

Review of How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide

It seems just about everyone agrees that the vicious rift in how we disagree with each other has never been worse than it is today, especially in politics. Friends have disowned each other over whether they support gun control, immigration, climate change or Trump. We all shake our heads as if this was a hopeless, irreconcilable divide. Although this might be ultimately be true I believe we should still try.

I've read several books and articles that offer suggestions on how to bridge this gap. Of the ones I've read I'd highly recommend *How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide* by Peter Boghossian, James Lindsay. Peter Boghossian is a faculty member in the philosophy department at Portland State University and is a speaker for the Center of Inquiry and an international speaker for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science. James Lindsay holds degrees in physics and mathematics, with a doctorate in the latter. Because I liked this book I've been planning to write a review for this blog. However, this review by [Eric Barker](#), author of *Barking Up The Wrong Tree*, does such a nice job hitting the key points that I've decided to quote from his blog entry to share the key points from *How to Have Impossible Conversations*.

I should note that the book's advice is laid out in a sequence starting with beginner's level recommended skills then intermediate and expert levels. The authors explain that they evolved these skills "drawn from the best, most effective research on applied epistemology, hostage and professional negotiations, cult exiting, subdisciplines of psychology, and more."

Quoting more from the book, it is "organized by difficulty of application: fundamentals (Chapter 2), basics (Chapter 3), intermediate (Chapter 4), advanced (Chapter 5), expert (Chapter 6), and master (Chapter 7). Some techniques teach you to intervene in the cognition of others, instill doubt, and help people become more open to rethinking their beliefs. Other techniques are oriented toward truth-seeking. Some are just plain good advice. Their underlying commonality, regardless of your conversational goal, is that they all empower you to speak with people who have radically different political, moral, and social worldviews."

So what are the key points of this book? Here I'll rely on Eric Barker's summary. (I've edited it slightly and added comments to explain a point if it needs to be expanded.)

- **Be a partner, not an adversary:** If you're trying to win, you're going to lose. The best approach is: Be nice and respectful. Listen. Understand. Instill doubt. (I refuse to change my mind about this.)

- **Use Rapoport's rules:** They can seem awkward but they reduce conflict better than Valium. *[I'll add an explanation of Rapoport's rules below.]*
- **Facts are the enemy:** Unless we're talking about the savvy, attractive people who read this blog, yes, facts are the enemy. *[I have some additional thoughts below.]*
- **Use the "Unread Library Effect":** Let them talk. Ask questions. Let them expose their ignorance. Do not cheer when that happens.
- **Use scales:** Bring extreme statements down to earth with numbered comparisons. And unless they're certain at a level 10, they'll mention their own doubts which can aid your cause.
- **Use disconfirmation:** "Eric, under what conditions would disconfirmation not be effective?"
- **Serious beliefs are about values and identity:** Don't attack what they believe, focus on the validity of their reasoning process and whether that identity is the only way to be a good person.

What are Rapoport's rules? Impossible Conversations explains, quoting from Daniel C. Dennett's book *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*. (Rapoport is a game theorist.):

1. Attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
2. List any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. Mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. And only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.

Rapoport's rules would fall under the concept "steelmanning" in which you restate your opponent's case in the strongest possible way before challenging it. This approach treats your partner's beliefs more fairly than using the "straw man" approach in which you purposely weaken or exaggerate someone's case then refute it.

What about facts? Why do Boghossian and Lindsay urge us not to argue with facts? Well, they don't say you should never use facts. "It *does* mean that introducing facts into a conversation is likely to backfire unless done at the correct moment and with great care. ... Many people believe what and how they do precisely because they do not formulate their beliefs on the basis of evidence – *not* because they're lacking evidence. ... Few people form their beliefs on the basis of rigorous consideration of reasoned arguments. Complicating matters, most people believe they *do* have evidence supporting their beliefs. ... We tend to form beliefs on the basis of cherry-picked selective evidence that supports

what we already believe or what we want to believe. Virtually everyone formulates most of their beliefs first then subsequently looks for supporting evidence and convincing arguments that back them up." As Jonathan Haidt says, we think we're being detectives who piece together the facts before reaching a conclusion when in fact we act like lawyers who choose facts to make a case.

The authors conclude that introducing facts can backfire and harden your partner's viewpoint rather than leading your partner to change their mind. They suggest that a more effective way to work facts into a conversation is through questions and by saying something like "I may be wrong about this. It's my understanding that ..."

They also offer a valuable tip on choice of words: eliminate the word "but" and replace it with "and." For instance, instead of saying "**Yes, but** how should we deal with the children of illegal immigrants?" we say, "**Yes, and** how should we deal with the children of illegal immigrants?"

I've found that when I disagree with someone on a subject the person I'm talking with often asks why I disagree. They'll ask what evidence do I have. That gives me the opening to introduce the facts I've used to support my conclusion. I should note that sometimes my partner doesn't ask for my reasons. The less reasonable person will just launch into an attack because I dare to disagree with their unshakeable opinions. In that case, I might still cite my reasons but find a way to end the conversation. Diplomatically, of course!

While I admit I haven't mastered all of the techniques in this book the key points discussed above have helped me when talking with people who don't see things the way I do. Read *How to Have Impossible Conversations* because I think it is possible to have reasonable conversations.