

Compliance Today – June 2020

Civil debate: A path to greater integrity

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Getting to the right answer can sometimes be tricky in healthcare. When billing disputes come up, for example, debate leads to a better understanding of why certain services were coded the way they were. That truth can mean the difference between violating or complying with the law. Having a civil debate seems like a logical way to get to the truth, but it's not necessarily easy. Tempers flare, opinions are strong, and the discussion can get heated. Yet civil debate is a critical pathway to mutual understanding. It benefits us in every aspect of our lives, especially in our integrity.

What is civil debate, and why is it important?

Civil debate is when two or more people sit down, have a discussion, and all parties are able to make their points. All participants should feel that their ideas are being seriously considered, even if they have opposing viewpoints. It allows them to dissect information, ask questions, and hear what they may not have heard before.

This kind of debate is such an important tool. We can use it to obtain knowledge, new ideas, and the truth. It can be difficult to implement though, especially when emotions and personal opinions get in the way. Having a civil debate is so important to getting to the truth that I devoted an entire chapter to the topic in my book *IntegrityWorks: Tools and Skills to Build Integrity*. In that chapter, I shared my principles of civil debate—a list of tactics that can help anyone debate in a more civil manner.^[1]

Debate is an important part of leading an intentionally integrity-focused life: civilly discussing issues leads to knowledge and truth, and knowing the truth helps us act with more integrity.

My principles of civil debate

Here are the principles of civil debate that I describe in my book, which can help you conduct a more productive and focused debate.

Before debating, describe your opponent's position to them until they think you have it right. This might be the most important principle. We promise to listen to others, but we don't always *prove* we did. If you can explain another's argument to their satisfaction, you have proven you listened. You cannot "win" a debate if you do not understand the opposing position. More importantly, you cannot get to the truth if you don't listen and learn. It also makes it harder for the person you are debating with to be uncivil if you show them that you are listening.

Take joy in your opponent's ability to make a good point and tell that person when they do. If you can do this, you truly are in a different league. People who care about those they don't agree with are different to their core. Being

able to compliment someone on a good point they made means you understand how to civilly debate.

Take a break or ask to meet another time if either one of you becomes too frustrated. I personally can get so wound up in a debate that I don't always notice when it becomes too heated. I don't usually stop it in that moment; instead, I lean in and talk a little faster. However, on occasion, I do carefully put the discussion on pause—and *it feels good*. I feel smart when I'm able to do it, and when we pick up the discussion again, it's almost always more productive.

Avoid questioning motives. Assume that your opponent's disagreement comes from a lack of understanding your point. I was told very early in my career not to question people's motives. A guess about someone's motive is just that—a guess. It may be way off base and can lead to rationalizing discounting another person's point. Questioning motives just distracts us from understanding a discussion's key points—focus on them instead.

Use another person's disagreement as a seed of an idea to refine or clarify your point. Occasionally, we get offended if someone disagrees with us, especially when the disagreement is based on an inaccurate assumption about a position we may have stated poorly. Rather than become offended, ask yourself, “Is my opponent just confused or mistaken about my position?” My advice: be patient and try to understand how your point might have been misinterpreted.

When I hear an objection to my position, I think to myself, “Given what they just said, I may not have explained myself clearly. Now that I have heard and understood the objection, I know what they may not have understood about my argument.” Consider asking your opponent questions that can help you clarify your message and revise your argument to be more easily understood.

If your opponent causes you to change your mind about a topic, tell the person about it. Most debates have many subcomponents. You may never change your mind on the fundamental issue being discussed, but you *may* change your mind on its elements, especially if you learn something new. If that happens, you should thank the person you're having the discussion with, because they helped you.

When your opponent wanders off from making a good point, help steer the conversation back to the original discussion. I am constantly asking people to tell me more or go back to a point they were making. Intense discussions can stress people out, and then they can start rambling. Many people are not good at having a beginning, middle, and end to their point. Help them get back to an interesting thought they had but didn't finish. This will help them clarify what they are saying.

Occasionally ask your opponent to repeat a previous statement. This helps you understand their point better and buys some time to formulate your next thought. Every once in a while, I need a time-out. I need time to think. Maybe I checked out for a moment, or I just couldn't process what was said as fast as it was said. So, I ask people to repeat themselves.

It's easier to agree or disagree with what you understand than what you don't understand. So, ask lots of questions. This is so helpful; I don't know why we don't do it more often. There should be a rule to ask five questions before you talk in a debate. It would be so useful. Asking questions is like cheating in a debate: You get all the information you need, and the person you're having the discussion with appreciates your interest. **Periodically start a sentence with, “So what I hear you're saying is ...”** If you want to be sure you accurately heard someone, all you have to do is repeat what you thought that person said. Not verbatim, but repeat what you thought they meant—civilly, of course.

Smile. Or at least make sure you're not frowning or showing concern. This may be a blindingly obvious statement, but we often have no idea how bad or unenthusiastic our facial expressions can be. If a mirror was

next to the person you're debating with, I bet you would almost always immediately change the look. Every communication expert in the world says nonverbal communication is really important, and yet I don't think we focus on it enough.

No debate should start without ample time to calmly conclude it. The minute you realize the discussion might get intense, assess how much time you both have to finish it.

Never finish a debate in the heat of the moment. Every discussion is better ended on a positive note. Think about it as a period of winding down. Change the subject after the debate is over. End the conversation with something innocuous and uncontroversial. Say something about how your position changed (only if it did). Compliment them on an idea, position they hold, or the way they made their point clear. You don't need to agree with the point, just the way it was made. Find a way to finish the conversation on a positive note before one of you has to leave.

Do not rush a debate. Slow and steady conversations promote civility. Frantic conversations hurt civility. Despite the fact that discussions rarely have to be totally resolved, we often act like our discussions must be resolved *right now*. The faster you try to resolve a disagreement, the less likely you will resolve it civilly.

Do not debate in a place where your opponent will be uncomfortable (like in public). Some people hate conflict. Even more people hate conflict when others observe it. If other people can hear you, make a conscious effort to speak quietly.

If other people are complicating the civility of the discussion, stop. Debates can start when you least expect them to. A debate might start in a circle of people, and one or two of them might start breaking every one of these principles. If that happens, bail out. Run for your life. Stop talking. It isn't going to work. If the discussion is important, figure out a way to have it later with only the people who absolutely need to be involved.

Have empathy for your opponents, particularly if debating is not their thing. If you can have empathy for your opponents and really mean it, you should have a lot of confidence in your ability to get to the truth and act with integrity.

Get background material. Ask for something to read that will help you better understand a person's viewpoint. If you really want to get to the truth, do your research. A whole chapter in *IntegrityWorks* is devoted to critical-thinking skills and research. Many discussions or debates can be started, stopped, and started again at a later date. In between, consider reading something the other person suggests. Just asking for information used by that person shows your desire to learn the truth and act with integrity.

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