

Civility



Demonstrating and maintaining respectful behavior toward one another even when we disagree

Developed in collaboration with the [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#)

Civility Defined

The principle of *civility* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to social interactions in which participants maintain respect for one another, and demonstrate respectful behavior toward one another, even when they disagree.

The practice of civility can help diverse groups of people develop a deeper understanding of one another's beliefs, values, opinions, and perspectives, which can reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding, stereotyping, disputes, and conflict. For example, the intentional practice of "civil discourse" is often used to help people work together to solve a problem, make a decision, execute a project, or resolve a conflict. Civil discourse is also used to expose shared values among individuals and groups with seemingly incompatible beliefs or worldviews.

While civility occurs naturally in informal social interactions, it can also be intentionally learned by individuals, developed in organizational and community settings, or activated in facilitated group discussions. Because the absence of civility is a common source of tensions, conflicts, stereotyping, and other negative behaviors in groups, organizations, and communities—particularly among groups from different socioeconomic, cultural, or racial backgrounds—promoting greater civility is an often-cited goal in organizing, engagement, and equity work.

Discussion: The Challenges and Limitations of Civil Discourse

In some contexts, the practice of civil discourse can unintentionally (or even intentionally) silence certain voices or viewpoints. For example, some leaders may want to avoid overt contentiousness or conflict in their schools, organizations, or communities (perhaps because when everyone appears to be getting along it seems to validate their leadership) and therefore they may see "civil discourse" as a strategy for avoiding problems rather than solving them.

In these cases, an emphasis on "civility" may actually be used to silence legitimate concerns, for example, and the practice of "civil discourse" becomes a new method for controlling or dictating the terms of conversation. When civil discourse is inappropriately used in this way, it can have a particularly pernicious or harmful effect because the term is being applied to a conversation that is

antithetical to the goals of civil discourse. Not only will leaders appear hypocritical or deceptive, but participants may feel misled or manipulated, which can then aggravate existing frustrations and undermine confidence in the practice of civility.

Problems can also arise when historically marginalized groups feel they cannot talk about issues such as racism, sexism, or bigotry because their perspective may be seen as “uncivil.” When people of color discuss their experience of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, for example, other participants may feel they are being attacked and blamed for the behaviors of others. Because honest discussions about race or racism can be perceived as “uncivil” to those who feel uncomfortable or defensive, leaders, organizers, and facilitators may attempt to change the topic, ask people of color to use different language, or otherwise control or shut down the discussion. These silencing maneuvers, however, are antithetical to the practice, purpose, and goals of civil discourse.

In these cases, leaders, organizers, and facilitators will need to recognize the difference between disrespectful behaviors and expressions of legitimate grievance that result from problems such as racial injustice. Creating a space in which people can honestly speak about their experiences—even if those expressions are sometimes accompanied by anger and other emotions that may make some participants uncomfortable—is an essential condition for civil discourse.

Civility is a nuanced concept that can take many different forms in practice. The following descriptions illustrate a few common characteristics of civility:

- **Humanization:** The foundation of all civil interactions is the recognition—both inwardly and outwardly—of the dignity and humanity of others, which entails, for example, empathizing with their experiences, appreciating their contributions, valuing their perspectives, or recognizing the legitimacy of their concerns. → **For a related discussion, see the [Dignity Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#).**
- **Respect:** Expressions of mutual respect exchanged between individuals or groups are essential to the practice of civility. Demonstrations of respect are validating and affirming to others, and they can disarm the behaviors that often escalate into uncivil and disrespectful interactions.
- **Intentionality:** Because civility may not be a natural response in certain social situations—such as when someone makes rude or insulting comments—civility often requires the intentional decision to maintain civil behavior despite the urge to act or respond in less-than-civil ways.
- **Restraint:** Civility often requires restraint—specifically, the ability to control negative emotional reactions, such as defensiveness or anger, or to refrain from uncivil responses, such as combative argumentation, snide remarks, hostile gestures, or contemptuous looks and comments.
- **Responsibility:** In a civil interaction, people take responsibility for their behavior by, for example, recognizing, self-correcting, and apologizing for one’s own inappropriate or disrespectful behavior. In uncivil interactions, people often assign responsibility for their own behavior to others, such as when they claim that disrespectful behavior justifies a

disrespectful response or that someone's comments "caused" their behavior.

- **Sharing:** When participants in a group dialogue, activity, or process share their personal stories, it helps others develop a stronger understanding and appreciation of how those experiences have shaped their values, priorities, or perspectives, particularly when participants come from different racial, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds. When people share their experiences, it helps to cultivate empathy among listeners, which makes it harder for others to stereotype, label, dehumanize, or objectify them—all of which are perceptions that can contribute to uncivil behavior.
- **Kindness:** While kindness is not a requirement for civility, acts of kindness—such as outward expressions of caring, concern, or compassion—tend to encourage more civil interactions and defuse uncivil behaviors.
- **Mutuality:** The exchange of mutual respect among individuals and groups is essential for maintaining civil interactions. If only one party or group is acting with civility in an exchange, collaboration, or partnership, the relative incivility of the other party or group will likely undermine civil relations.

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see [HOW PRINCIPLES WORK](#) →

Civility Strategies

This section describes a selection of representative civility strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Distinguishing civility from politeness**
 2. **Framing dialogues and activities to promote civility**
 3. **Creating environments that encourage civility**
 4. **Designing for inclusivity**
 5. **Using structured and facilitated dialogue**
 6. **Establishing group agreements**
 7. **Avoiding surprises and setting appropriate expectations**
 8. **Modeling civil behavior and speech**
 9. **Integrating opportunities for teamwork and collaboration**
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1. Distinguishing civility from politeness

Civility and respect are distinct from *politeness* or *niceness*. When practicing civil discourse, for example, people are allowed to disagree or express incompatible beliefs or viewpoints, whereas social politeness often entails the avoidance of issues that may call attention to difference or disagreement.

- Because the concept of *intentional civility* is often confused with the *social custom of politeness*, leaders, organizers, and facilitators should clearly and precisely define civility and discuss how and why it is distinct from politeness. In the practice of civil discourse, open disagreement, passionate expressions, and uncomfortable topics may not be uncivil; in fact, they may be essential to helping participants develop a stronger understanding of one another or expose common values or beliefs that may be obscured by political, ideological, or cultural differences.
- Providing descriptions and examples of civil and uncivil behavior can help participants understand which behaviors are expected and encouraged, and which behaviors will not be tolerated or allowed. Clear descriptions and examples can also help participants be more conscious of and reflective about their own behavior and comments. Facilitators might ask, for example, that participants reflect on and discuss their own experiences with civil and uncivil behavior, and then create a list of specific factors that made those experiences feel either civil or uncivil.
- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can explain why civility is important and teach participants specific strategies for maintaining civility in their interactions and conversations. For example, facilitators can explain how civil interactions help people understand and appreciate cultural differences or collaborate more effectively. They can also describe the common emotions that lead to uncivil behaviors and how participants can be more attentive to and mindful of those emotions when they experience them. If a participant becomes emotional when recounting an experience with racial prejudice or injustice, for example, facilitators can support the honest expression of those strong emotions but ask that those emotions not be directed at specific participants.

2. Framing dialogues and activities to promote civility

When framing an event, dialogue, or discussion topic to encourage civil interactions, it can be helpful to avoid “politicized” labels that are associated with cultural polarization, conflicts, or stereotypes, such as liberal/conservative or religious/secular.

- Politicized labels not only mask the nuance and complexity of human values, beliefs, and opinions, but persistent political and ideological debates in society condition people to have negative emotional reactions to certain terms and labels. For example, the language that is commonly used by national politicians or the news media, especially contentious terms that

are associated with a particular political party or ideological position, may be more likely to trigger divisive behavior in diverse groups.

- Framing language such as “building bridges across difference” or “working together to solve community problems” is more likely to create advantageous conditions for civility than language that triggers stereotypes or imports pre-existing anger, frustration, or resentment into an interaction before a conversation has even started. While participants should be allowed to use terms they may identify with, or that they believe best describe their viewpoints and experiences, facilitators can use more neutral language to frame the discussion. When developing promotional messaging, invitations, discussion materials, and other resources for organizing and engagement activities, focusing on local issues that affect the community, rather than on national debates, can also help to create more conducive conditions for civil interactions.
- Dialogue leaders and facilitators can discuss the problems of “binary thinking” at the outset of a discussion. Human beliefs, values, and opinions are rarely—if ever—reducible to simple either/or propositions. While people may identify as either “liberal” or “conservative,” for example, they tend to share many values or viewpoints with people who profess different ideological positions. One of the goals of civil discourse is to move participants beyond either/or, good-and-bad, or us-versus-them thinking to help them develop and embrace a fuller and more accurate understanding of other people. In the practice of civil discourse, facilitators often try to establish common ground among participants before transitioning into discussions of difference. For example, facilitators may ask participants what brought them to the dialogue, and then point out that everyone in the group expressed a motivation that showed they are committed to improving their community.
- Leaders, organizers, and facilitators can foreground positive goals and outcomes. Goals such as improving collaboration, working together across cultural differences, or solving community problems can create more conducive conditions for civil interactions than using problems or conflicts to frame a discussion. Positive framing helps create a context in which people are more focused on developing solutions than dwelling on problems. That said, positive framing should not be used to suppress legitimate frustration, resentment, anger, or other emotions or expressions that stem from problems such as prejudice, discrimination, or inequity.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Dialogue Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#)

3. Creating environments that encourage civility

In group contexts, leaders, organizers, and facilitators can create environments that feel as welcoming, relaxed, and safe. Because participants may experience discomfort during the practice of civil discourse, for example, facilitators can make physical spaces as inviting, accommodating, and pleasant as circumstances and resources allow.

- People are more inclined to act respectfully toward others when they are in their presence, and the intentional use of in-person activities and face-to-face interactions as often as possible can help promote civility. Interactions that are depersonalized or anonymous—such as those that occur on social media or in the commentary sections of local online newspapers and discussion forums—are more likely to be characterized by incivility.
- Neutral locations can promote civility, particularly when distrust, tensions, or conflicts are present in a community. Conducive locations for holding a civil dialogue might include libraries, community centers, event halls, and other spaces that are not associated with a particular power structure, cultural group, or political ideology. If a neutral location is not available, organizers can carefully consider the pros and cons of each available option and develop strategies that will help participants feel welcomed or at ease. If participants express concerns about a chosen location, facilitators should be forthcoming about the process they used to select a location and the limitations they faced. Facilitators could then discuss the features of a preferred setting with participants and collaboratively strategize about where future dialogues or events could take place.
- Central locations are preferable to those that require some participants to travel longer distances than others, and spaces with windows, natural light, comfortable seating, accessible restrooms, and other amenities can promote the kind of positive psychological or social conditions that are conducive to civil discourse. Providing food and beverages is also helpful: in addition to offering an incentive to show up, people are more likely to have a positive attitude when they are nourished and hydrated. Providing food and drinks can also make it easier for some people to participate, particularly if their participation may require them to miss a meal otherwise.
- Classroom-style seating and other room arrangements that discourage face-to-face conversations are typically not conducive to civil interactions. Instead, organizers can arrange seats in circles or u-shapes so that people are not looking at the back of other participant's heads. Organizers should also avoid features such as elevated stages, microphones, and podiums that are associated with positions of power, authority, and control. In the practice of civil discourse, participants enter the conversation as equals, and therefore symbols of unequal power and authority—particularly in contexts in which power and authority may have been abused—can reinforce problematic power dynamics.
- During dialogues and other activities, facilitators can encourage civil interactions by assigning people to small-group discussions that bring together community members with different experiences, perspectives, or cultural backgrounds. In public forums, uncivil behavior tends to occur more frequently when people are assembled in large groups, when they are denied an opportunity to speak or contribute, or when they are seated in auditorium-style room arrangements. Small-groups discussions, particularly “roundtable” discussions in which people are seated in a circle facing one another, create opportunities for more participants to speak up, and the face-to-face interactions tend to elicit more respectful behavior.

4. Designing for inclusivity

Purposeful inclusivity can also be used as a strategy for promoting civility.

- For example, people sometimes act out in uncivil ways because they feel that they have been left out of a process (they may even suspect they were left out intentionally) or because their viewpoints or values are not reflected in a decision that affects them or their family. When community members are invited into a decision-making process, their participation not only helps to reduce the negative reactions that come from being excluded, but it creates the context for the kinds of relationship-building dialogues that build mutual respect and encourage civility.
- In many cases, however, inclusion on its own is an insufficient engagement strategy—leaders, organizers, and facilitators also need to ensure that a community’s diverse cultural groups and populations are represented in meaningful, authentic, and empowering ways. For example, schools may have parent advisory committees whose recommendations are routinely ignored or overruled by administrators. In this example, the parents have technically been “included” in a decision-making process, but their input is not represented in the outcome. Authentic representation means that stakeholder viewpoints are not only considered, but that they are incorporated and acted on.

5. Using structured and facilitated dialogue

An essential strategy for promoting civility is structured dialogue—or intentional forms of conversation used to improve mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect among individuals and groups, often for the purpose of achieving a specific objective, such as facilitating a productive collaborative process or resolving a conflict.

- When people are given opportunities to share and discuss their experiences, perspectives, values, or concerns, and to feel that they have been heard, understood, and appreciated by others, that mutual exchange of personal stories can help to reduce the negative assumptions, stereotyping, and other factors that often contribute to uncivil behavior. When exchanging personal stories, however, time must be used fairly and effectively to promote connection and mutual understanding in a group. For example, facilitators can monitor and manage sharing time to ensure that participants feel they have been given the time they need to fully express themselves or that the amount of time they’ve been given is comparable to other participants.
- People may act in uncivil ways because they feel their concerns are being ignored, minimized, or dismissed, and respectful discussions about their concerns can help to defuse the negative emotions that often motivate uncivil behavior. Uncivil behavior may also occur when people are unaccustomed to interacting across cultural differences or inexperienced with certain forms of dialogue or social interaction. In organizing and engagement work, strong facilitation is an essential skill. By guiding participants through a process or

discussion, facilitators introduce structure, rules, knowledge, encouragement, and other assets that help participants interact respectfully and productively. And if uncivil behaviors emerge, facilitators can also intervene with reminders, reflections, or insights that can defuse situations that might otherwise escalate into disrespectful interactions.

- One of the cornerstones of civil discourse is storytelling. When people are given opportunities to share the personal experiences that shaped their beliefs, values, or viewpoints, these personal stories help people develop a more nuanced and accurate understanding of one another. For example, facilitators can ask participants to share the story of a struggle or challenge they faced, the values they were trying to uphold, and the actions they took or the outcomes that resulted. In civil discourse, personal stories become the gateway to interpersonal understanding and mutual respect because people are learning directly from others about their experiences.
- The practice of civil discourse should not feel overly structured or controlled, and facilitators can remain flexible and adapt the agenda as necessary or appropriate. For example, if the conversation requires more time on a given topic, facilitators should avoid abruptly cutting off discussion simply to stay on a predetermined schedule. When important moments arise—such as when two ideologically opposed participants realize they share common values or goals—facilitators can let those moments play out, and even encourage continued discussion if the larger goals of the dialogue or activity are being achieved. If participants are abruptly interrupted when they're talking, particularly if they are experiencing a vulnerable moment, the interruption may also be seen as “uncivil” behavior. Civil-discourse facilitators should explain their rationale when a change in topic or the discontinuation of a particular exchange are required. Similarly, interruptions should either be done as respectfully as possible or when there is a pause in the discussion. Facilitators may also ask the group if they would like to return to the topic or discussion later on, particularly if group interest is noticeably high.
- Civil discourse creates the conditions for mutual understanding between two or more individuals, and understanding requires both expression and listening. Unfortunately, people have often developed unconstructive habits when it comes to both expressing their views or listening to others. For example, people may express their viewpoints combatively or use offensive language (in some cases unintentionally) or they may only listen for weaknesses in another person's viewpoint that they can then criticize or attack. In civil discourse, however, speakers should share responsibility for being understood, and listeners should share responsibility for understanding.
- Civil discourse is an acquired skill that typically requires practice. When listening, participants may be advised to “listen for understanding,” which means that they should listen closely and truly attempt to understand the other person, rather than formulating a response or counterargument while the person is speaking. Facilitators may also advise participants to speak for themselves and not for their group, whether it's their racial group, profession, or political party. Breaking unconstructive conversational habits can be challenging for some participants, and it typically requires practice. Facilitators can describe these common habits to participants, build speaking and listening practices into activities, and celebrate occasions when old habits are recognized and corrected during practice.
- Civil discourse is more likely to be productive and successful when people have enough

time to share their experiences, feel heard and acknowledged, and work through difficult topics or disagreements. In addition, if a conversation is abruptly interrupted before people have had an opportunity to speak, work through an emotional reaction, or develop a common understanding with others, they may leave frustrated, upset, or resentful. The amount of time allocated should be based on the particular goals of the discussion, activity, or process. For example, getting people interested in a topic or proposed process may be accomplished in an hour or two, while sharing difficult personal experiences, resolving long-standing conflicts, coming together as a new team, or developing a collaborative plan may require a full day or longer.

- When civil behaviors occur in an exchange, facilitators should openly acknowledge those behaviors and encourage them. Just as it's important for negative behaviors and language to be called out and corrected, positive behaviors should be celebrated and reinforced in small ways throughout a discussion or activity. Facilitators can publicly recognize when participants make good points or positive contributions, and ideally all or most participants should receive positive recognition at some point during a discussion, activity, or process.
- Facilitators can remain attentive to potential biases or triggers, such as when people express racial stereotypes or negative group characterizations. To reduce the likelihood that participants will express viewpoints that may trigger other participants, facilitators can ask participants to share their biases or triggers at the outset of a conversation. If participants know what viewpoints or language is likely to cause a negative reaction in others, it increases the likelihood that they will be more mindful of what they say and how they say it.
- Being attentive to the emotional states of participants can help facilitators de-escalate negative interactions. If it appears that a participant is about to have a negative emotional reaction, the facilitator can intervene, for example, by asking the group to pause for a moment to reflect on how they're feeling or by asking emotional participants to take a moment and then explain what they're feeling. Facilitators can also call for a break and pull emotional participants aside for a private conversation.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Facilitation Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

6. Establishing group agreements

For structured events, activities, and dialogues, establishing “group agreements” before a discussion, activity, or process gets underway can help promote civil interactions. Group agreements may also be called “group norms,” “ground rules,” “discussion guidelines,” or other terms.

- Group agreements function similar to the rules used in games and sports: participants agree to follow the same set of rules, which help participants understand the terms of an activity or discussion. Group agreements describe the specific behaviors that will be expected of

participants, and they help participants understand the terms of the discussion before it begins. Establishing group agreements can significantly improve the quality and productiveness of a discussion or process, while also decreasing the likelihood of misunderstanding or rudeness—particularly when interactions are likely to become contentious, such as when a discussion topic is controversial.

- Group agreements perform a few important functions: (1) group agreements establish a foundation of common agreement at the outset of a discussion or activity that participants can build on during subsequent interactions, (2) group agreements explicitly bar certain negative behaviors from an interaction and promote more constructive behaviors, and (3) group agreements allow facilitators and participants to enforce the agreed-upon rules of a dialogue by reminding others of the agreements they made at the outset of the discussion.
- Group agreements are typically established in one of three ways: (1) facilitators will propose a set of agreements, usually by incorporating group agreements that have been effective in other contexts, (2) participants co-develop group agreements using a democratic process proposed by facilitators, or (3) facilitators propose a set of group agreements but give participants the opportunity to modify or add to the rules using a democratic process. All three approaches can be effective, and facilitators can choose the approach that best suits the goals of the dialogue or the needs of participants.
- In most cases, participants are willing to accept a set of proposed group agreements, particularly if facilitators explain why the agreements are important or mention that they are standard rules that have been widely used in other dialogues. It is important that facilitators explain the rationale for using group agreements and why certain agreements are important for the discussion or activity that follows. When additional group agreements are suggested, it can be helpful if the participants who are proposing them share their rationale.
- After participants commit to following the group agreements, facilitators should make sure they remain prominently displayed for the duration of the dialogue or activity. The agreements can be written on poster paper or handouts, or they can be projected on a screen. Visible agreements serve as reminders for participants, and they allow facilitators to reference them more easily when needed. Group agreements also educate participants about the specific characteristics, expectations, and behaviors of civil discourse, and they are particularly valuable when conversations become disrespectful. In these cases, ground rules provide a non-threatening method for naming and correcting negative behaviors that could undermine civil discourse. Without ground rules, participants may be more likely to get defensive or hostile when their behaviors are called out and challenged.
- Discussion leaders and facilitators may utilize a variety of facilitative techniques to ensure that people follow group agreements. These techniques can include politely pointing out that an agreement is being broken or directing the group's attention to the agreed-upon rules if negative behaviors threaten to disrupt a discussion. Facilitators may also need to call out and challenge disrespectful behaviors or harmful language that might intimidate or silence some participants. In addition to calling out transgressions, facilitators may, for example, propose that participants snap their fingers if they believe someone has broken an agreement, or they may ask outspoken leaders to listen more and talk less.

Discussion: Insensitive Group Agreements

In some cases, facilitators will propose a group agreement that may be insensitive or counterproductive in certain circumstances. Agreements such as “assume good intentions” or “trust one another” are two examples. While such rules may be well intentioned, participants in some communities and organizations may be unable to assume positive intentions or easily bring trust into a conversation with strangers due to past personal experiences with prejudice, discrimination, injustice, or violence. For example, “assume positive intentions” may not be a productive group agreement if staff members routinely experience workplace bias or discrimination because of their gender, race, or sexuality. When establishing group agreements for civil discourse, facilitators should remain mindful of history, identity, culture, and other factors that may influence how participants experience a dialogue, process, or other activity.

7. Avoiding surprises and setting appropriate expectations

Establishing clear expectations at the outset of an activity, dialogue, or process can help reduce anxiety, frustration, and other emotions that often contribute to uncivil behavior. For example, many people are uncomfortable openly discussing race or racism in a group setting, and emotionally difficult conversations about racial issues can induce a variety of stress responses, such as apprehension, anxiety, defensiveness, irritation, or combativeness.

- Make sure people know in advance what they are being invited to participate in, what the purpose or topic of the discussion will be, and how the process will work. When people generate expectations that depart significantly from the actual experience of an event, they are more likely to experience frustration or other negative reactions that make them less open to other participants and less receptive to the experience.
- If facilitators describe how the conversation will unfold, and the kinds of emotions people typically experience, it can help participants feel more at ease and more open to the experience. For example, facilitators can describe a time when they personally experienced a negative emotional reaction during a dialogue or they can share other stories that help participants visualize and prepare for the experience they’re about to have.

8. Modeling civil behavior and speech

Modeling is a particularly effective strategy for promoting greater civility in organizing, engagement, and equity contexts. When leaders, organizers, and facilitators demonstrate civility in their actions, attitudes, and speech, it not only helps participants develop a stronger understanding of what civility looks like in practice, but it also “sets the tone” for a given event, activity, or dialogue—that is, civil behavior tends to encourage civil responses in others.

- When facilitating civil discourse, it is essential that facilitators demonstrate the respectful behaviors and language they expect of participants. When facilitators intentionally model civil discourse in their language and actions, participants are more likely to understand how civil discourse works in practice and to recognize and value its benefits. For example, positive behaviors can be modeled by facilitators in how they greet and welcome participants, in their posture and facial expressions, in the methods used to call on or include participants, or in the terminology they use.
- Modeling civility often requires training and practice. Facilitators need to maintain self-awareness and correct their own behavior when necessary. It is especially important that facilitators continue modeling civil behavior and language even when confronted by anger, disrespect, or other problematic behaviors from participants—though exceptions may need to be made, however, if either the facilitators or participants feel unsafe due to hostile or threatening behavior.

9. Integrating opportunities for teamwork and collaboration

Group collaboration can be one of the most effective ways to build mutual respect, appreciation, trust, and shared understanding—the relational foundation of civil interactions.

- When people work together to develop a plan, execute a project, make a decision, or solve a community problem, they are more likely to see others as allies, not opponents. And the sense of accomplishment that participants experience when they complete a project or resolve a conflict can help to alleviate the tensions that often propel uncivil behavior.

Acknowledgments

Organizing Engagement thanks Makayla Meachem, Kip Holley, and [Jon Martinez](#) for their contributions to developing and improving this resource, and the National Institute for Civil Discourse for sharing its expertise and insights.

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