# Lesson 4: Welcoming diverse perspectives

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### Three benefits of welcoming diverse perspectives

- **Benefit 1. It helps you uncover the full truth**
  - Parable of the blind men and the elephant
  - Graded Question #1

- **Benefit 2. It helps you make wise decisions and avoid groupthink**
  - Groupthink
  - Graded Question #2

- **Benefit 3. It helps you become more persuasive**
  - Graded Question #3

### [Optional] Additional benefits

- Unlock creativity and innovation
- Build diverse coalitions to solve difficult problems

### Review

- Graded Question #4

### Where to draw the line

- Good faith vs. bad faith
- [Optional] Common questions about drawing your line
  - What about...people who spread misinformation?
  - What about trolls?
  - What about people who defend harmful ideas or actions?
  - Why...does the burden always fall to minorities?
  - What if the conversation isn't... on equal footing?
  - Why should I risk judgment or retaliation?
  - Why should I risk my safety?
  - Why should I risk being brainwashed?
  - Why should I waste my time on these conversations?

- Graded Question #5
In the previous lesson, we learned about the benefits of intellectual humility and a growth mindset. By acknowledging our mistakes and weaknesses, we gain opportunities for growth and development.

This is at least one reason to engage with people who think differently than us: These conversations help us uncover the errors in our thinking.

But maybe you’re still not convinced? In this lesson, we’ll dive deeper into this important question: Why talk to people you disagree with?

- We’ll explore this question while working through an interactive mystery
- Along the way, we’ll highlight five benefits of engaging with diverse perspectives
- Then we’ll add some complexity: Is speaking with people we disagree with always a good idea?

Let’s get started

When it comes to talking to people who think differently than us, most people have some mixed emotions about it.

Many people tend to say things like, "I don't think I have much to learn from people who think differently than me."

Another common response is, "I know I should talk to people I disagree with more often. But it just feels more comfortable to have conversations with people who see things from my point of view."

Can you relate to either of these responses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We totally understand. As we've discussed, we're all prone to seeking out viewpoints that agree with our existing beliefs, and avoiding views that conflict with our own. It's a natural human tendency.</td>
<td>Thanks for your honesty! Most people say that they prefer speaking to people who agree with them. As we've discussed, it's a natural human tendency to seek out viewpoints that agree with what we already believe, and to avoid views that come into conflict with our views.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We could all use a little push out of our comfort zone from time to time. That's why we're going to highlight the benefits of welcoming diverse perspectives into your life.

To illustrate these benefits, we'll lead you through a scenario where you'll need to solve a mystery.

What's the mascot of your school? If your school doesn't have a mascot, make one up! [Please write it like "Bulldog" or "Tiger" (capitalized and singular).]

What mystery?

Imagine that there's a large statue of your school's mascot, "The [Mascot]", on display in a prominent location in your school. This statue is beloved on campus as a symbol of school pride, so it has a lot of sentimental value.

One morning, everyone on campus wakes up to an urgent school-wide email: The [Mascot] has vanished!

The principal wants to get to the bottom of what happened. They decide to entrust a few students with the task of investigating the disappearance of The [Mascot] — and you've been selected!

To motivate you all to solve the mystery quickly, the principal promises that the student who figures out what happened to The [Mascot] will receive a $500 reward.

I'm on it!

Great! We'll help you strategize.

So far, the following rumors have been circulating about the disappearance of The [Mascot]:

- A disgruntled former principal stole it to get revenge
- A student kidnapped it to hold for ransom
- A group of students took it down in protest against campus policies
How would you begin to approach this challenge?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I'll team up with some other classmates</th>
<th>I'll solve this mystery on my own</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's a great strategy! It would be helpful to work alongside other people so that they can bring new information to your attention.</td>
<td>That's totally reasonable that you'd feel that way. But it can often be helpful to work with a team so that they can bring new information to your attention.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let's step away from the mystery for a moment, to consider the first benefit of engaging with diverse perspectives...

What's the benefit?

**Benefit 1: Welcoming diverse perspectives helps you uncover the full truth**

Many cultures have inherited a parable from ancient India about the blind men and the elephant. In this story, six blind men come across an elephant for the very first time. Each of them touches a different part of the creature. As a result, they disagree with each other about what it is that they're touching:

- It's a spear!
- It's a snake!
- It's a tree!
- It's a wall!
- It's a fan!
- It's a rope!

Each one is convinced that his answer is completely correct. To resolve their disagreement, the six men consulted their local ruler, the wise Rajah. The Rajah explained: "An elephant is a large animal with many parts. Each of you only touched one part. If you put all the parts together, you'll understand the truth."

What's the point of the parable?

The parable reminds us that our individual perspective rarely tells us the whole story!

As we saw in Lesson 2, we tend to assume that we experience the world objectively. Our impressions and opinions can feel so true that we sometimes confuse them with facts.
But in reality, we each interpret the world subjectively — each of us is only seeing a part of the complete picture.

When we encounter someone who has a different perspective than us, we can remember this parable. Rather than assuming we’re correct and the other person is wrong, we can recognize that each of us may only understand one part of the issue.

Only by incorporating each others' perspectives can we fill in the gaps in our knowledge and understand the full truth.

| To summarize, which of the following better represents the message of this parable? |
| To learn the full truth about anything, we should consult other people to learn about their perspectives | We should trust our own individual point of view, no matter what other people say |

Great job! Not exactly. The parable teaches us that looking at something from just one perspective is not enough to understand it completely.

Exposing ourselves to different opinions and sources of information is one of the most effective ways to broaden our perspective and expand our knowledge. It often brings our attention to information and ideas that were previously hidden from our view.

Let’s apply this lesson to your investigation about the disappearance of The Mascot.

Okay

Teaming up with other people means you'll be more likely to combine your individual insights together to learn the truth and solve the mystery.
In fact, just by asking other people on campus what they know about the mystery, you gained an important insight: The student who was suspected of kidnapping The Mascot has a rock-solid alibi. They couldn't have been the culprit.

You're making good progress on your investigation, but you reach another dilemma.

What is it?

Here's why you're wrong...

You know a classmate named Nick, who's great at finding information and solving puzzles. It strikes you that he might be very helpful to have on your team.

Your concern is that he often disagrees with your views. When you've been in classes together in the past, he always seems to find some point of criticism to raise against your ideas and opinions.

Should you invite Nick to join your team?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **We agree!**  
Having someone on your team who challenges and criticizes your ideas can be a powerful tactic to strengthen your own argument. | **We can imagine why you might be hesitant to invite Nick to join your team. But having someone on your team who challenges and criticizes your ideas can be a powerful tactic to strengthen your own argument.** |

It's often strategic to team up with people who don't share your point of view and aren't predisposed to back up your ideas. Let's take another quick detour from our mystery investigation, to discuss why this is effective.

Sounds good
Benefit 2: Welcoming diverse perspectives helps you make wise decisions & avoid groupthink

"Two heads are better than one," the saying goes. For a lot of difficult decisions, it's helpful to consult other people to make sure you aren't missing anything important before you make up your mind.

But psychologists have revealed that a group of people can make worse decisions together than they would've made working on their own.

It turns out that groups of people (not just individuals) can exercise confirmation bias, by steering clear of ideas and perspectives that challenge the group’s consensus views.

This is likely to happen when a team is made up of individuals who have similar viewpoints, who are likely to simply back each other up instead of challenging each other's ideas.

To explore this further, let's take a look at an example.

Okay

In 1986, NASA's Challenger space shuttle was scheduled to launch from Florida's Cape Canaveral on a January morning.

Weather forecasts indicated that the launch would take place on an unusually cold day. The night before the launch, a group of engineers warned NASA that some small but crucial parts of the shuttle (called "O-rings") could malfunction at low temperatures.

NASA went forward with the launch anyway, despite the engineers' warnings. Sure enough, the O-rings failed and the shuttle exploded just minutes after liftoff, resulting in a terrible tragedy.

Why did this happen?
Groupthink

Some experts allege that the Challenger explosion resulted from a phenomenon called **groupthink**.

Groupthink occurs when pressure for conformity within a group becomes so powerful that it suppresses dissent and stifles the ability to consider alternative perspectives.

Groups like this can be so sure they’re correct that they reject clear evidence that exposes the faults in their decision-making.

It turns out that the executives on the team behind the Challenger launch were so set on launching the shuttle according to schedule, they actually ignored signs of problems with the O-rings for nearly a decade before the explosion.

They silenced and shunned engineers who presented data demonstrating the safety risks.

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### Yikes

### Avoiding groupthink

Luckily, there are techniques we can use to steer clear of groupthink and make better decisions. These are the same kind of tactics that allow us to overcome our own individual confirmation bias.

In order for a group of people to successfully fill in gaps in each other's knowledge, the group needs to:

1. **Contain varied perspectives.** Otherwise, everyone in the group will have the same gaps in their knowledge, which means that they won’t be able to fill each other in on what the others aren't seeing. The group as a whole ends up having blind spots.

2. **Ensure that members of the group speak up** and share their perspectives when they disagree with one another. Otherwise, those blind spots won’t get filled in.

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**What are other strategies used**

Successful teams often make a point of welcoming disagreement, and listening intently when one of its members dissents from the rest of the group. It might sound counterintuitive, but it's often a good thing when members of a team disagree with each other and voice conflicting views.
In other words, many successful teams work to cultivate intellectual humility. They embrace the possibility that they could be wrong. They go out of their way to "poke holes" in their own thought processes, to make sure they aren't missing something important or making mistakes.

To recap, which of the following are steps a team can take to avoid groupthink and make better decisions? [Select as many as apply]

- A. Recruit members who bring different points of view to the team
- B. Encourage members to voice dissenting opinions that go against the majority view
- C. Demand that members agree with the leaders' viewpoints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Both A &amp; B</th>
<th>A or B (not both)</th>
<th>Any answer combo that includes C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exactly!

Almost.

In order to steer clear of groupthink, it helps to recruit team members who have different points of view, as well as to encourage team members to voice dissenting opinions that go against the majority view.

Not quite.

Demanding that members agree with the leaders' viewpoints might foster groupthink and lead to poorer decision-making.

In order to steer clear of groupthink, it helps to recruit team members who have different points of view, as well as to encourage team members to voice dissenting opinions that go against the majority view.

Time to apply this insight to our mystery investigation!

Let’s do it
Teaming up with people who tend to see things differently from us, like your classmate Nick, might help you avoid making mistakes or ignoring crucial information.

For example, perhaps you started to lean towards the theory that the disgruntled former principal stole the statue in revenge. Everyone on your team agrees with you...except Nick.

Nick points out a flaw in your theory: There's video evidence showing that the former principal was travelling in a different state at the time of The Mascot's disappearance.

It seems like Nick was a valuable addition to the team after all. But after a bit of time, a new problem arises...

**What's the problem?**

After further investigation, your team has gathered extremely strong evidence showing an unexpected conclusion: Your closest rival college stole it as a prank. Based on the evidence you've seen, you're convinced.

The problem is, Nick strongly favors the theory that a group of students took down The Mascot in protest against campus policies.

Even though the evidence supporting your view is very compelling, Nick is absolutely convinced of his view.

**What do you do?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tell Nick he should learn when to keep his thoughts to himself</th>
<th>Invite Nick to share his views even though you're pretty sure he's incorrect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's totally fair that you'd feel this way! It can be so frustrating when other people disagree with you — especially when you're certain that you're right.</td>
<td>Good thinking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although it might seem annoying, listening to Nick can actually prove extremely useful. Even if you're already convinced you're correct!

Let's take one last detour from the mystery, to consider what you can gain by having conversations with people you disagree with.

Benefit 3: Welcoming diverse perspectives helps you become more persuasive

The ability to express your views in a clear and compelling way is an invaluable skill. It increases the likelihood that you'll be heard and understood. It's especially crucial if your aim is to persuade others to adopt your view.

You may feel very strongly about a particular issue. But when confronted with someone who disagrees with you, you may find it difficult to articulate exactly what you believe and why.

The best way to build your communication skills is to put yourself into situations where your ideas will be challenged. This gives you the opportunity to practice expressing and defending your views — like a "training session" to build up your persuasion muscles.

Speaking with people who challenge your views also gives you valuable insight into what people who disagree with you believe and why. Without this knowledge, it will be difficult for you to anticipate challenges to your views and to articulate your views in a way that's compelling to others.

The Taoist thinker Sun Tzu warned: "If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat."

In other words, no matter how well you know your own position on an issue, it will be difficult to persuade anyone who sees things differently, unless you truly understand the views that they hold.
To review, why is it helpful to have conversations where other people may challenge or criticize your views?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It gives us opportunities to practice expressing our point of view in a way that could potentially convince people who think otherwise</th>
<th>It helps us learn about other people's personal weaknesses, so we can choose the most effective insults to use against them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct!</td>
<td>Not quite!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There's an important difference between identifying potential weaknesses in another person's argument and identifying their faults as a person. If we want to be persuasive, we'll need to explain kindly and respectfully why they might want to change their mind.

If we use personal attacks against them, they probably won't be interested in listening to us, let alone changing their minds to our point of view.

Okay — back to the mystery now!

What happens next?

Your team helped you develop the theory that your closest rival school stole The Mascot as a prank. By discussing the case with Nick, you've honed your ability to explain your view to skeptical listeners.

You confidently explain your solution to the mystery to the principal. They immediately send a group of students to the rival school's campus — and sure enough, there's The Mascot!

Shortly after, The Mascot is brought back to its rightful home, and the principal thanks you for solving the mystery. They graciously award your whole team with a $500 reward.
Even though you've solved the mystery, there are two more benefits of engaging with diverse perspectives that you can learn about.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you like to move forward?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn about both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about the benefit of unlocking creativity and innovation</td>
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### Unlock creativity and innovation

We're going to share a story about a very popular invention that resulted from a lucky encounter between two people with different perspectives and life experiences.

While trying to develop an extra-strong and durable adhesive, 3M chemist Spencer Silver accidentally came up with the opposite — an adhesive that allowed surfaces to stick together, but also easily peel apart.

Silver presented this finding at a company seminar, but he couldn't find any practical use for it.

Six long years passed. Then, one day, Silver was approached by a colleague, Art Fry, who had heard Silver's presentation about his seemingly useless adhesive.

### Build diverse coalitions to solve difficult problems

There are a lot of tough issues in our society that can only be tackled through collective action, where many people work together to bring about an important change.

The tougher the issue, the more important it is to build a broad and diverse coalition, where we work alongside people who see things differently from us in order to achieve a common goal.

Many of the greatest leaders and social change activists pursued this approach. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. and the late Congressman John Lewis, who were devoted Christians, built broad multi-faith coalitions with Jewish and Muslim leaders.
Fry had been in church choir practice when it occurred to him that Silver's new adhesive could actually be extremely useful.

**How so?**

Fry used pieces of paper as bookmarks in his choir hymnbook — but the paper would just fall out. If an adhesive could stick paper together non-permanently, Fry's bookmarks could stay in place.

Thanks to Silver's willingness to see a silver lining in his mistake (intellectual humility in action!), and Fry's experiences in choir practice, Silver and Fry could team up to pitch a new product — "Post-Its". Now, 50 million Post-Its are produced and sold by 3M each year.

In Silver and Fry's case, luck brought them (and their distinct perspectives) together. But we can learn from this example and be proactive about seeking out alternative perspectives.

**Tell me more**

Before rising to this political postion, Mandela had been imprisoned for 27 years for his role as a leader in the struggle against apartheid, a rigid system of racial segregation which disempowered the nation's Black majority.

Upon his release from prison in 1990, tensions were incredibly high among South Africans. The nation felt as though it was on the brink of a civil war. But Mandela steered his party away from retaliating against the white leaders who had imposed apartheid.

He insisted that both parties needed to work together to develop a mutually-agreeable path forward for a unified nation. Over several long years, Mandela negotiated a peaceful end to apartheid through talks with the president at the time, F.W. de Klerk.

After winning the presidency in 1994, Mandela persuaded de Klerk and many members of de Klerk's team to join his administration.

Plenty of great thinkers and innovators have done this to unlock life's greatest mysteries and come up with innovative solutions to make our world a better place.
This unlikely alliance proved critical to Mandela's success in restoring unity and building a cohesive national identity for South Africa after such a long period of strife.

Got it

Are there other examples of productive disagreement?

Yes! There are too many great stories to tell here. But we recommend that you check out these two TED talks, linked in the "Additional Resources" section in our Resource Library:

"Learning from Past Presidents:" Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin shares the story of how U.S. President Abraham Lincoln appointed several of his biggest rivals to his cabinet in order to reunite the nation after the Civil War. Lincoln explained: "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

"Dare to Disagree:" Entrepreneur Margaret Heffernan explains how Dr. Alice Stewart used disagreement to strengthen her arguments, allowing her to succeed in banning X-rays on pregnant mothers.

Review

We’ve covered a lot of ground in this lesson! Let’s recap what we’ve learned so far. One big takeaway is that it’s often advantageous to work alongside people who disagree with us.

As we saw in the parable of the six blind men, we can each be completely convinced that our view is correct, even when we’re only seeing a part of the truth!

Engaging with diverse perspectives is the most effective solution to our natural human limitations. It offers all of these benefits:

- Allows us to expand our knowledge
- Helps us make new discoveries and unlock creativity
- Empowers us to make wise decisions and avoid groupthink
- Improves our communication skills so we can be more persuasive
- Make it possible to build effective coalitions
How are you feeling about this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great!</th>
<th>Still a bit skeptical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glad to hear it! Even though you're feeling good about this premise, it's valuable to think about some challenges that can arise when we team up with people we disagree with.</td>
<td>We totally understand! Let's talk about the challenges that can arise when we team up with people we disagree with.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Doing this work is extremely difficult. Collaborations, partnerships, and movements frequently fall apart if members of the group get caught up in their differences instead of keeping their eye on the prize.

All too often, small disagreements escalate into obstacles that prevent our progress toward our common goal. We end up dividing ourselves into smaller and smaller factions, and we lose our collective power.

In 1917, the psychologist Sigmund Freud coined this tendency "the narcissism of small differences."

Fortunately, we can change how we react to disagreements, so that we treat them as a secret weapon for improving our team's thinking, rather than an obstacle to achieving our common goal.

Let's do a little thought experiment to play this out.

**Okay**

**What's a social issue you feel strongly about?**

[Describe the issue in a few words.]

**Enter text...**

**Which of the below better describes your philosophy on how to make progress on this issue?**

- The only way to make a difference is to use aggressive tactics to get attention for your cause
- Aggressive tactics tend to antagonize people and turn them away from my cause
Thanks for sharing!

Imagine that you meet Nasrin, who is equally devoted to [the issue you described]. But Nasrin disagrees with you about the best method of advancing the cause. She thinks [the opposite method from the one you chose] is the best way to make progress.

Which of the following would be a more productive way of reacting to your disagreement with Nasrin?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;By talking through our differences, Nasrin and I can work together to find the best approach to advancing the cause.&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Nasrin must not be a true advocate for the cause.&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great thinking!</td>
<td>Not quite!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It probably won't help to push Nasrin away and paint her as an adversary, just because of a small disagreement. Instead, you can view this disagreement as an opportunity to strengthen your group's strategy to advance your common cause.

You can follow the advice of the civil rights activist Pauli Murray, who said: "When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them."

The wider we draw our circles to bring others into our cause, the more effective we will be in bringing about the change we want to see in the world.

But let's be honest — the process of welcoming diverse perspectives isn't always easy. It's one thing to understand the merits of speaking with people you disagree with in theory, but it's another thing to actually put this into practice in the real world.

It's not always easy to engage with diverse perspectives. Nor do these conversations always lead to a productive outcome. It's important to acknowledge this upfront and to have an open conversation about the limits of this premise.
You may have questions on your mind like, "Are you saying I should be willing to talk to everyone, in every circumstance, even if they are saying something truly hateful?"

Rest assured: That is not our stance.

All of us — tech CEOs, university presidents, journalists, educators, campus leaders, and average citizens — need to "draw the line" between views that we disagree with but are worth engaging with, and views that are truly harmful or unlikely to add real value.

But that means each of us has to grapple with a more complicated question: Who should we be willing to engage with?

What's the answer?

Where to draw the line

In a perfect world, we'd be able to give you an elegant one-sentence answer. But in reality, deciding whether or not to engage with people who hold different views is complicated.

There are circumstances where engaging is important and productive, while at other times it might actually be counterproductive. In short, there's no "magic formula" to figure out where that line is for everyone in every situation.

Only you can determine which topics and ideas deserve your time and energy. Even if you come up with general rules for yourself, you might find that they don't apply in every situation.

What we recommend is that as individuals, we each take the time to carefully evaluate situations on a case-by-case basis. While our elephant might have a quick initial reaction to shut down a conversation, if we slow down and consider the situation, our rider might decide that it could be valuable to engage.

So while we're not going to tell you where "the line" is, we will equip you with tools to draw that line for yourself.

Got it
Good faith vs. bad faith

One important factor to consider is the intention of your potential conversational partner. Is the person acting in good faith or bad faith?

Acting in **good faith** means that someone has a sincere intention to be fair, open, and honest.

In contrast, people who act in **bad faith** have no intention of having a productive dialogue. They may be trying to provoke or harass you just for the fun of it.

As a general principle, engaging with people who are acting in good faith can lead to rewarding conversations, but it’s wise to avoid people who are acting in bad faith.

The difficulty is: It may not be immediately obvious what someone’s intentions are! We generally recommend giving people the benefit of the doubt and providing them with an opportunity to demonstrate their intentions.

But determining how much of a chance you ought to give someone requires using our judgment. We’ll help you practice honing your judgment, so that you’ll be able to make the right calls for yourself.

Let’s do it

Below, we’ve provided responses to the most common concerns that we’ve received from previous Perspective learners about engaging with diverse perspectives. You can click to read whichever ones you’re interested in.

We’re also always eager to learn and hear from others, so if you have a concern that you don't see addressed below, you'll have the opportunity to share it with us at the end. We might be able to add your concern into our program.

**Which of these questions are you curious to read about?**

[Learner sees responses to the questions they select]
What about conspiracy theorists and people who spread misinformation?

We should be concerned when people spread lies to benefit themselves and harm others. This behavior betrays our trust and degrades honest communication. Anyone who intends to deceive you is acting in bad faith, and you don't owe it to them to hear them out.

But we should also recognize that not everyone who spreads incorrect information is doing so with the intention to deceive. There's a big difference between people who purposely create misinformation, and people who unintentionally fall prey to it.

Some people with good intentions accidentally end up believing falsehoods. If they spread misinformation to other people, they may be doing it unknowingly, because they genuinely believe what they heard.

We may not even realize this, but it's likely that we've unintentionally done this ourselves! Have you fact-checked every single article you've read online before sharing it? Have you ever accidentally misremembered a detail or misunderstood something?

As human beings, we all get things wrong sometimes. As we've learned, our brains take shortcuts in order to avoid overload. So keep in mind that someone you're talking to might have made an honest mistake by trusting the wrong sources.

What about trolls?

Trolls intentionally enter into conversation in order to be malicious and inflammatory. We are not advocating that you engage with trolls or provocateurs. It is very unlikely this will lead to a productive conversation.

If you witness someone engaging in extreme trolling behavior (such as harassment or bullying), we suggest you avoid them — their bad intentions are crystal clear.

But you'll also encounter less severe cases, where people express themselves rudely but aren't necessarily acting in bad faith. In those situations, try doing a little detective work to evaluate their intentions. You can ask yourself: Am I certain that their goal is to derail the conversation or to offend me?

If you're not certain, it's best to give them the benefit of the doubt. Some people might appear to be trolling when they're really passionate. Maybe their elephant is acting up, but they actually do want to engage in a real discussion. Especially in online conversations, it's easy to misread
someone's tone or intention. If you determine a person truly has no interest in having a productive conversation, you always have the choice to walk away. Since trolls get satisfaction from riling you up, you'll maintain the upper hand by remaining calm and dispassionate.

What about people who defend harmful ideas or actions?

As we've mentioned, deciding who you're willing to speak to or what topics you're willing to discuss with others is a deeply personal matter. It's entirely up to you to make these calls.

You may resist discussing certain ideas or topics because they seem to question your own worth as a human being, or the worth of a group of people whose welfare you're deeply concerned about. This is totally legitimate.

However, we'd advise you to really analyze the situation and weigh the pros and cons of engaging, before you make any decisions. You should never underestimate the power of conversations to change others.

When considering a conversation with someone who defends ideas you strongly disagree with, you can ask yourself: "Am I absolutely certain this particular person can't learn or improve?"

When we encounter someone who holds a view we find abhorrent, we may assume they lack the capacity to change. But when we do so, we're falling prey to a fixed mindset! We should recognize that just as we have the capacity for growth, others do too.

As the Indian civil rights leader Mohandas Gandhi said, "No human being is so bad as to be beyond redemption."

Ironically, their best hope for growth is if someone treats them with compassion and engages them in a nonjudgmental conversation. If we simply write them off and refuse to engage, it's unlikely that they'll ever be able to see things differently, or recognize the error of their ways.

We're certainly not saying that you must confront extremists or members of hate groups in an effort to talk them out of their beliefs. But there may be particular encounters where an honest conversation could start to prompt them to reconsider their positions.
In Lesson 6, we'll share a real life story about someone who was able to successfully persuade hundreds of KKK members to change their ways just through the power of conversation.

It's also important to keep in mind that talking to someone or hearing what they have to say is not the same as endorsing or approving of what they're saying. Despite what some people think, simply talking to someone doesn't make you "guilty by association." Your character is a reflection of your actions, not anyone else's.

Why should I engage when the burden always falls to minorities to explain themselves?

You might be thinking, "I'm so tired of having to explain myself to people. It's not my job!" Maybe you feel frustrated that you have to take up that work when other people don't.

You might even wish that people would do some of their own research before coming to you (although there's always a chance that without your guidance, they'll be reading sources that make you cringe).

Whatever the specific scenario, it isn't fair that some people have to do much more work than others in order to be understood and seen for who they truly are. Rest assured that you don't need to open up to everyone at all times and have these conversations.

You're not obligated to explain your point of view whenever someone asks. It's vital to take care of yourself, so you have enough energy to tackle the things in your life that really matter to you.

But it's valuable to recognize that these challenges can also serve as opportunities. Have you ever thought to yourself, "I wish they knew X, or would think about Y?" With your voice, they could learn what they were missing before.

Never underestimate the power of conversations to motivate others — not only to join your cause, but also to do their own independent learning thanks to your encouragement.

What if the conversation isn't taking place on equal footing?

It's true that conversations about difficult topics can be even more challenging when you and your conversation partner aren't speaking on a "level playing field."

Especially if you're speaking to someone who has influence or authority over your future (like your teacher), you may be worried that a disagreement could damage your relationship or even
jeopardize your academic future.

As with all disagreements, you should weigh the risks of a conversation going badly (and potentially leading to negative consequences) against the rewards of speaking your mind and defending your point of view.

You don't need to push yourself to risk damaging an important relationship with an authority figure. But there may be some topics where you'll be upset with yourself if you don't speak your mind.

Here's our advice: Build up your confidence and your communication skills by approaching difficult topics in conversations with your classmates, friends, and so on. That way, it'll be easier to communicate effectively in moments where it's important to explain to an authority figure why you disagree with their point of view.

Why should I risk judgment or retaliation?

It's totally understandable if you're fearful that speaking your mind could lead to social and even academic consequences. Unfortunately, in our current climate, these are serious risks.

But if we're never willing to face these risks, we may actually perpetuate problems that can only be solved through open and honest conversation.

If we always keep our views to ourselves out of fear, then no one will know that there are other views out there besides the loudest ones we're already hearing. Other people who see things the way we do will also keep quiet, instead of seeing our example and feeling empowered by our willingness to speak our mind.

So instead of withdrawing from conversation altogether, you can think about how to engage. It's important to keep in mind that these conversations are hard and they take time.

Rather than always keeping your thoughts to yourself, or waiting for your "big moment" to reveal your thoughts on the toughest topic, you can begin by easing into these conversations. This will give you the opportunity to start exercising your conversational muscles and it will begin preparing your conversational partner as well.
Why should I risk my safety?

Let's be clear: If anyone threatens you with any kind of physical violence, you should absolutely remove yourself from the situation immediately and report the threat to an authority. You should never risk physical danger in order to have a challenging conversation. But even if your physical safety isn't at risk, there may be times when you start to feel uneasy or uncomfortable because the conversation you're having is taking an emotional toll on you.

On some of these occasions, choosing not to engage might be the right choice for taking care of yourself. But if we always avoid difficult conversations, the mere thought of addressing the topics that stir up strong emotions is likely to bring up even more fear and anxiety for us.

Think of the first time you did anything new or scary, such as learning to drive a car or putting yourself in a new social situation. At first, most of us feel scared and anxious. But over time, you can rise to the occasion with little to no anxiety.

If we want to change how these issues make us feel and become more empowered, we can train ourselves to keep our emotions from running the show during the difficult conversations we're having. We'll teach you how you can do this in Lesson 7!

Why should I risk being brainwashed?

It's understandable that you might be concerned about getting "brainwashed" by someone who holds crazy or even dangerous ideas. But let's be clear: Being open-minded does not require you to buy into everything you hear. Sometimes other people are just plain wrong, and sometimes they really do have bad intentions.

But listening to someone else's ideas doesn't mean you're automatically going to be brainwashed. When someone says something that seems pretty convincing, you have plenty of options besides immediately accepting that idea.

Being open-minded doesn't mean that "all ideas are worthy of belief," but instead, "all ideas are worth investigating, at least initially." This requires critical thinking — a task for your rider.

For example, you can implement the belief updating technique we learned in the previous lesson, to adjust your degree of confidence about what you've just learned without completely changing your view.
If you feel your elephant being easily persuaded, slow down, take a few deep breaths, and allow your rider to gain control. Try to carefully evaluate the evidence at hand rather than just accepting the new information at face value. You can also seek out other people's perspectives or additional sources to learn more before you make any final decisions.

And perhaps most importantly: have a little confidence in yourself. Maybe instead of the other person persuading you to their opinion, you will be the one who persuades them to yours.

**Why should I even bother wasting my time on these conversations?**

You've probably had some conversations in the past where it felt like things were going nowhere. Even if you're talking to someone who is acting in good faith, some discussions only lead to a stalemate.

We're not saying that you need to engage with every possible perspective on every single issue. That would certainly be exhausting, and impossible!

But there's still a reason to consider engaging. It's easy to assume it's not worth wasting time on people who won't take your ideas seriously. The thing is, how can you be certain what someone else is thinking or intending to do if you don't speak with them first?

In fact, research shows that our expectations are often wrong. When it comes to interacting with others who are different from them, people tend to have more positive experiences and find more common ground than they expected.

Another question to ask yourself is: Should we only consider conversations to be valuable when we can change someone else's mind? Even if the other person isn't willing to budge, we can still stand to gain from the interaction.

You may, for instance, learn arguments from the other side you've never considered before.

You may also gain the other person's respect by demonstrating to them that you're willing to hear them out.

Of course, you might have questions or concerns about engaging with diverse perspectives that we haven't addressed. We'd love to hear your
thoughts so we can fill in our own blindspots!

Are you thinking about something we didn't address? If so, let us know what's on your mind. [If you don't have unaddressed questions or concerns, you can leave this blank.]

Thanks for sharing with us!

In the next lesson, we'll begin to offer guidance on how to approach conversations so that when you do decide to engage, they're most likely to go well. We'll provide you with a set of techniques to help you feel more confident and prepared to navigate difficult conversations.

To summarize, should you always feel compelled to engage with people you disagree with?

| Yes. We should always be open to any conversation no matter the circumstances |
|---|---|
| No. There are many factors to keep in mind, and it's up to each individual to decide if and when to engage in conversation |

Exactly!

Not quite. There are factors that we should take into account when deciding whether a particular conversation is worth having.

What about some life hacks?

Life hacks!

To continue developing intellectual humility and to practice opening yourself up to diverse perspectives, you can try these life hacks:

1. Ask yourself: 'Am I seeing the whole elephant?'
The next time you find yourself disagreeing with someone, consider the possibility that understanding the truth might require putting both perspectives together.

2. **Keep your eye on the prize**  
The next time you find yourself disagreeing with someone over something small, bring your attention back to what you're trying to accomplish. This will help you keep this disagreement in perspective.

3. **Build your persuasion muscles**  
Every week, try to read or listen to one opinion you know you disagree with. This will help you better understand opposing views so you can strengthen your own arguments. You can find multiple angles on news stories by checking out [AllSides](#) or by signing up for [The Flip Side](#) — a 5-minute daily email that summarizes the main news event of the day from the best sources on the political right and the political left.

### Which life hack would you like to practice?

| Ask yourself: "Am I seeing the whole elephant?" | Keep your eye on the prize | Build your persuasion muscles |

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### Self-Reflection

Great! We'll send you a reminder of the life hack you chose in your summary email. Before we wrap up, let's do some brief self-reflection.

What's the key takeaway you learned from this lesson?

Enter text...

In the upcoming week, how will you implement this key takeaway in your life?

Enter text...

That's it for Lesson 4! We'll send you a summary of the material in this lesson in 24 hours.

So far, we've discussed many advantages of engaging with diverse perspectives, and we explored how we can cultivate a mindset of intellectual humility and continual self-improvement.

In the next lesson, we'll explore an important question: Why are we so divided and what can we do about it? We'll dive a bit deeper into the inner workings of the mind to explore...
the psychological roots of our differences. We'll also teach you specific techniques you can use to navigate these differences.