Opinion **Business School Insider**

Three rules for constructive debate

How to resolve conflict in a social media age when everything is being questioned

Labour MP Liz Kendall and former leader of the Scottish National Party Alex Salmond debate well in a public forum © Getty

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We have more information available to us than ever before. In theory this means everyone's voice can be heard. But it also creates a flood of perspectives and an era of increasing polarisation, where traditional sources of information such as news and expertise are labelled as

fake. Trust in institutions such as Nato, the UN and the EU are being challenged in ways that were unthinkable 20 years ago.

So how do we move forward when everything is questioned? There are two possible paths: one is unwinding the current system through violence, the other is dialogue and conflict resolution. Almost everyone would agree that talking is better than war. But we seem to have lost the ability to disagree constructively and work together despite our differences.

I have studied conflict and conflict resolution for more than 30 years and have never been more concerned about the state of the world. Politicians, citizens, and even the media seem to have regressed to name calling rather than engaging with ideas.

Political debate is moving to social media where there are few formal rules. Twitter and Facebook have become the new global institutions where ideas are debated, and they, too, are struggling with what the rules of acceptable debate ought to be.

Yet there is a long tradition of philosophical debate and scholarly research on the principles of effective disagreement. Here are my three rules for constructive debate:

1. Ensure psychological safety Name-calling and bullying sends ideas underground. Research shows that psychological safety builds trust and improves effectiveness in debate and decision-making. Everyone should be able to contribute without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career. This is not the same as not being challenged or being a " snowflake " — all ideas ought to be challenged. But attacks on a person's character, intelligence and livelihood should be off the table.

2. Majority rule and minority rights What is right for the many ought to prevail, but not at the expense of rights for the minority. I have found consistently in my research that majority rule voting fails when the will of the majority is to silence the minority, to "win" and ensure that the "other side" loses. Indeed James Madison, the fourth US president, explained very well in the Federalist Papers in 1787 that when there are those who have nothing to gain by following the rules, they also have nothing to lose in attacking the majority.

3. Do not get addicted to moral outrage When people feel something is unfair, they understandably get emotional. The problem is that it is easy to get addicted to moral outrage. For example, "flaming" others on social media feels good, especially when we are protected from their anger by being on the other side of a computer. But it also makes it less likely we will hear their point of view, or that they will really hear ours.

Effective disagreement is best done in person, and in the cold light of day rather than in the heat of battle. When disagreement spirals out of control and name-calling starts, catch yourself and ensure you stick to these simple rules.

It is difficult to maintain a positive outlook when others call you names, but to quote Nelson Mandela, former South African president: "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."

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