

Civil Presence

Facilitation Guide



Tool for
Civic Character

 10 minutes

 Educator-prep
Leader-prep

Materials

- Individual activity or group participants

Making Connections

Principled Innovation asks us to work with others and recognize the limits of our own knowledge so that we can better understand and tackle the complex issues our communities face.

Connecting Character Assets:

[Humility](#)
[Civility](#)

About this Guide

Civility is about listening as much as it is about speaking. The perspectives that can sharpen our understanding of a problem often come from people who think we are wrong. Yet, if we shut down communication with those people, we might miss hearing the hard truths we need to hear. Use this activity to talk about “staying present” even when we’re tempted to shut down these tough conversations.

The framework for Principled Innovation defines civility in this way:

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

While civility is often thought of as the way we express ourselves, one of the hardest acts of civility can be to simply listen to others. When we believe someone is speaking in a way that seems uncivil – a complaint easily lodged against anyone who has strong feelings about why they think we are wrong – our defensive instincts shift toward fight or flight. Neither of these instinctive responses produce the democratic outcomes needed to effect what Principled Innovation describes as “positive change for humanity.”

In schools, difficult conversations with parents and colleagues are made even harder when we fail to seek the honest truth about the areas in which we are wrong. And perhaps some of the hardest conversations take place with our students, when our body language or words shut down communication about our shortcomings in the classroom – shortcomings in assessments, in patience, or any number of other areas that all teachers encounter in a typical day on the job. Maintaining openness and resisting the urge to become defensive can make us the sounding board for families who need someone in a school or district to understand their perspectives, and what we learn when we remain civil can open the door for systems change.

In these ways, staying at the table long enough to hear out people who are frustrated with us or with our schools – particularly when we ourselves are wrong and don’t realize it – is part of the give and take of civility and is a necessary precondition to identifying problems and finding solutions.

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Instructions

1 Situate

Share the following comments on “Civility,” from the [Institute for Civility in Government](#):

Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It is political in the sense that it is a necessary prerequisite for civic action. But it is political, too, in the sense that it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone's voice is heard, and nobody is ignored.

2 Discuss

Lead a short discussion around this statement. The following questions may serve to foster the conversation:

1. How do we signal our intent to “stay present” in conversations with others?
2. What are some common ways that you know someone’s “checked out” of our conversation?
3. How can we be civil in our listening and responding when other people are acting in ways that we believe are uncivil?
4. Is civility incompatible with loudly voicing our discontent in political protests? Can someone be civil while breaking the law? Why or why not?
5. How can civility contribute to innovation?