

From Demagoguery to Dialogue

Seven referees take the field at each American professional football game. Coach's challenges and video tape replay scrutinize the referee's decisions as the crowd waits in suspense for each verdict on the field. Commentators describe the rule and anticipate how it will be applied in each particular instance. Referees describe the evidence and the rules to the fans before announcing their decisions. Cheers and jeers express the fans' opinions of these rapid and vital proclamations. Perhaps as a result, youngsters playing sandlot football are well aware of the rules, and often play fairly even without referees present.

The commentator smiles warmly as the first guest politician misrepresents facts, endorses false assumptions, over-generalizes, draws invalid conclusions, engages in *ad hominem* attacks, creates false dichotomies, uses literal truths to send false messages, and uses inflammatory and hateful language to present his position on the typical political talk show. The same personable commentator enjoys provoking the role-playing as the other guest politicians use similar demagoguery to attack opponents. Political conversation resembles [WrestleMania](#); there is nothing fair, sporting, insightful, or adult about it. The referee *contributes* to the mayhem. The crude and divisive communication style we see used by these celebrity politicians, talk-show hosts, and even political analysts quickly contaminates our everyday discussions. Because we are cautioned not to discuss vital issues such as religion or politics the most essential conversations become prohibited. We pay a heavy price for this constant mischief.

Football is played in college. [WrestleMania](#) appeals to children. Can we learn to converse like collegiate adults?

Perhaps *refereed dialogue* can provide a model for more meaningful conversations by the professionals and by ordinary citizens. The consistent intent of the [dialogue](#) is for each participant to move us toward a deeper understanding of *what is*. Dialogue is a collaborative rather than a competitive endeavor. These simple but rarely followed rules can help insightful dialogue emerge:

- Statements are required to be factual and representative; untruths, misleading statements, or unrepresentative anecdotes are not allowed. Words are carefully chosen for accuracy and objectivity. Opinion is clearly differentiated from fact. Uncertainty is accurately characterized. Context is fairly represented.
- Stated conclusions are validly derived from carefully established premise. Logical fallacies or unsubstantiated premise are not allowed.
- Discussion is relevant to advancing the thread of the argument. Non Sequiturs, distracting tangents, and irrelevancies are not allowed.
- Speakers work to fully understand each other's point of view. They ask clarifying questions or suggest clarifying restatements to help the other more fully express his viewpoint. They accurately express the other's viewpoint before changing the direction of the dialogue. Ideally, speaker "A" expresses the viewpoint of speaker "B" to the satisfaction of speaker "B" before going on.

- Speakers continuously demonstrate their respect for each other throughout the dialogue. Hateful language, *ad hominem* attacks, ridicule, sarcasm, preemptive dismissals, and condescension are not allowed.
- Participants work together to uncover assumptions, gather information, increase clarity, challenge inconsistencies, resolve ambiguity, think critically, dig deeper, identify helpful shifts in viewpoint, and improve inadequate research, reasoning, or presentation.

Sports referees blow the whistle and immediately stop play to address infractions, review what has happened, correct the error, and ensure play continues according to the rules. Similarly the moderator acts as a referee to enforce these dialogue rules. Whenever an infraction occurs the conversation is immediately halted, the infraction is identified, and the speaker corrects the error before the conversation continues. This intervention might be as simple as a request by the moderator for clarification, or the moderator may stop, challenge, and redirect the conversation more intensely. Skilled participants stay within the rules so the conversation proceeds uninterrupted.

Kids on sandlots learn sports by watching the professionals play fairly by the rules. Amateur athletes at many levels quickly regulate their own play according to agreed rules. Perhaps professional communicators carefully following well-chosen rules of dialogue can provide us with an effective model for meaningful, even transformational, conversations.