


BridgeUSA

EST. 2017



THE CONVERSATION FACILITATION GUIDE





“True Community is based upon equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. It affirms the richness of individual diversity as well as the common human ties that bind us together.”

Pauli Murray, American Human Rights Activist

“Conversations stop violence, conversations start countries, they build bridges...Human beings are not the barriers but the gateways to the very things that we want.”

Theo E.J. Wilson, Poet and Television Personality

“Ideal conversation must be an exchange of thought, and not, as many of those who worry most about their shortcomings believe, an eloquent exhibition of wit or oratory.”

Emily Post, American Author and Novelist

“People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, American Essayist





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OUR PHILOSOPHY

BridgeUSA believes in the power of conversation. By engaging in good faith conversations with people holding a range of different views, we learn and benefit ourselves as well as the greater community.

If we hope to change the status quo of toxicity, blind partisanship, and misunderstanding, the simple act of talking with others is a powerful force. Importantly, empathy and constructive conversations are a prerequisite to taking action on important issues.

Conversations help us learn both what others believe and why they believe what they do. They help us discover and strengthen our own beliefs, too, because there is no better way to understand our personal convictions than by defending them against counterarguments. Overall, conversations that cover diverse viewpoints affirm a commitment to truth, solutions, and community.

PILLARS OF DISCUSSION

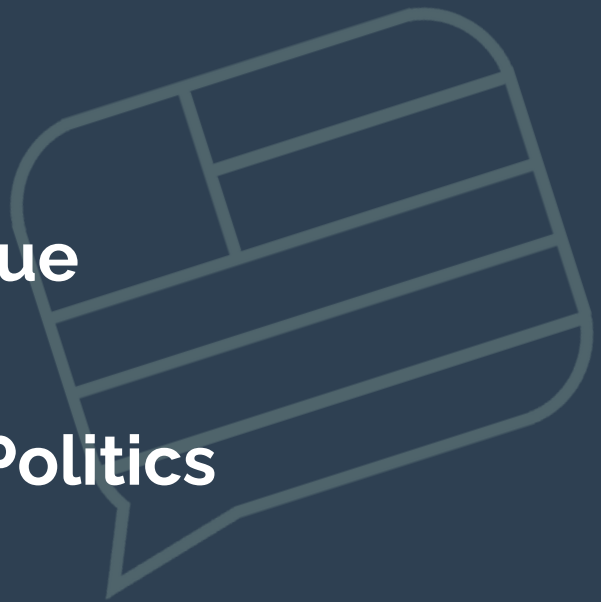
Starting the best possible conversation on the pressing issues of our time requires a spark to get people talking. Any topic or issue will work, as long as it taps into the heart of a debate, poses a broad question, or sets up for a rigorous discussion. Issues of common, public concern are the flint to BridgeUSA's fire, activating the BridgeMindset.

The Three Pillars of the Bridge Mindset are:

I. Viewpoint Diversity

II. Constructive Dialogue

III. Solution-Oriented Politics



PILLARS OF DISCUSSION

I. Viewpoint Diversity

BridgeUSA believes in viewpoint diversity and rising above party. This allows us to challenge our assumptions, broaden our perspectives, and find common ground amidst our differences.

II. Constructive Dialogue

We encourage participants to seek understanding of different perspectives and work together to solve global challenges. We are dedicated to creating an environment where ideas are not only shared, but also developed and implemented to address the real challenges.

III. Solution-Oriented Politics

We believe that conversations can create change and common ground can be found even in difficult spaces!

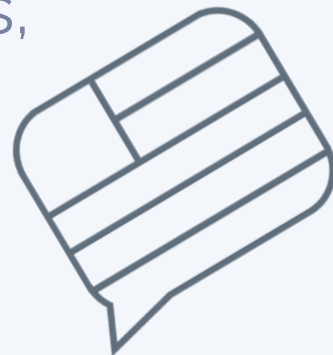
PURPOSE OF DISCUSSIONS

The goal of our discussions is to foster a BridgeUSA community where participants from various ideological and intellectual backgrounds collaborate.

These discussions are not about promoting partisan viewpoints but about collectively exploring different aspects of issues. **The essence of a BridgeUSA discussion lies in not only grasping others' viewpoints but also understanding the reasons behind those beliefs.** This understanding is crucial for any BridgeUSA chapter.

While approaches may vary across different settings, the ability to engage peers in meaningful dialogue is fundamental to the growth and success of the community.

Our discussion methods, **tested by over twenty thousand BridgeUSA participants**, facilitate meaningful conversations across diverse perspectives.



DISCUSSION NORMS

These norms are essential to fostering respectful and productive dialogue across diverse settings and audiences. They serve as a foundation for creating an inclusive environment during conversations.

At the start of any discussion, these norms should be clearly presented to all participants. **It should be made clear that by choosing to stay, participants agree to adhere to these guidelines to ensure a constructive and respectful dialogue environment.**



Listen to Listen, Not to Respond:

Focus on fully understanding the speaker's perspective without planning your response while they are speaking. This promotes deeper comprehension and meaningful exchange.



Avoid Interrupting or Having Side Conversations:

Ensure all participants have the opportunity to speak and be heard without distractions. This respect for each voice encourages genuine engagement and learning from one another.

DISCUSSION NORMS



Address the Statement, Not the Person:

When responding to comments, focus on the content of the statements rather than the characteristics of the person making them. This keeps the discussion focused on ideas and avoids personalizing debates.



Participants Represent Only Themselves:

Although individuals may share perspectives influenced by their communities, they speak only for themselves in these discussions.

Respect for personal and social identities is crucial, and experiences related to these identities are valued contributions to the dialogue.



**THESE NORMS ARE THE
GUIDING STRUCTURE OF
BRIDGEUSA DISCUSSIONS!**

STRUCTURE OF A CONVERSATION



Set the Tone

Explain the Norms of Discussion and the reasoning behind each. Set any other ground rules at the beginning of the meeting.

Start with a “Check-In”

Open the conversation by discussing feelings, initial opinions, things participants have heard. This will give the moderator a sense of viewpoints and emotions in the room before the discussion begins.

Explore Facets of the Conversation

All topics will naturally have subtopics within them, use the multiple questions to look more deeply into nuances within the conversation.

End with Points of Agreement and Disagreement

This removes outside alliances/biases and shows common interests within the discussion group. End discussions with a theoretical attempt to work together will allow people to go home less angry than if you only explored disagreements.

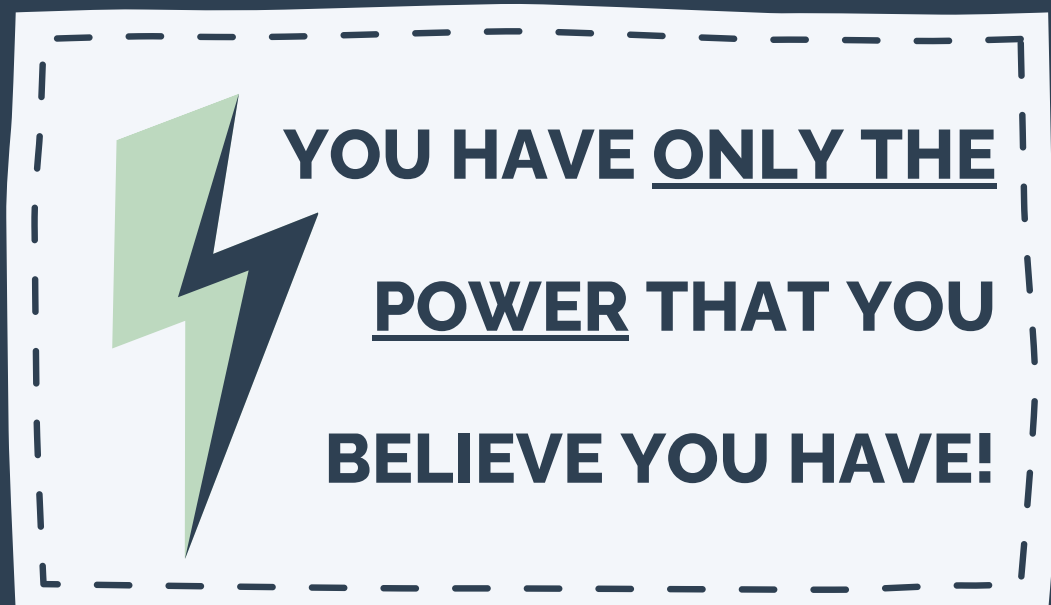
HOW TO FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS

The following guidelines for moderators and facilitators are just that: guidelines. Each discussion will be unique in its own way, depending on the campus, topic, and political climate.

Being a good moderator is not about memorizing every tool here. Instead, being a good moderator involves reading the room, recognizing problems before they develop, and being confident in your own authority. Participants will only listen to your direction if you are firm and confident.

There are two main sections here: **tips on creating a welcoming space/constructive environment** and more **specific advice on moderating heated discussions**.

#1 RULE OF MODERATION



HOW TO FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS



Create a Welcoming Space

- Arrange the room to best facilitate conversation.
- Begin with introductions (if group size allows).
- Review the Norms of Discussion.
- Establish that both empirical arguments and arguments rooted in experience are both welcome; no one should feel like they must be an “expert” on the issue to provide a point of view or an argument.

Share Goals for the Conversation

- Establish that the aim is not to ‘fix’ issues with a single conversation.
- Instead, we come together to practice talking with and listening to one another while gaining a greater understanding of others’ (and our own) points of view.
- Depending on the meeting, a goal may include the identification of potential next steps in strengthening the campus community.

HOW TO FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS



Stimulate Productive Inquiry

- Foster an environment where curiosity is encouraged, making it safe for participants to ask questions and explore ideas without judgment.
- Incorporate multimedia elements and real-world examples to make discussions more engaging and relatable.
- Encourage participants to connect personal experiences to the topic, creating a richer, more personal dialogue.
- Summarize key points at the end of discussions to reinforce learning and understanding.
- Encourage participants to reflect on their learning and how it applies to their own lives.
- Provide opportunities for feedback to continuously improve the inquiry process.
- Celebrate diverse perspectives and acknowledge contributions to foster a sense of community and shared learning.
- **The moderator must maintain a non-partisan effect and should refrain at all costs from bringing in their own opinions to the discussion.**

HOW TO FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS



Balancing Group Size

- Often it is optimal to start out in small groups to discuss an initial question.
- The benefit of small group discussion is that it gives more individuals the opportunity to voice their opinions and it allows a conversation to progress deeper. While larger groups allow for more viewpoints to be heard and engage with another.

Tips for Ending Reflections

- Wrap up with a summary of key points.
- If time allows, you may wish to go around the room and have each person share one takeaway.
- Provide note cards for participants, asking each person to write down one takeaway from this experience and one suggestion for next steps.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR WHEN FACILITATING

These are some of the most common issues within BridgeUSA discussions. They are listed in order from least destructive to most destructive. As a moderator it is your duty to see these issues arising before they become prohibitive to constructive engagement.



1. People talking amongst themselves
2. Two people want to just keep going back and forth (We recommend only letting a pair talk 4 times back and forth: initial thought, rebuttal, rebuttal, rebuttal, done)
3. People begin raising their voice
4. "All you X people think Y"
5. Ad hominem attacks
6. A perceived, but unintended attack

FACILITATING HEATED DISCUSSIONS

Most discussions will go off without a hitch. People who voluntarily join BridgeUSA conversations are predisposed to exchanging viewpoints constructively. However some discussions are bound to become heated even with all the above tips. These are potential problems to watch out for, as well as preventative and reactionary measures.

Setting the Tone for Moderation

The **pre-step** to the following solutions is setting the tone of the meeting prior to any issues arising. When establishing ground rules it is important that you do the following:

Establish the Norms of Discussion

- Start by explaining the four core norms of discussion.

Explain why we have the Norms

- These discussions are designed to ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions and critiquing others.
- There is no value to a BridgeUSA discussion space if people feel forced into silence.

You will not hesitate to remove participants

- Rules are only as good as enforcement mechanisms.
- Make clear that violating the norms repeatedly or purposefully will result in removal from the discussion.

FACILITATING HEATED DISCUSSIONS

Regaining Control of Conversations

The following **three methods of steering a discussion back on track** are listed in order from least intrusive to most intrusive. The last “extra” method is for specific circumstances and shouldn’t be a go-to method.

Re-phrasing an answer:

- Allows you to remove harsh/targeting words from the point (be careful about misconstruing, however).
- Ensures other participants actually understand what was said
- Makes the speaker feel heard. When people don’t feel heard is often when they get angry/mean.
- Asking participant if that is what they meant.

Reminding participants of the purpose of discussion

- Re-focuses conversation.
- Reminds participants that they voluntary joined this conversation, knowing full well that they would be talking to people they disagree with.
- Requires you to have stayed true to your rules throughout (especially with someone they are having issues with).

FACILITATING HEATED DISCUSSIONS

Asking everyone to take a minute of silence

- Best for when the entire discussion has become heated, instead of just two people.
- Remind participants of the purpose of the discussion.
- Ask participants to reflect on what they've heard, how it's made them feel, if they want to have this conversation now.



EXTRA: ALLOWING THE ROOM TO RESPOND

- This is for when someone says something very controversial, but it might seem partisan to address it as the moderator.
- "I sense that a lot of people in the room took issue with that, would anyone like to respond?"
- Sometimes there is not a good neutral response, this is for those times.
- Or if no one wants to respond, feel free to respond but try to do it in the third person.

TRAITS OF A DIALOGUE FACILITATOR

Leadership



- A good facilitator will **inspire participants to create healthy discussion** themselves.
- **Encouraging good engagement** vs. discouraging bad engagement.

Observation



- You should be **watching other participants** while one is sharing their feelings.
- Verbalization of observation is what will **create understanding** and make participants feel heard.

Empathy



- A dialogue facilitator should be able to **empathize with a wide-range of perspectives.**
- As a **moderator who doesn't believe in the other side, you may struggle to empathize** and overlook attacks.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This document is designed to equip you with the tools to effectively engage individuals in your circles and community. Our discussion methods, tested by over twenty thousand BridgeUSA participants, facilitate meaningful conversations across diverse perspectives.

Should you have any questions about this toolkit or need guidance on organizing a discussion, please reach out to us at info@bridgeusa.org. To learn more about BridgeUSA and how you can get involved, please visit our [website](https://www.bridgeusa.org).



@bridgeusa_



info@bridgeusa.org



[bridgeusa.org](https://www.bridgeusa.org)

The Conversation Facilitation Guide

A BridgeUSA Publication

BridgeUSA is a multi-partisan student movement that champions viewpoint diversity, responsible discourse, and a solution-oriented political culture. We are developing a generation of leaders that value empathy and constructive engagement because our generation will bear the cost of polarization and tribalism for years to come.

The purpose of BridgeUSA is to build a community — one in which students from across the ideological spectrum can engage as a group working together to understand—to bridge—the various perspectives behind the important political and social issues of our time.

We rise above party. We do not force unity or compromise. We believe in the Bridge Mindset: viewpoint diversity, constructive engagement, and a solution-oriented political culture.

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