

Guidance on Opportunities
Civility: Aiding our Impact
April 2018

In today's political climate and culture, it may feel like civility is becoming the exception instead of the rule. As the debate on issues becomes more strident, it becomes harder to identify common ground and shared solutions. In the words of one local League, "How could we advocate on issues with any expectation of seeing results if the communications process seems to be broken?"



As we've discussed in previous guidances, the democracy space has grown more crowded. While this activism is exciting, it can make it difficult to be heard. As a trusted, nonpartisan organization, our collective voice has the potential to "cut through the noise."

However, *how* our message on issues is delivered can have as much impact as the message itself. As we know, relationships are critical. Trust-building and team-work are essential because people must come together to fix problems and create compromises on issues. There must be mutual respect between each other to enhance strong dialogue.

Civil discourse, debating (not arguing), and listening to the other side are critical to building trust. While we all know this, it can be hard in practice. Borrowing from the League's partner, the National Institute for Civil Discourse (<https://nicd.arizona.edu/>), here are several simple tips to remember to achieve a positive, respectful conversation:

1. Go into the conversation or meeting with an **open mind**. Your initial attitude has the power to set the tone for the entire conversation.
2. **Listen carefully and respectfully**. The most important thing you can do is listen to the other person. Their opinion is valid, just like yours. This gives you an opportunity to better understand the background of that viewpoint.
3. Do not be afraid to **ask questions**, but ask them in a respectful manner. This is also a way to find common ground.
4. **Avoid non-verbal cues**. Be aware of your own biases and reactions. Be careful of your facial expressions, body language, etc. Negative reactions can cause the person you are speaking to, to feel uncomfortable and disrespected.
5. **Stay in engaged** with the person you are speaking to and be present in the conversation. For example, do not text while they are talking. Positive engagement is a key to proper civil discourse.
6. **One voice at a time**. Let the person finish talking; do not begin to speak over them. Be patient.

Civil discourse is discourse that supports, rather than undermines, the societal good. It demands that democratic participants respect each other, even when that respect is hard to give or to earn.

www.tolerance.org

7. **Avoid name-calling and other disrespectful actions.** If the speaker said something that offended you, tell them peacefully and explain why. This is an opportunity for both of you to learn.
8. **Accept differences.** Sometimes you must agree to disagree and walk away from the conversation.

While we all hope that these conversations will result in immediate solutions, often solutions and compromise take time to identify. These conversations are primarily about building relationships for the organization. By presenting ourselves in a civil manner, listening respectfully and staying open to conversations with others, we help to position the entire organization for success in the future.

Civil Discourse inside the League...

While we often think about the value of civic discourse when navigating external audiences, these tips can be just as valuable within League. How do we approach meetings? How are new voices added to the conversation? What happens when there isn't agreement? How do we foster a welcoming and respectful environment for activists in our community?

League Spotlight

- [LWV of Portland, OR](#)

LWV of Portland brought several speakers to talk about the importance of civil discourse in October 2017. Video highlights are available online.

- [LWV of San Luis Obispo County, CA](#)

LWVSLO has created a Civil Discourse Action Team and published several handbooks and brochures on civil discourse related topics. LWVSLO has been working on this issue for several years.