

# Constructive Debates About Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

In the next several weeks and months, organizations will be conducting tough conversations about how to respond to the wave of change that has been occurring around the world. It's no longer enough to delegate issues of diversity and inclusion to an office within Human Resources. It's no longer sufficient to require eight hours of anti-bias training. Every single leader in every organization is beginning to realize that it's down to them to take a hard look at policies, practices, attitudes, investments, assumptions, and culture and consider implications for justice and fairness. This will require them to have challenging conversations, to invite critical feedback, to listen to a broad range of voices, to be open to innovative solutions, to break out of their comfort zone.

There is nothing easy or obvious about how to do this. If you're not yet grappling with it, you may not yet realize how counterintuitive and difficult our responses and actions need to be. Major changes like the one we're experiencing now seem to happen suddenly, but if we take the longer view, we can see how we got here – first incrementally, thinking we are being responsible and accountable by taking small actions. The volcano slowly builds, the intensity of what's happening deep within is not in our consciousness. We notice a wisp of smoke here, a small shudder in the ground there. Then all at once it explodes - our world changes from one day to the next. Nothing happened that hasn't happened before, but now we see it, we feel it – we grasp the larger sense of what it means. We can't turn away or turn back. We look outward and realize that we also have to look inward. We have to think about it. We have to talk about it.

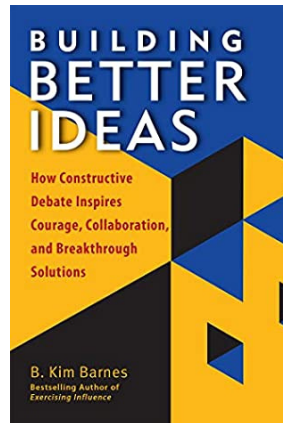
How we approach these conversations has everything to do with how confident we can be in making decisions and taking actions. It's not just a matter of logical problem-solving. We need to have robust, open, and constructive debates about how we will change. That means confronting and exploring our past practices, current culture, and future aspirations. Skillful and successful communication about such topics requires several conditions to be present:

- facility with a number of different communication behaviors including expressing ideas, engaging others, exploring views, and challenging positions
- the ability to give, receive, and invite constructive feedback
- a willingness to consider a variety of viewpoints
- a minimum of conflicting vested interests
- an interest in acknowledging, then setting aside, preconceived notions, assumptions, and biases about others
- an issue, problem, or opportunity that participants care about
- a set of agreed-upon norms and a well-designed process for conducting debates and discussions.

The word “debate” implies the airing, even the collision, of different points of view. Many needed

debates don't happen because we fear they will lead to interpersonal conflict. This isn't inevitable if we choose to have debates that are constructive. Constructive, according to dictionary.com, means "helping to improve, promoting further development or advancement." Debating in a constructive way means exploring differences of experience, belief, or opinion in order to build or improve something together. It requires us to speak our truth, to listen to and consider that of others, to look for ways to align where we can, and finally to devise solutions that we can all stand behind. We can take a step back from our own experiences and beliefs rather than wearing them. We can be curious about how others arrived at theirs without condemning them. We can leave a space of thoughtful silence between our ideas so that they have a chance to land.

If we are to make any breakthroughs as a society, organization, or community about the enormous issues of fairness and justice that are facing us, we need, of course, to listen to one another. But if we want to move from understanding to action, we must



do the further uncomfortable, difficult, but ultimately rewarding work of debating and then deciding and making a commitment to change that would have seemed radical to us just a short time ago.

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Learn more by attending the course *Constructive Debate™ - A Collaborative Approach to Building Better Ideas* available from TidalShift. Course details at:

<https://procept.com/content/constructive-debate>



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