

League of Women Voters
Diablo Valley

Civil Discourse

February 2022



Constructive Conversation is Critical



The slide features three photographs illustrating constructive conversation. The top-left photo shows a woman with glasses speaking at a podium with a microphone, while a man in a suit listens. The top-right photo shows a group of four people in a meeting room, with one man speaking and others listening. The bottom-center photo shows a group of five people sitting around a table, engaged in a discussion.

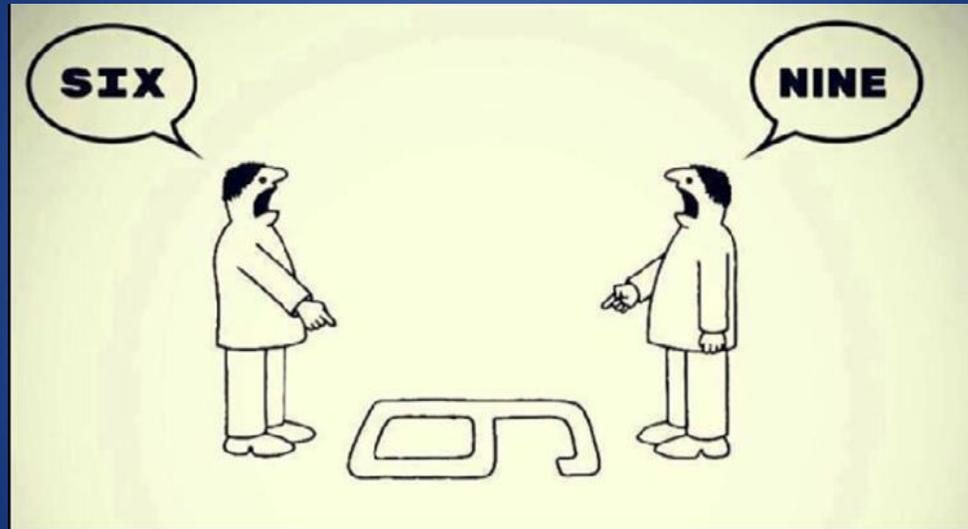
LWV LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF DIABLO VALLEY

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

The League of Women Voters of Diablo Valley is a non-partisan, non-profit organization and our mission is to make democracy work. In order for this to happen, civic engagement must be strong and everyone must feel welcome to participate without fear of criticism or intimidation. Our studies show that the use of **Civil Discourse, or civil civic engagement skills**, is the most effective way to accomplish this goal.

We find ourselves at a crossroads right now. A crossroads exposing bitter and polarized political divides. We will have to work to find ways to create consensus and broad support for our system to function effectively. Engaging in conversations across these divides helps us find common ground and moves our country toward a stronger democracy. The League's goal is to promote the education of government bodies, staff and the public to improve civic engagement and public policy decisions and processes.

The Problem



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The graphic here is an example of the adage: Where you *stand* on an issue, begins with where you *sit*. Our deeper understanding of an issue benefits from hearing other perspectives. Consider the statement from the Kettering Institute:

“When citizens deliberate about an issue and when a community has a habit of asking citizens to make choices, the directions that are chosen often are better and they have a legitimacy that simply doesn’t exist otherwise”.

Civil Discourse -
What It Is:

- ▶ Willingness to *listen* to another's opinion
 - ...With curiosity *and not animosity*
 - ...Respectfully, without interrupting
 - ...Share the time equally
 - ...Search for common ground
- ▶ Ability to disagree w/o being disrespectful
- ▶ Opportunity to share values to find common ground

What It Isn't:

- ▶ A debate with winners/losers
- ▶ Persuasion
- ▶ Caving in on beliefs/values
- ▶ Waiting "politely" with retort
- ▶ Shutting down dialogue

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Civil Discourse is courteous, constructive communication characterized by mutual respect, openness and attentive listening. It's important because it facilitates the informed discussion of public issues essential for government bodies and citizens to make good decisions. Civil Discourse skills are simple guidelines for speaking effectively so you can be heard and so that your perspectives can be clearly understood.

What Civil Discourse Is:

- It's a way to exercise our First Amendment rights effectively
- It's a willingness to respectfully listen to someone else's opinion – someone who might not share your views - with an open mind and with curiosity to understand their experience, ideas and values and with the expectation that they will do the same for you.
- It's a willingness to be equal partners in the conversation, where the time is shared equally and no one dominates
- It's a willingness to search for common ground based on facts and shared values
- It's the ability to disagree without being disrespectful, so that you have a deeper understanding of the values you share so you can find common ground

What Civil Discourse Isn't:

- It's not a debate with winners and losers
- It's not giving up or caving in
- It's not about waiting politely with a retort
- It's not an attack on free speech

At the core...

- Be Respectful
- Listen with an Open Mind
- Share Your Experience
- Find Common Ground



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THE CORE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE:

- **BE RESPECTFUL:** Behave courteously in public forums. Learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Remember that democracy requires input from each of us to be successful.
- **LISTEN WITH AN OPEN MIND:** Ask questions, be curious about some else's life experience, try to understand their perspective, don't interrupt or challenge.
- **SPEAK UP AND SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE:** Take responsibility for your perspective and explain it clearly and non-judgmentally. Be a strong, confident, well-informed advocate. Explain the rationale and evidence to support your opinions.
- **FIND COMMON GROUND:** Challenge, discuss, argue and defend issues. Keep an open mind. Challenge stereotypes or unclear information. Look for shared values and common interests. Be open to compromise.

Benefits the Community



- Assist Public Speakers
- Build Trust
- Increase Collaboration



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- Civil discourse guidelines assist potential public speakers to improve their skills, conveying a message that will be heard and considered.
- Community action provides an opportunity to build friendships and trust among many residents who may not otherwise know each other or have an opportunity to engage
- More collaboration provides an opportunity to discover shared values, with an added benefit of seeing the results of your collaborative work – *work you did together*
- When trust is regained, people view each other as fellow human beings
- The buy-in of *community belonging* encourages more collaboration and continues to build more trust

Benefits Government

- Respectful Conduct at Public Meetings
- Increase Collaboration
- Expand Participation
- Improve Outcomes



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- Guidelines for civil speech set clear expectations for respectful conduct at public meetings.
- Local leaders are listened to and spoken to with more respect and appreciation for their public service.
- Public meetings proceed more effectively without dysfunctional behavior.
- Public officials are more likely to serve when they feel safe from public threat.
- Skills-based collaboration is more effective for finding common ground and is less likely to end in polarized conflict.
- Skills-based dialog keeps doors open to future collaboration.
- Community groups save time and public resources when they use effective civic engagement skills to reach understanding and respect for different opinions *before* approaching public agencies.

Possibilities with Civil Discourse

- We are Discussing Conflicting Ideas with Respect
- More of Us are Choosing Civic Engagement
- We are Coming Together to Solve Problems
- We are Strengthening Democracy for Our Future



- Civil Discourse skills facilitate the ability for people to respectfully exercise 1st amendment rights and be *heard and understood*.
- Learning and practicing Civil Discourse skills increases healthy civic engagement because people feel safe to express their opinions.
- Increased civic engagement reduces political polarization, misunderstanding and misinformation.
- Civic Engagement strengthens our democracy and gives everyone the opportunity to participate - a requirement of our democratic government.

Spread Civil Discourse



- We All have a Part to Play
- Contact us at: <https://lwvdv.org>
- Thank you!



We all have a part to play in keeping our democracy vital and responsive. Your participation is needed, welcome and important. Please help us facilitate more civic engagement and make it an enjoyable and satisfying exercise for all of us. We invite you to contact us at: <https://lwvdv.org> for more information about how we can support your organization with civil discourse and civic engagement resources. Thank you for your generous participation in the process of governance.

