

# 10 Commandments of Respectful Discussion

1

## **Maintain a humble attitude.**

It well may be that you are mistaken and the other person is in the right. Be ready to change your opinion. Ditch dogmatic obstinacy.

2

## **Keep cognitive biases in check.**

Keep in mind that we humans, you included, are prone to many kinds of cognitive bias. We regard ourselves as more clever than we really are (Dunning-Kruger effect). We put so much emphasis on information that supports our views and tend to downplay conflicting data (confirmation bias). These and many other biases are obstacles to fruitful discussion. Exercise self-criticism and be aware of their effect on you.

3

## **Be mindful of how emotions can affect you.**

If the issues under discussion are important and personal, they easily stir up emotions. You may feel personally attacked when your best ideas are critically scrutinised. Clear thinking easily gets obscured and judgment deteriorates when emotions come to the surface.

4

## **Be just with the opposing views.**

Refrain from making a caricature of others' talking points (straw man) and attacking this kind of distorted view. Rather, ask your discussion partner whether you have correctly understood her arguments. Respond to them only after that.

5

## **Stay on topic.**

Sometimes, people attempt to bury difficult issues by leading the discussion towards irrelevant questions (red herring). A fair debater will not escape from challenging arguments but will respond to them or, alternatively, will change their own opinion.

6

## **Be civil.**

Do not attack your discussion partner as a person (ad hominem). Do not sneer, taunt or mock anyone. Do not presume anything that your interlocutor has not clearly expressed about herself. Moreover, do not play the martyr. Do be courteous and friendly.

7

## **Help your discussion partner save face.**

If other person's arguments prove to be weak, do not try to corner her into an embarrassing or shameful situation. Changing one's opinion can be mentally demanding; make it as easy as possible for the other person by being a fair and safe discussion partner. Do not rub salt into the wound.

8

## **Do away with rhetorical tricks.**

Civil discourse is not the kind of debate that one should aim at winning at all costs. A skillful language user can use wit in a number of ways to disarm and stab at her opposition while putting up a façade of civility. Using verbal mastery, you can make your conversation partner look stupid and her opinions silly. This, however, cannot be considered a genuine counter-argument. A discussion partner is not your enemy –she is not your adversary. Do not treat her as if she were.

9

## **Demand that the other person be civil during the discussion.**

Unfortunately, fruitful discussion cannot take place when only one party complies with the rules. Even if you strive to do justice to another person's opinions, stay on topic and be civil, the discussion will not work if the other couldn't care less about such principles. You have the right to demand of another what you yourself are striving for. If this does not materialise, it is questionable whether there are enough reasons to continue the discussion.

10

## **But be understanding.**

Do not transform a discussion into an obstacle course where another person will immediately be disqualified upon breaking the rules. If your discussion partner loses her temper or lapses into inappropriate tricks, you can remark on her behaviour. She may well revert to civil discourse. It is only human that people do not always reach an ideal discussion.