

**LWV of San Luis Obispo County's Responses
To Frequently Asked Questions about Civil Discourse
LWV Santa Barbara Forum: "Can We Talk ... and Listen to One Another?"**

Q1. What does "civil discourse" look like in action in public meetings with elected or appointed officials, staff, and the public?

- Shared agreement on a set of civil discourse guidelines (What do we need from each other in order to support a democratic environment?)
- Adoption of a Civility and Civil Discourse Resolution
- Commitment to repeat Civil Discourse Pledge before meetings
- Make Guidelines or Resolution visible to public on Agenda/web site
- Model civil behavior and civil discourse in meetings and interactions
- Review and reinforce Guidelines as part of Chair's duties
- Search for shared meaning with other officials and the public
- Encourage spirited, yet respectful exchange

Q2. What are the observable traits of civil discourse in these public meetings?

- Engaged officials and public- both verbally and non-verbally
- Active listening- seek to understand with an open mind
- Focus on issues, facts, and evidence not on the messenger
- Choose respectful words and model civil actions
- Chair facilitates and encourages full participation
- Chair encourages inclusive Bipartisan exchange
- Search for shared meaning, common ground

Q3. Who or what sets the tone for civil discourse in meetings?

- Agreed upon printed, visible guidelines
- Chair sets tone through guidelines, own behavior
- Officials and public should be self-aware and self-correct when needed
- Presence of League Civil Discourse Observers-Ambassadors

Q4. What does uncivil discourse look like in action in public meetings?

- Negative non-verbal demeanor- no eye contact
- Expressed frustration with words, actions, and body language
- Public/Officials avoid common ground
- Officials and public resort to verbal attacks
- Judgmental, demeaning remarks directed at specific people
- Misassumptions about the motives of officials/public

Q5. What is the best way to deal with incivility in meetings?

- Provide space for a League Civil Discourse Concierge to help the public with questions, information, and forms prior to the start of the meeting
- Be proactive from the start - introduce guidelines and expectations
- Ask elected officials and the public to join together in reciting an agreed upon Civil Discourse Pledge at the start of each meeting
- Refer back to guidelines printed on back of agenda
- Provide disruptors with a form to express their frustrations in writing
- Take a ten-minute break if needed to break the cycle of incivility

Q6. Is the propensity for “gotcha” moments destroying civil discourse and efforts to work for public policy solutions?

- Focus on the strengths of a government body - on what is working well. Then move on to opportunities for improvement
- Reframe “gotcha” moments – see them as a moment to listen, learn, and clarify
- Civil discourse is not a win-lose situation, it’s a process of working toward shared meaning, common ground, and/or new insight
- Embarrassing others will not advance ideas, opinions, or agendas
- Own and admit when you’re wrong – this creates both trust and respect
- Compliment others who may in fact be correct – valuing and acknowledging others is the right thing to do

Q7. How do we avoid #6?

- Do not make assumptions about the motivation of the speaker
- Avoid profiling or judging speakers based on political affiliation or other personal affiliations that are not relevant
- Refer back to Robert’s Rules, Brown Act requirements, and facts, not judgments
- Ask pertinent questions, request clarification if subject is related to an item on the consent agenda
- Show respect if there is a violation- educate, do not judge
- No embarrassing remarks
- Help violator save face

Q8. Do you think the people of the United States are concerned about the absence of civility in local, state and national government?

- It’s an epidemic now!!!
- In a January 2017 poll, Weber Shandwick found 97% of Americans expect civil behavior from political leaders

Q9. What are the minimum communication requirements necessary for civil discourse to thrive among elected officials, staff, and the public for social policy issues to be discussed?

- Own personal responsibility to demonstrate civility
- Be open to learn from others
- Seek shared meaning
- Inquire and discover
- Demonstrate engaging behavior (verbal & non-verbal)
- Speak clearly and respectfully, be aware of your tone of voice
- Use language that others can understand
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Keep it short
- Give space to others
- Gather differing perspectives
- Become self-aware of your impact on others

Q10. What are the most common communication barriers that obstruct or prevent civil discourse?

- Focusing exclusively on personal agendas
- Inability to be open to new ideas or points of view
- Lack of engagement and eye contact
- Hostile intent, words, and body language
- Inability to listen with an intent to understand
- Inability to empathize with others
- Inability to forgive, forget, and move on
- Inability to give others permission to change

Q11. How do we encourage self-reflection and accountability in a positive way so both “civility” and “civil discourse” are valued and practiced by elected or appointed officials, staff and the public?

- Create and adopt a set of agreed upon norms, ethics, and/or related guidelines that promote civility and civil discourse and provide built-in accountability
- Bring civility and civil discourse to life with real life stories and examples
- Bring attention to what is working well with people and the organization
- Remember and talk about the success stories
- Allow for mess ups - learn from them – move on
- Praise demonstrated civility and civil discourse
- Make the process of practicing civility and civil discourse fun – keep your sense of humor
- Provide ongoing civic education, training workshops, and world cafes to educate and reinforce how to practice civil discourse

Q12. How do we encourage self-reflection and accountability in a positive way so both “civility” and “civil discourse” are valued by individuals?

- Don't assume they know what civility and civil discourse looks like
- Provide success stories
- Take time in meetings to reflect on not just what you did, but also how well you did
- Demonstrate civility and civil discourse
- Give folks permission to change
- Learn from mistakes
- Give feedback
- Reinforce civil discourse best practices