

Rules of Engagement

Facilitation Guide

What is it?

Getting to the bottom of thorny interpersonal or community problems is fraught with risks. Frequently, our interactions slide into backhanded insults, sarcasm, or outright name-calling, shutting down communication and preventing people from finding the common ground needed to find solutions and lead innovation. Use this activity to reflect on how civil discourse in online contexts has important implications for face-to-face interactions.

Why use it?

The Principled Innovation approach to creating change centers on understanding values (Practice **M1**). It is important to surface diverse perspectives (Practice **C2**) in order to identify solutions that fit the values and beliefs of stakeholders, because no single group of people shares an identical set of values and perspectives. We always bring the nuance of our lived experiences and values to the conversation.

However, a deficit in civility can lead us to avoid talking about our differences. While there may appear to be consensus, there are often people in a group who are reluctant to speak for fear of retaliation or of being excluded from the conversation moving forward. Creating a welcoming environment in these contexts, both through conversational turn-taking and through our verbal tone and body language, helps to keep people at the table long enough to identify the outlying ideas which might help create a breakthrough in understanding and trigger innovation.

As interactions move online, if at least one party in a dialogue is willing to follow a set of rules of engagement, difficult conversations become productive. These difficult conversations, both online and in person, are important in schools, and especially in parent meetings in which emotions can understandably run hot. Having the metacognition to manage our online communication with families and finding ways to create a hospitable environment for parents for in-person meetings—whether that means finding alternative times or modes for meetings that fit parents' work schedules or transportation limitations, finding support for translation, or adding people to a meeting that would help a parent feel allied—can help trigger the breakthroughs in communication that can lead to changes in the classroom and beyond.

While avoiding controversial topics may be appropriate in certain contexts, that is not always an option for those seeking to work through differences and reach solutions. Knowing what our own practices should be in the midst of disagreement—our own rules of engagement—can help invite diversity and innovation.

What you need

- Time: 30 minutes of participants' time
- Individual activity or group participants



Instructions

Step 1: Situate

Share the following definition of “Civility,” from the Principled Innovation framework:

Civility is treating others with sincere respect and as members of a shared community, including those who may challenge our beliefs or opinions.

Explain that this activity is designed to prompt thought about the way that we interact around common problems, both in our larger community and in our professional lives.

Step 2: Reflect

1. Read the New York Times’ four guidelines for civil conversations here:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/03/learning/our-civil-conversation-challenge-for-teenagers.htm>
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2. Select a news website and review the comment stream for several articles.
3. What are the common ways that you see these rules broken?
4. How does it affect your attitudes and perceptions when people follow these New York Times guidelines?
5. We often disagree with others in our professional relationships. How would these principles apply to the way we interact with others in professional spaces, both online and in person?
6. How can respectful speech support social innovation?

Step 3: Share

Some participants might be willing to share something they wrote down—if so, hearing participants’ reflections would be a constructive way to conclude the activity.

This activity can also be structured as a think-pair-share or jigsaw activity, with small groups sharing their observations of some of the more egregious violations of the New York Times’ guidelines.