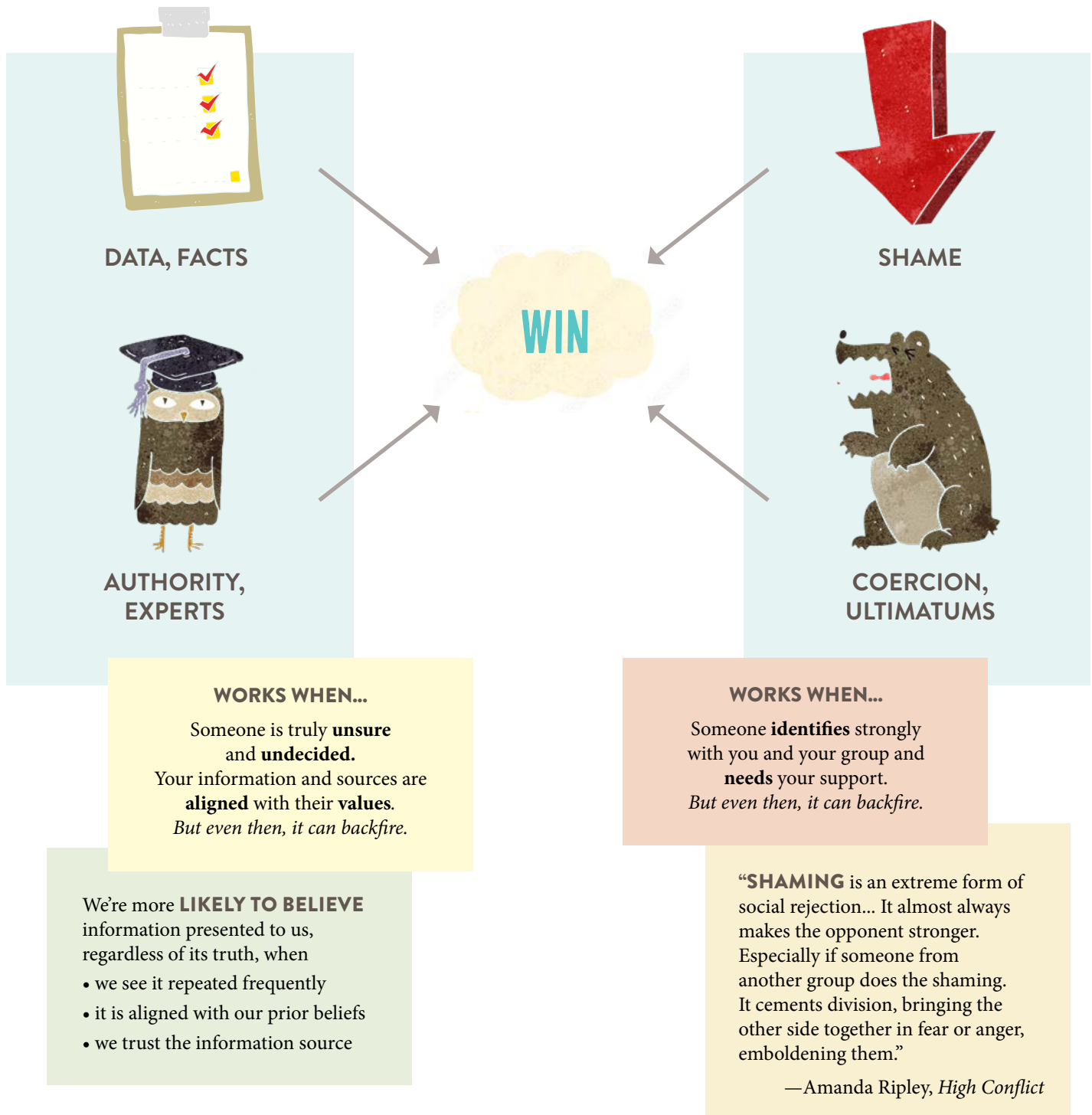
When we fail to change someone’s mind through facts and expert testimony, we often begin shaming them. Shame is a powerful social tool, especially when someone identifies strongly with the person or group that is shaming them. But it can also backfire and alienate the other person.

COERCION, ULTIMATUMS

When one person has significantly more power than the other, polarized conversations can veer into the realm of coercion. Think about parents who force their children into political, religious, or ideological conformity so long as they’re living under the parent’s roof. But we all know how this story tends to go in the long run: the person who was coerced into conformity becomes an outspoken opponent as soon as they have the choice.



When was the last time you
changed your mind about a
deeply held belief?



REDEFINING GOALS FOR POLARIZED CONVERSATIONS

PEOPLE DON'T CHANGE THEIR MINDS about things they care deeply about very often. And when we do change our minds, we often do so over many conversations over many years with many people. If persuasion is your long-term goal, what goal should you have during a single conversation?

Ultimately, our relationships are our greatest source of influence, so the best way to increase your long-term influence on another person is to **strengthen the relationship**. Short-term persuasion tactics undermine long-

term influence. So which tactics cultivate connection, trust, sense of community, and ultimately influence?

When we try to change another person's mind, our conversation becomes adversarial: most people don't enter into a conversation hoping to change their own mind. So how do we shift from an adversarial conversation to a collaborative one? By redefining our objective to something everyone would be willing to sign on for:

OBJECTIVE: **DEEPEN THE RELATIONSHIP.**

Make your goal prioritizing connection before conviction. Remember: empathy is not an endorsement. Making space to listen to someone's perspective does not imply you approve of their conclusions, and staying in relationship with someone is not the same as condoning their beliefs.

OBJECTIVE: **LEARN THE UNSPOKEN STORY BEHIND THEIR BELIEFS.**

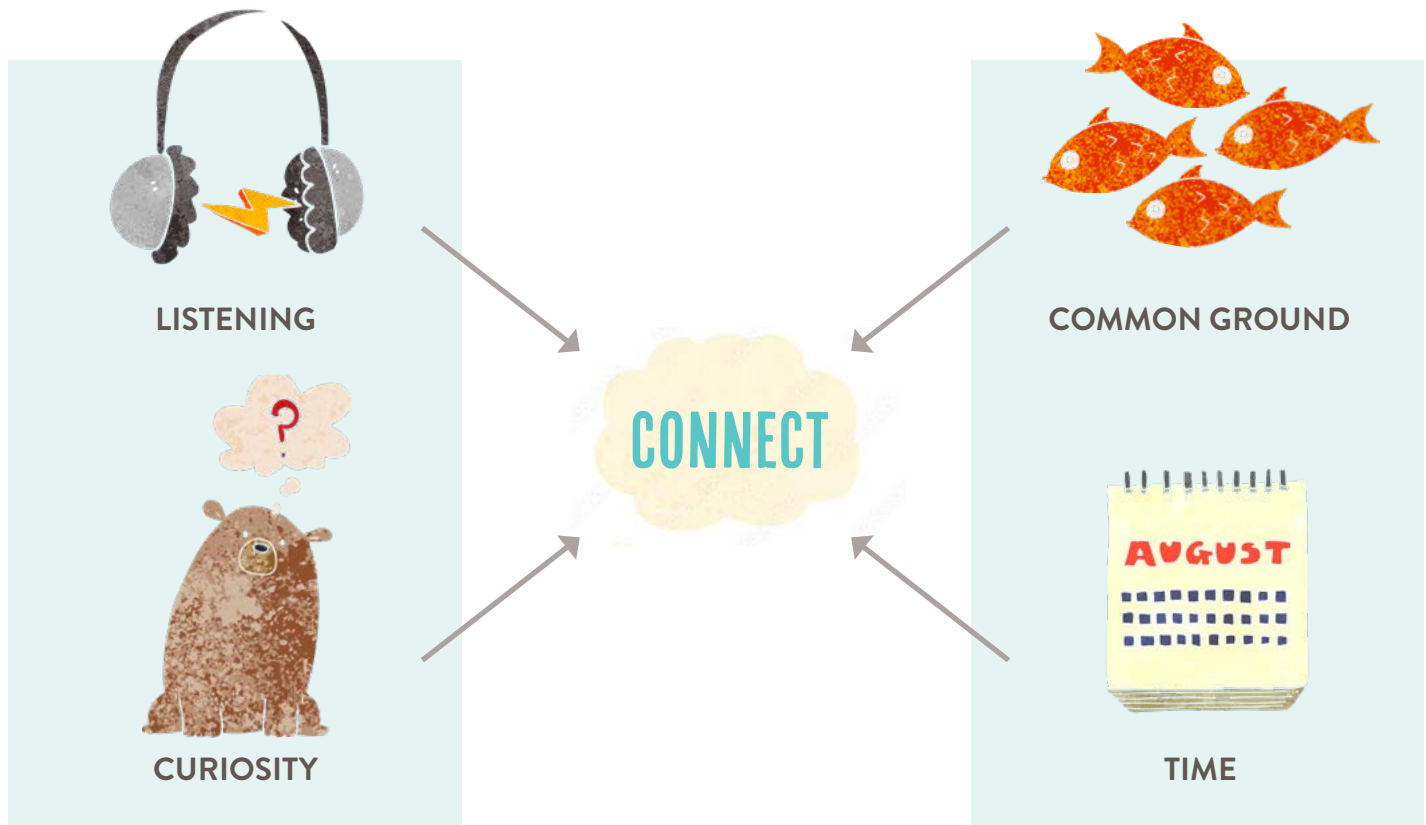
People long to feel heard, seen, and acknowledged. Be curious, not judgmental about how they came to believe something so different from you. Keep digging to the root. If they are listening to different sources of information, get curious about why they feel more connected to those sources. If you feel yourself becoming incredulous, turn that impulse into curiosity.

OBJECTIVE: **SEEK OUT THE WEAKNESSES IN YOUR OWN POINT OF VIEW.**

We're all subject to the same cognitive biases! Try to notice yours rather than theirs. Most people will be much happier to help you find the weaknesses in your own arguments than to admit to the weaknesses of theirs.

*"Empathizing
with someone you
profoundly disagree
with does not
compromise your
own deeply held
beliefs and endorse
theirs. It just means
acknowledging
the humanity of
someone who was
raised to think very
differently."*

—DYLAN MARRON



I release my attachment
to a specific outcome.

You feel a greater sense of
agency. **You feel trusted.**

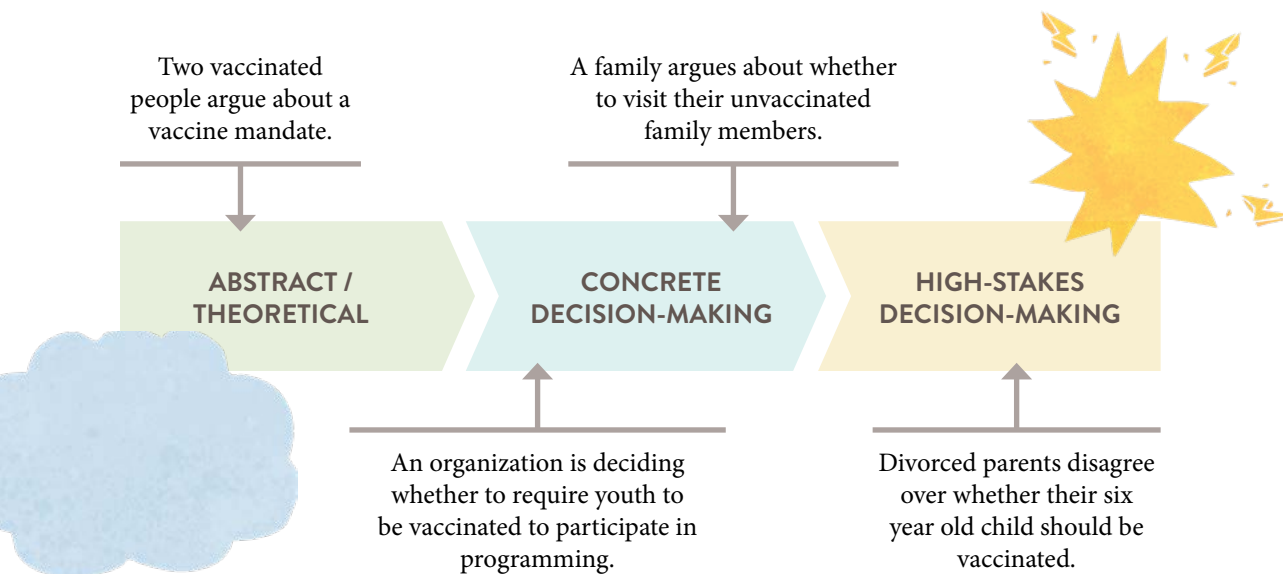
You are more receptive
to new ideas.

LETTING GO OF PERSUASION

Counterintuitively, when we let go of trying to control what a person thinks about an issue, and when we trust people to make up their own minds for themselves, they become more receptive to new ideas and more persuadable.

But it's important to know that letting go of the goal of persuasion does not mean letting go of your convictions. **Detached does not mean disinterested.**

Articulate your convictions and values as a way of helping the other person to get to know you better, rather than as a way of trying to change their mind. Use the conversation as an opportunity to better understand yourself and your beliefs. Make the case for what you believe in order to figure out how to express your thoughts clearly rather than convincingly. You'll know you've succeeded if the person seems to "get" you, even though they still disagree.



VARYING STAKES, SAME TACTICS

When it comes to polarized conversations, the stakes vary. The higher the stakes, the higher the odds that we're in it to win the argument. Whenever real, immediate decisions are in question, we want real, immediate influence. And when we're the ones making the decision, we want real, immediate support.

But the higher and more concrete the stakes of our conversation, the lower the odds that anyone's fundamental position will change. It's hard to let go of our goal to persuade when a concrete decision hangs in the balance. But even then, cultivating long-term influence is much more likely to be successful than efforts to change minds in the near-term.

WHEN TO KEEP TALKING, AND WHEN TO WALK AWAY

There's no point in working hard to deepen a relationship that isn't a relationship in the first place. Whether you're encountering them in real life or online, there are no magic solutions for abusive and aggressive strangers. Often, in these situations, the best thing you can do is walk away.

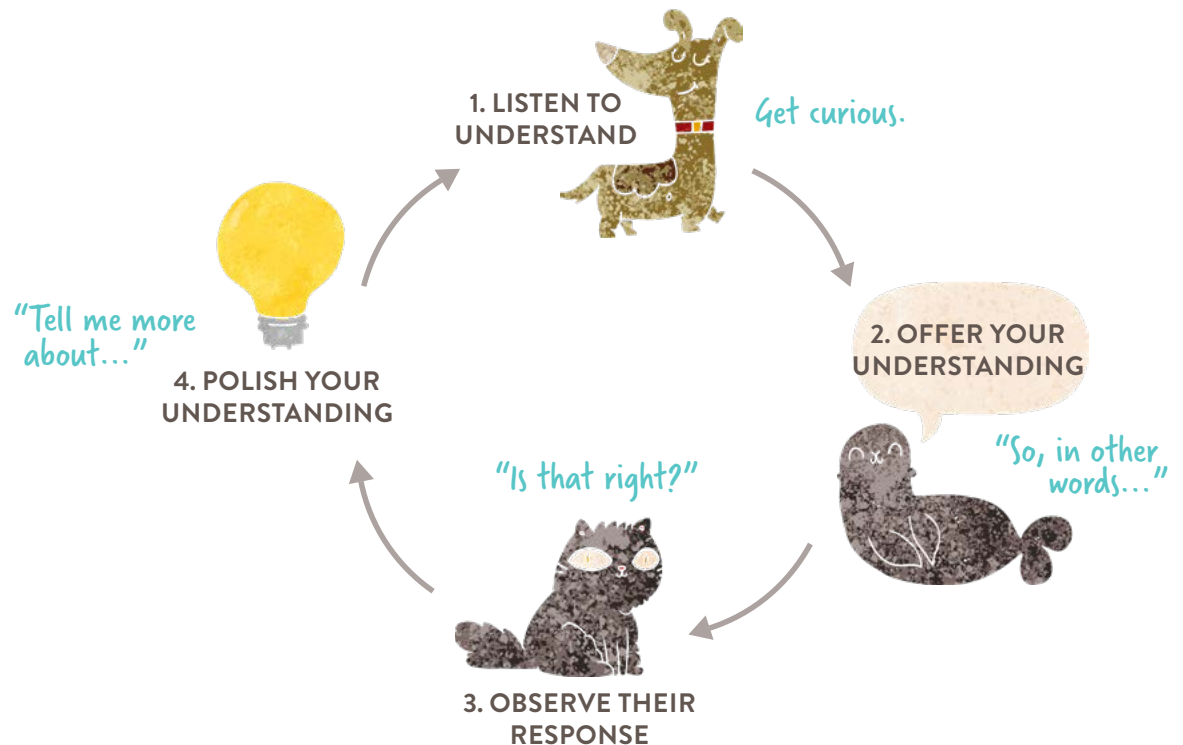
"People are harder to move from our positions on things that matter to us for good reason. Because our whole lives have led us here."

—MONICA GUZMAN

THE CONSTRUCTIVE CYCLE OF CONFLICT

BREAKING OUT of the destructive cycle of conflict in polarized discussions usually requires shifting out of an adversarial stance by redefining our goals to prioritize the relationship and cultivate long-term influence. Compassionate listening and wise questions help us to break out of that cycle and move towards a more constructive response. By staying in a constructive cycle, we avoid seeing

the other person as their argument, as just the enemy, and we start seeing them as full human beings. As Eric Liu of the Better Arguments Project of the Aspen Institute Project reminds us, “Rehumanization doesn’t require that we try to like each other. It requires only that we try to see and hear each other: that we feel the pain and pride and hope and fear of our putative antagonists.”



COMPASSIONATE LISTENING FOR POLARIZED CONVERSATIONS

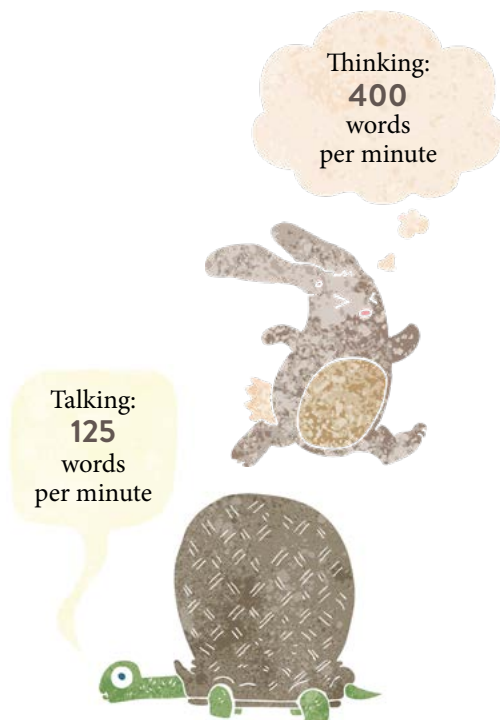
FIVE BARRIERS TO COMPASSIONATE LISTENING

1. Our fight/flee/freeze response

Our survival drive temporarily shuts down our capacity for reflective thinking and critical analysis.

2. Our processing speed

We process information much faster than we talk, which gives us a lot of room to get distracted.



3. Our assumptions

Assumptions are like earplugs: we unconsciously stop listening whenever we think we already know what someone is going to say. Most of the time, we don't even realize we've stopped paying attention. We just hear exactly what we expect to hear, even if that's entirely different from what the person is actually saying.

4. Our expectations

- We automatically interpret information generously when it confirms our pre-existing expectations about how the world works. We interpret information skeptically when it conflicts with our expectations.
- Stereotypes are a kind of expectation.

5. Our goals

- When we are trying to persuade someone, we listen for the weaknesses in their arguments and often fail to hear their strongest points.
- When we want to commiserate with someone, we listen for common ground, and we may be so focused on hearing agreement that we miss nuances in disagreement.
- When we are looking to show off about how much we know about a polarized topic, we often aren't listening at all, just waiting for our turn to talk.

"While you might think you're more likely to listen to a loved one than a stranger, in fact the opposite is true."

—KATE MURPHY,
*You're Not Listening,
What You're Missing
and Why it Matters*

FOUR TECHNIQUES FOR COMPASSIONATE LISTENING

1. Shift your goals.

Instead of persuading, commiserating, or showing off, focus on understanding where the other person is coming from and ensuring they feel heard, seen, and acknowledged.

2. Leverage the speech-thought differential.

Instead of letting your thoughts wander while the other person is speaking, focus your extra processing-speed on questions that force you to listen even closer (see 3 and 4).

3. Notice and check your assumptions.

As you are listening, notice your assumptions whenever possible. Ask:

- What am I assuming?
- Where do those assumptions come from?
- Where am I giving myself more grace than those who oppose me?

4. Challenge your own expectations.

- Remember, we automatically interpret information generously when it confirms our expectations about how the world works, and we interpret information skeptically when it conflicts with our expectations. You can balance the scales by applying skepticism to information that meets your expectations.
- As you are listening, notice when the other person shares information that confirms your pre-existing expectations, then ask yourself:
 - Must I believe it?
 - What information or evidence could convince me otherwise?

When we hear a new piece of information and it **CONFIRMS** our beliefs...

CAN I believe it?



When we hear a new piece of information and it **CONFLICTS** with our beliefs...

MUST I believe it?



WHY OUR TYPICAL QUESTIONS **FAIL**

WHEN WE DEEPLY DISAGREE, we tend to ask questions from a place of incredulity rather than authentic curiosity. Incredulous questions come with confrontational intentions that undermine the goal of prioritizing the relationship and cultivating long-term influence. These questions are often framed with the following conscious or unconscious intentions:

To make a point

Example questions:

- What are your sources for that?
- How can you support abortion but not vaccine choice?

To find specific common ground

Example questions:

- But that's because you care about your health right?
- Can't we all agree that there's risk everywhere?

To seek emotional validation

Example questions:

- Why can't they see their hypocrisy?
- How is it possible to think that's what's in the best interest of our kids?

To challenge

Example questions:

- But isn't the risk of complications from the vaccine lower than the risk of death from infection?
- But did you read the recent report about the surge in South Africa?

To shame

Example questions:

- How could you possibly believe that?
- Don't you care about our community?
- Why are you so willing to sacrifice your freedoms?



WISE QUESTIONS FOR POLARIZED CONVERSATIONS

THREE PRINCIPLES

1. Questions work best when you sincerely believe you do not know the answer.

Wise questions come from a place of genuine interests and intellectual humility. Explaining expectations leads to team alignment.

2. Curiosity is a choice.

If you're not naturally interested, you can still cultivate interest.

3. Wise questions demand compassionate listening.

Otherwise, what's the point?

WHEN OUR QUESTIONS come from a place of genuine curiosity, we move closer towards our goal of depolarization. Curious questions have intentions like...

To understand the other person's perspective

Example questions:

- Tell me more about what you mean by _____ .
- What are some of your fears, and what are some of your hopes?

To see the other person as they see themselves

Example questions:

- How are your beliefs about vaccination affecting your relationships?
- What do you feel people most misunderstand about your point of view?
- Are there any ways you think I am misunderstanding your perspective?

To draw out and explore subtle distinctions in beliefs

Example questions:

- What perspectives and beliefs are you reluctant to share with people who generally seem to agree with you about vaccination?
- When do you feel conflicted/uncertain about your beliefs on vaccinations?

To Learn New Things

Example questions:

- I didn't know that! Tell me more. What else have you learned about that?
- No, I didn't hear that. What happened?

To challenge your own assumptions

Example questions:

- What am I missing?
- Have I made any assumptions you want to challenge?

"What do you feel people most misunderstand about your point of view?"



SAME QUESTIONS, DIFFERENT INTENTIONS

Ultimately, the same exact question can be asked from a place of curiosity and intellectual humility or a place of incredulity and point-making. The other person's understanding of your intention will depend on the level of trust you've built with them.

CURIOSITY	INCREDULITY
Asking about someone's sources because you're interested in expanding your own.	Asking about someone's sources so that you can challenge their validity or prove they don't have sources.
Inquiring about someone's backstory so that you can understand their perspective.	Inquiring about someone's backstory so that you can find its weaknesses.
Asking a "What am I missing here?" with an interested tone.	Asking "What am I missing here?" with a tone of incredulity.

CURIOSITY TAKES PRACTICE

When we feel threatened, our sense of curiosity is quashed and it becomes nearly impossible to cultivate curiosity actively. Start practicing getting curious where it's the easiest, and build up to polarized conversations. Easier contexts for getting curious include:

Differences amidst general agreement


Seek out the ways that people you believe are "in your camp" actually disagree with you.

During slower interactions

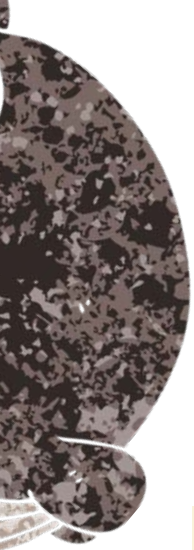
Prioritize practice in relationships you'll come back to. Generate questions in the in-between time.

With intermediaries

If you find someone with more compassion towards an opposing viewpoint than you can find, get curious about that.



If you're looking to develop your curiosity about a particular polarized issue, you can often find videos and podcasts of people sharing a wide variety of viewpoints online. These can serve as fertile grounds for practicing curiosity in the face of disagreement and drafting questions that convey an authentic desire to learn something new.



CONSTRUCTIVE BOUNDARY-SETTING FOR POLARIZED CONVERSATIONS

COMPONENTS OF A BOUNDARY

Awareness
Communication
Action
Followthrough

WE CAN GAIN A LOT from leaning into conflict over polarized topics, but we're human and we all have limits. Conversation boundaries help you to be realistic about how much conflict you can really take and how much empathy you can extend. Without conversation boundaries, we tend to wear out or blow up. Boundary-setting is a way of prioritizing relationships.

SIGNS THAT YOU NEED CONVERSATION BOUNDARIES

1. You regularly feel like you've been **"pushed" to keep talking** about the issue after you stopped finding the conversation productive.
2. You feel **resentment** towards other people's behavior when discussing disagreements.
3. You begin to **avoid interactions** and phone calls.
4. You make comments about working hard to empathize and understand others and **getting nothing** in return.

You set boundaries around your own behavior. You describe your needs and expectations from others, but you cannot control their choices. You can only control your own.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE YOUR BOUNDARIES

1. **Be direct.** Expecting the other person to intuit your boundaries based on your behaviors alone is a recipe for an unhealthy relationship.
2. **Focus on your comfort-level rather than right/wrong.** The other person will shut down if you suggest that they are being foolish or immoral
3. **When in doubt, use this formula:** "I feel _____ when you _____ [neutral description]. I need _____."
4. **Don't apologize.** Clarity is kind. There is no need to apologize.

CONFLICTING BOUNDARIES

SOMETIMES OUR CONVERSATION BOUNDARIES are in conflict with one another. In these cases, we are at an impasse, and we likely need to end the conversation. This is the best way to respect the relationship! Below is an example of conflicting conversation boundaries.

	YOURS	THEIRS
NEEDS/ EXPECTATIONS	To feel comfortable having this conversation, I need to be able to verbally process and revise my thoughts as we discuss. I need to know that we'll take the time it takes to understand one another.	To feel comfortable having this conversation, I need a lot of structure and a clear timeframe for the discussion. I prefer to know what questions you'll ask ahead of time.
LIMITS	I cannot have a conversation about this topic if you have a hard-stop or if I need to give you an agenda for what we'll discuss.	Unless I know roughly how long we're going to discuss this topic, I will not have a conversation with you about it. I will only answer questions when I have been given time to really think about my answer.



"I'm not going to continue this conversation if you're trying to prove me wrong."

EXAMPLE CONVERSATION BOUNDARIES

- "You can disagree with me without being mean or rude."
- "I'm not in a good place to have this conversation right now. Can we talk about it tomorrow?"
- "If you are curious, I'm happy to discuss my choices. But I will not continue this conversation if your intention is to prove me wrong or make me feel bad about my decisions."
- "I am really curious about your perspective on this issue, but I feel sad when you don't ask me about mine. I need you to listen to my story, and then I'll be ready to hear more about yours."

THE AFTERMATH

When we communicate our boundaries, it's not unusual to experience a negative response or difficult emotions. After setting a boundary, you may experience:

- **Pushback**
- **Rationalizing**
- **Grief or sadness**
- **Ignoring**
- **Testing**
- **Guilt**
- **Cut-offs**
- **Silent treatment**
- **Self-doubt**

Ultimately, there is no way to avoid these experiences altogether. We must confront short-term discomfort for the long-term benefits of boundary setting.

Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between healthy boundaries and toxic manipulation. The difference comes down to the intention behind the boundary. Healthy boundaries come from a place of caring for yourself while respecting your relationship. Manipulation comes from a place of trying to control the other person.

BOUNDARIES	MANIPULATION
Asking to end a conversation because you are emotionally saturated and need a break.	Asking to end a conversation because you want to make the other person feel guilty.
Unfollowing or unfriending someone because you find their posts upsetting and unsettling.	Unfollowing or unfriending someone because you want to punish them for posting things you disagree with.
Asking that someone avoid using a particular term or phrase because you truly feel hurt when you hear it.	Asking that someone avoid using a particular term or phrase because you want to teach them a lesson.

MANAGING GRIEF AND GUILT

Take a pause | Go for a walk | Listen to music | Journal
Breathe deeply | Repeat a mantra to yourself | Call a friend



"I need a break."

DEPOLARIZATION ≠ CENTRISM

WE'VE BEEN TALKING a lot about “polarization”, but that word isn’t a perfect metaphor for the challenge we’re addressing in this guide. “Polarization” emphasizes people moving to the “poles” of an issue, and separating themselves into two sides, “polar opposites.” Calling it “polarization” almost makes it sound like there’s a clear and easy

solution: everyone just needs to move closer to the center! When we call the problem “polarization,” centrism looks like the antidote. Particularly if you’re already a centrist yourself.

When we recognize that our community is divided, our response generally falls into one of three categories:

BREAKING THE DIVIDE

We stop seeing the people we disagree with as legitimate members of our community, and we break away from them, defining “we” in an increasingly narrow way. As John A. Powell, Director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at University of California Berkeley, describes, “Breaking sees the other as a threat, sees the other with fear, as somehow attacking who we are. And most of the stories, most of the practices that we engage in in our society... are breaking. We’re constantly defining ourselves in opposition to the other.”

OBLITERATING THE DIVIDE

Here we try to push everyone towards an imagined ideological center, and we deny the legitimacy of deep difference in the first place. We obliterate the divide, erasing our fellow community members’ distinct worldviews and identities in the process. If breaking sees the other as a threat, obliterating fails to see the other at all.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

We create a sense of belonging within our community not just in spite of difference, but also through that difference. Bridging invites empathy, deep listening, and connection. **It’s about seeing the other in their full humanity:** messy, complex, flawed, and intrinsically worthy of community. When we bridge a divide, the divide doesn’t disappear. Rather, bridging allows our sense of community and belonging to transcend the divide.

FLAWED—AND WORTHY

When we frame the issue as “polarization”, we tend to respond by trying to obliterate the divide. But the problem isn’t really polarization, it’s dehumanization. And centrists are often just as guilty of demonizing those they disagree with.

So why have we created a “depolarization” guide and not an “anti-dehumanization” guide? Most of us are more willing to admit that we’re polarized than that we’ve been dehumanizing and demonizing large swathes of people in our community.

But even though we’re slow to admit it, the truth is that, just like the people we disagree with, we’re also messy, complex, and flawed.

And intrinsically worthy of community.

Let’s build it
together.



DEPOLARIZING CONVERSATION RESOURCES

BOOKS

Difficult Conversations, Kern Beare

High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out, Amanda Ripley

I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times, Monica Guzman

Set Boundaries, Find Peace, Nedra Glover Tawwab

The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't, Julia Galef

The Way Out, Peter Coleman

You're Invited: The Art and Science of Cultivating Influence, Jon Levy

You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why it Matters, Kate Murphy

ARTICLES

"Complicating the Narratives" by Amanda Ripley: <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63>

"The Second Most Powerful Tool in Conflict" by Amanda Ripley: <https://amandaripley.substack.com/p/the-second-most-powerful-tool-in>

"What is a Better Argument?" by The Better Arguments Project: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Better-Arguments-Report-REVISED-FINAL.pdf>

VIDEOS

How Curiosity Will Save Us | TEDxSeattle by Mónica Guzmán: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSLOzNREHAE&t=17s>

Empathy Is Not an Endorsement | TED by Dylan Marron: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waVUm5bhLbg>

ORGANIZATIONS

Braver Angels: <https://braverangels.org/>

The Better Arguments Project: <https://betterarguments.org/>

Bridge Alliance: <https://www.bridgealliance.us/>

ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM

421 W. 1st Ave., Suite 200,
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 272-5341 | www.akhf.org

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The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this booklet are those of the Alaska Humanities Forum. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Way of Anchorage or the Municipality of Anchorage's Health Department.

ABOUT THE ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM

OUR MISSION

The Alaska Humanities Forum connects Alaskans through stories, ideas, and experiences that positively change lives and empower communities.

OUR VISION

We envision a culturally diverse, economically vibrant, and equitable Alaska where people are engaged, informed, and connected.

ABOUT US

We're driven by the search for common ground, respectful curiosity about the differences among us, and the belief that every Alaskan has a story worth sharing.

Since its founding in 1972, the Forum has been bringing Alaskans together to think critically and to talk —across perspectives, values, and backgrounds— about things that matter.

The Forum is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization representing and serving Alaska as one of 56 state and territorial councils supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and as a member of the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

The Alaska Humanities Forum is dedicated to strengthening and connecting communities

across Alaska. Using the humanities—literature and storytelling, history, art, music, philosophy, our shared cultural heritage—we create the space for Alaskans to share their stories, ideas, and experiences so that they may better understand themselves, one another, and the human experience.

WHAT WE DO

Many of the issues that threaten the stability and health of our communities are rooted in a lack of connection, engagement, and perspective. We help (Alaskans) address this need by:

- Empowering community changemakers
- Preparing our youth for their future
- Deepening trust and connection
- Fueling creative projects

We design, facilitate, and support experiences that bridge distance and difference—programming that shares and preserves the stories of people and places across our vast state, and explores what it means to be Alaskan.

"The humanities
offer us so many
avenues for
considering who
we are and what
we might become
and how we might
behave to create a
better world."

—GARY HOLTHAUS,
Alaska Humanities
Forum founding
director

CORE PRINCIPLES

Embrace complexity.

Both the causes and solutions to many of the challenges our communities face are complicated and multifaceted. We lean into this space by exploring the interconnectedness of people and issues, and by digging deeper to get to the "why."

Play the long game.

Cultural norms and perceptions need to shift to see long-term, lasting social change. Our programs engage people in small groups to build individual capacity and understanding while developing the relationships and networks needed for big, lasting systems change.

Gather people.

We bring people together, drawing on the knowledge, experience, and ideas in the room to cultivate collective wisdom. In one of the truest expressions of the definition of "forum," we are a meeting place for essential community dialogue.

Take risks.

Learning and growth happen when people stretch themselves. The Forum creates "brave spaces" where people can share controversial

ideas, be vulnerable and real, and examine their assumptions and biases in order to gain a new or deeper understanding.

Listen hard.

Our work is community-informed, adaptable, and responsive. In turn, we ask that the people who partner and engage with us are willing to slow down, seek to understand the humanity of others, and pay attention to the intention behind their words.

Activate diversity.

Alaskans represent a broad range of perspectives, experiences, backgrounds, and opinions. That diversity offers an opportunity that's too important to leave to chance. Our gatherings encourage participants to interact with and learn from one another to enrich the dialogue and learning.



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