

NEVILLE'S GUIDE TO TOUGH CONVERSATIONS



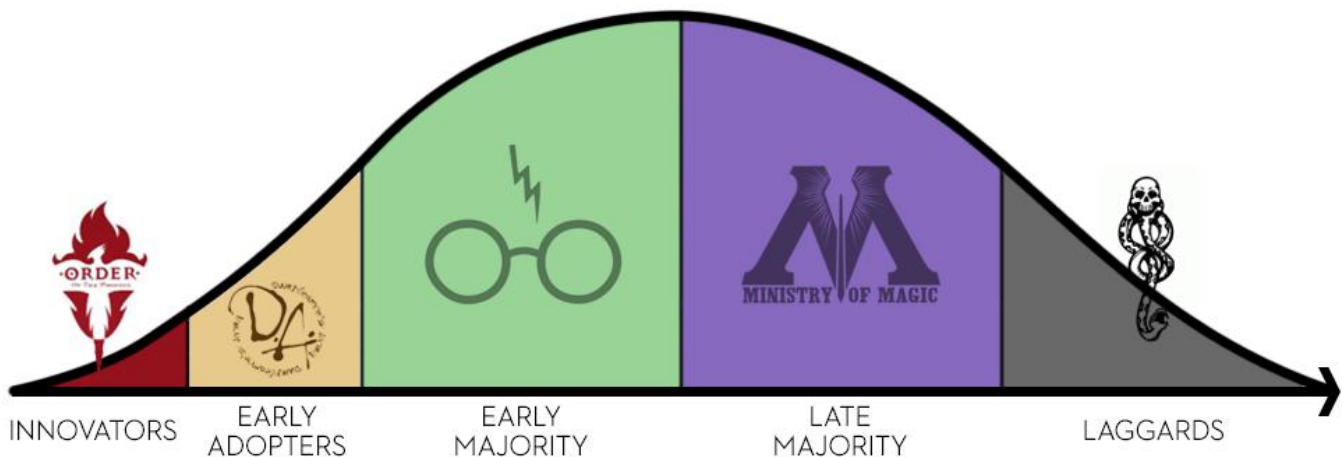
I suppose I should have thought about the fact that Hogwarts Professors get asked to write these kinds of things when I took the job, but this still feels quite odd. For so long I wasn't really the brightest wizard out there, or at least I didn't think I was, but now...well, now I suppose technically speaking I'm a war hero. That's not really how I prefer to be referred to. Professor of Herbology will do. But I am proud of Dumbledore's Army and what we accomplished together, and I suppose I'm quite proud of myself. That's why, seeing the things happening now, I wanted to talk to other wizards and witches and wixen and even Muggles who might feel like I used to, who might be afraid to speak up and take a stand. It's nothing to scoff at, that I know for sure, but it's also a powerful thing. An important thing. I know you can do it, too, and I want to give you some advice that I hope will help.

If you have questions about magical plants, well, drop by my office anytime - right now, let's talk about getting those tough conversations done.

USING YOUR POWER WISELY

THE ADOPTION CURVE

Big changes - to culture, to ideology, to systems - don't happen immediately, they take a lot of time! The rate at which society tends to adopt changes forms a regular distribution (that's math for the graph below - don't ask me about it, Hermione said it would make sense to you lot), and it's called the **Adoption Curve**.



As you can see here, the left hand side shows the **Innovators** (2.5%) - those are the people who are quickest to adopt a new change; in social justice work, those are probably the people leading the movements long before they're socially acceptable on a broad scale, like the folks who joined the Order of the Phoenix back in the day. Next we have the **Early Adopters** (13.5%), the group that will follow the Innovators fairly quickly and lend power to the movement - like Dumbledore's Army! After that comes the **Early Majority** (34%), or what we may think about as the average progressive person - they may not have been at the forefront of the movement, but after some education they will adopt the change readily (my mate Seamus Finnigan comes to mind here).

But on the right side of the curve we begin with the **Late Majority** (34%). You may think about this as people who struggle to adopt a movement even after it has begun to be accepted by half or more than half of the population. They take much more time and energy to get on board, but they may eventually understand or at least accept the movement - take Percy Weasley, for example, who was a bit of a prat for a long time but eventually helped us win the Battle of Hogwarts. Finally, we have the **Laggards** (16%); this group of people are the very last to adopt a change, if they adopt it at all. You may think of them as the folks who seem to be attached to outdated ideas even in the face of overwhelming adoption by the rest of society - yeah, we're talking Death Eaters here.

Now, think about the people you see most often representing different sides of issues - does it seem likely that these people are Innovators, Early Adopters, and Laggards? I'm gonna guess that's probably true. When we think about discussions in terms of extremes or polar ends of the spectrum, you can see that we're actually leaving out a lot of the people who are part of that conversation (Hermione says it's 68%, to be precise).

But because those voices are so loud, we get drawn into a nasty trap: we tend to want to tackle the folks on the most extreme end of the spectrum. It's understandable, believe me, but it's not usually very productive. Think about it like this: would Harry or Dumbledore have gotten very far if they spent all their time trying to convince Death Eaters to come to our side? Probably not. Instead, they focused on convincing people who were in the middle or people they knew (like our classmates) to join them. There's a good reason why that approach was the smarter one.

CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

Imagine you're standing in the center of all the people who make up your social life. The people closest to you personally - your family or friends - are also nearest to you in the circles, while your school or workplace is a little further out, and your broader community still further. If you were trying to cast a spell, which people would it be easiest for you to reach?

The answer is likely the people closest to you (and I didn't need Dumbledore's Army tutoring to figure that out, honestly). Thinking about your network this way is called Circles of Influence, and it helps you to think



about who you can have the most immediate impact on. When you need to have a tough conversation with someone, are you more likely to be able to make immediate progress with someone who is closest to you, or someone who is furthest away?

Not sure who to start with? Draw the circles above, and fill in at least 7 - 10 names of people you know in each circle. We're going to figure out who is your Order of the Phoenix, your Ickle Firsties, your Percys, and your Umbridges.

- **Order of the Phoenix:** these are the people you know who are already active in fighting for social justice. Maybe they are someone you're always learning from, going to protests with, or seeing speak out in public. These folks are in the movement with you, and could be good sources of advice or someone to invite to an action (if they aren't already leading it themselves). Draw a lightning bolt next to their names.
- **Ickle Firsties:** there are the people in your life who aren't actively fighting for social justice... but maybe they could be. After all, I didn't start out as a heroic horcrux-slayer. How do you recognize an Ickle Firstie? They are your classmates who volunteer for charities, but have never called their lawmakers. They're your co-workers who generally believe all genders should be paid the same, but don't want to rock the boat by bringing it up. They're your family members who *totally believe racism is bad*, but who don't speak up when your uncle tells race-related jokes. Ickle Firsties still have a lot of learning to do, but think about the magic they could do if they learned more about how to be a real activist and ally! Draw a heart around their names.
- **Percys:** Percys love the status quo, and they don't want to see anything change. They probably don't like protesters or organizers. They aren't interested in the issues you care about, and may actually be working against them. It takes a lot of work and time to change a Percy's mind, and they may get angry with you at times - but they might also surprise you in the end. Draw a circle around their names.
- **Umbridges:** I don't have to tell you - Umbridges are bad news. They are actively against the causes you care about, and changing their minds may use more time and energy than you have to give. You should always speak out when an Umbridge is spreading racist, sexist, classist, or other oppressive ideas - but you probably won't change their mind. Draw a square around their names.

Now, take a look at the people with hearts and circles around their names. These are your future heroes. Start sharing articles, recommending events, and talking with them about the issues you care about using the communication strategies outlined below. When you need to recharge, look for your lightning bolts. Your fellow Order members will cheer you on, help you learn, and remind you that you're not in this alone.

All of this is not to say that you *can't* have an impact on your broader community - a trained wizard can cast a spell pretty far! - but you may want to have other people at your side to help amplify the effect of your work. Plus, you shouldn't underestimate the impact that your conversation with one person can have on a broader scale - after all, for every person you talk to, they have their very own circles of influence that you've now made a difference in.

Think wisely about how you want to use your energy - with only so much to give, are you better served speaking to people who are unlikely to ever adopt a movement, or people who may just need some more education? People who you have some relationship with, or a troll who's unlikely to really care what you say (or even *understand* it, frankly - you know how trolls are).

But we don't always get to choose who we engage in conversations with, and even when we do those discussions can still be difficult, so let's talk about some ways to think about communication that could help.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

You may not think about communication as a process very often, but it is! Just like anything else, there are steps to communication, even if they may be less obvious than making a sandwich.

To put it very simply, communication looks something like this:



In this chart, what part of the process do you have control over? Well, that black line represents where you end and another human being begins, and as pretty much every textbook ever tells us, it's a bad idea to try to mess with the inner workings of other human beings. That means you have control over two things: the message, and the delivery.

Your **message** is the thing you are trying to convey to the other person, and your **delivery** is how you choose to try to communicate that message. Are you going to use text? Give them one of those Muggle phone calls? Meet face to face? Are you going to be calm or angry? Are you going to be kind or degrading? These are the things that you, as the communicator, have to decide.

No matter how you approach it, you do not have control over the **decoding**, or how the other person interprets your message. Many times this can be a source of great frustration in challenging conversations - WHY can't the other person just get what you're trying to say?! But letting go of that (as much as you can) is a good way to help reduce your frustration. If you feel that you have honestly tried every way of delivering your message that is within your power to do, then **you cannot force the other person to understand your message.**

This means that your real power is in your delivery, and this is where you need to make the biggest choices. When you're about to engage in dialogue with someone, ask yourself the following:

- ★ **Is this the best place to have this conversation?** For example, is this a message that would be better received privately, where the person may be less likely to feel attacked? Is this a message that may be challenging to deliver via text, and would be better communicated over a phone call or in person if possible? Are you trying to balance other responsibilities, like running a booth or an

event? If so, you may want to ask the person politely to agree upon another time to have the conversation so that you can devote your full attention to the situation.

- ★ **Am I in the best emotional state to have this conversation?** If you are dealing with heightened emotions, whether anger, frustration, or hurt, you are far less likely to be able to deliver your message in the most effective way. Take a moment (or a day, or a week) to collect yourself and check your emotional well being before you decide to engage.
- ★ **Is this conversation the best use of my energy?** If you feel that this person is likely not far along the adoption curve, or if they are someone who is far outside your circle of influence, are you likely to make progress with them? If that seems unlikely, you may be better served by saving your energy for a conversation with someone who is more likely to be impacted by your conversation.
- ★ **Are you willing to put your full energy into decoding?** We've talked a lot about being a good messenger, but it is equally as important for you to be a good listener. In order to have a productive conversation, you must be willing to listen openly, think deeply, and put your full energy into decoding the messages you are receiving. When both parties can agree to putting their full attention and energy into a conversation, that is when true, productive dialogue can occur.

CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE

One of the most challenging things to do when addressing emotional or high-stakes issues is to separate behaviors from people. An individual person may be doing their best to do good, but still make mistakes. It's important to focus our attention on addressing behaviors rather than focusing on someone's entire personhood.

When crafting your messages, think about centering behaviors in your statements:

- Not, "You are sexist," but "That action/statement perpetuated sexism. Here's why I believe that. Here's what I might suggest instead."
- Not, "I can't believe you're so privileged," but "I don't think that you are considering the role privilege plays in this conversation. Let me explain why."
- Not, "You're being super ableist," but "That action/statement was ableist - let me explain why and how you could make a change."

In these situations, it's totally possible that the person IS privileged or IS being ableist, but don't forget that human beings are naturally predisposed to being defensive (including you!). If your goal is truly to help that person understand and move them further along the adoption curve, then you want to deliver your message in a way that they are most likely to decode it as you intend. Plus, communicating in this way centers **empathy** for the other person as well - if you believe that they are another human being capable of making mistakes but also capable of improvement, your goal should be to educate, rather than shame. Leading with empathy is a powerful way to help other people feel invited into your movement.

KNOWING WHEN TO STOP

DE-ESCALATING CONVERSATIONS

All that sounds well and good, but we all know that no matter how we frame a conversation, even if we do everything we can to approach it clearly and empathetically, we can't control that other person. If someone you're engaging with is escalating a conversation - that is, bringing the negative energy up - here are some things you can do to try to bring it back down:

- ★ **Make Your Boundaries Clear.** If they appear angry or are otherwise making you uncomfortable, let them know clearly that you are here to engage in a conversation, not to be attacked personally, and that you will end the conversation if that boundary is not respected.
- ★ **Demand Equal Expectations.** Often, it can be scary to engage in conversations about subjects you're not an expert in - but here's a hint: they probably aren't either. If you don't know the answer to something, it's okay to say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I'm happy to do some research and get back to you." But that means they should also be held to the same standard - ask them to agree to follow up with sources for statements they are unable to back up. If they are not willing, then it may be time to leave the conversation.

SAFETY FIRST

The most important thing is to prioritize your personal well-being. If you feel physically unsafe or if a conversation is emotionally draining for you, it's probably not a good use of your energy. For example, if you live with a family member that disagrees with your viewpoint and having dialogue with them would negatively impact your home environment, it is **okay not to engage with them**. Similarly, if you are in a position online where you are being targeted by trolls or even just passionate laggards, **it is okay not to follow up on every conversation**. It is not your responsibility to respond to everything you see on the internet.

CHECK YOURSELF: ARE YOU CALLING OUT OR DRAGGING?

Hermione tells me that the internet is a powerful Muggle tool for building movements and equalizing conversation, allowing you to engage in dialogue with people from all over the globe and send messages directly to (or about) people from all walks of life and levels of societal influence. This is a special kind of magic, but you know what they say: with great power comes great responsibility.

When you notice someone participating in behavior that is problematic and you decide to address it publicly, how do you feel? Are you addressing it because you genuinely want to note the behavior and help the individual (and others who may be influenced by the individual) understand why it was problematic? Or are you getting some level of enjoyment out of publicly criticizing that person?

Muggle activist Dylan Marron described this as the difference between **calling out** and **dragging**. Calling out is the act of publicly addressing something that an individual (or perhaps a media production, like a show or book) did so that the individual and the individual's audience are made aware of the problem with that action. Calling out is not about your personal satisfaction or getting back at a person, but about working for a movement.

Unfortunately, calling out can frequently turn into something less wholesome: dragging. Dragging is calling out turned nasty, a kind of public shaming. This is often characterized by **dehumanizing** the person in question, and may also feature “pile-ons” - groups of people all criticizing the person at the same time. Rather than focusing on behaviors, dragging tends to use ridicule as a tool. Dragging, when we’re honest with ourselves, is not about the other person, but about the feeling we get from participating in it. Dragging is also not generally helpful for positive change - rather than helping the person make positive changes, it often lends itself to the person simply feeling attacked and defensive, and therefore much less likely to listen to what you and your movement has to say.

If you are going to participate in a dialogue publicly, check yourself: is this a call out, or are you dragging? If you’re dragging, you’re likely doing more damage to your cause than good.

INVITING PEOPLE IN

Here’s the big thing I want to tell you: when you see people who are not on board with your movement, who just don’t seem to get what you’re fighting for, it can be extremely frustrating. It’s easy to write them off or block them out. But if we’re talking about building movements, we should consider what it means to invite people *in*. When you decide to start a challenging conversation with someone, begin from a place of wanting to bring them into your movement, rather than a place of just wanting to prove you’re right. By giving people the opportunity to learn and grow, we give ourselves that many more opportunities for allies in our fight for a better world - Harry and Ron and Hermione, it took them a bit to let me in, and once they did? Well, we were all the more powerful for it.

Remember: the weapon we have is love.

Neville Longbottom

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