

Debate, Discussion, Deliberative Dialogue

Courtesy of Margaret Holt

Deliberation is a particular kind of talk. It is the kind of talking that people do when they realize that they are responsible for making decisions and choices – or giving guidance to other who will make those decisions that will not only affect them but will affect others and will also have costs and consequences along with the good things that may happen. Deliberation is hard work that involves looking at the tradeoffs of each approach, or perspective. That means making a real effort to find out how other people see the issue and, more importantly, *why* they see it the way they do. In deliberation, this means listening to the people you don't agree with as carefully as to the people you do agree with.

It is, of course, possible to have a great **discussion** about issues and problems; sharing opinions, personal experiences, and favorite solutions. Or it is possible to **debate** an issue; presenting evidence supporting your chosen view, countering and undercutting the arguments that others present for their chosen views, persuading, and trying to win by presenting the best and most eloquent argument. But with **deliberation**, talk goes beyond just discussion or debate to trying to understand the problem together and to finding solutions that will be best for everyone. Deliberation happens when a group of people work on a problem as if solving it is up to them and no one else, and when they recognize that they and others will be living with the consequences, both good and bad, of the choices they make.

Debate	Discussion	Deliberative Dialogue
Winners and losers	Back & forth exchange of information, stories, experiences, viewpoints	Goal is shared understanding of the issue/problem
Search for glaring differences	May focus on a topic, theme, idea, problems, issues, etc., may be broad or focused	Examining costs & consequences of even most favored approaches
Search for weaknesses in others' positions	A generic term meaning talking together	Assumes that many people have pieces of an answer & a workable solution
Counter another's position at the expense of the relationship; defend assumptions as truth	Focuses on the experience of talking without any particular goal or desired outcomes	Listening to understand & find meaning
Invest wholeheartedly in your beliefs	May be between two people or among many	Presents assumptions for re-evaluation
Listen to find flaws & counterarguments	May mean many kinds of talking together (such as informative discussion, persuasion, argument, etc)	Offers possibilities for new solutions
Is oppositional & seeks to prove the other wrong	Usually implies participants are not adversarial or competing as in a debate	Leads to mutual understanding of differences & ways to act even with those differences
The goal is winning		People explore what's important to them & others by asking questions
Most useful when: A position or course of action is being advocated & winning is the goal	Most useful when: People want to talk without desiring any particular outcomes	Most useful when: A decision or criteria for a decision, about the best way(s) to approach the issue or problem is needed