

# HOW TO HOLD DISCUSSIONS?

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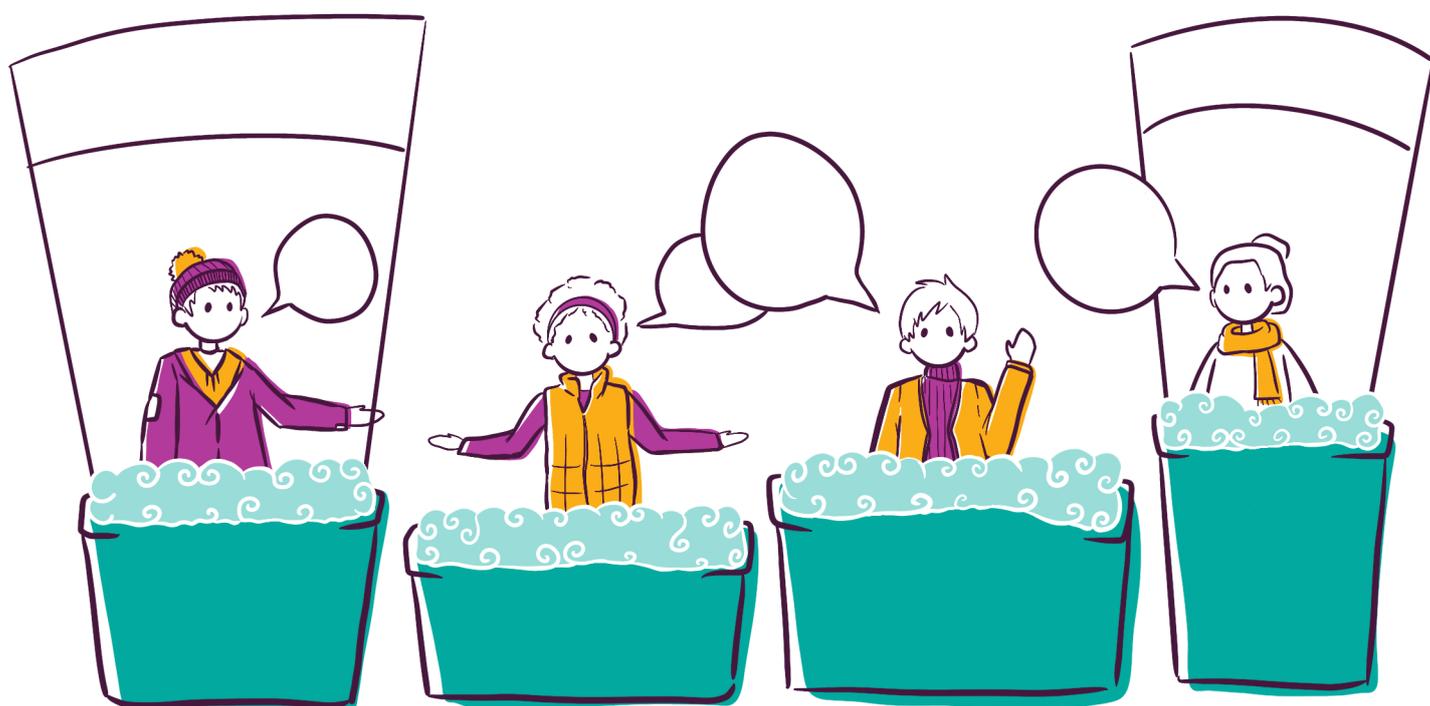
*An introduction addressing the fact that debate, discussion and the exchange of opinions are the foundations of a well-functioning democratic system.*

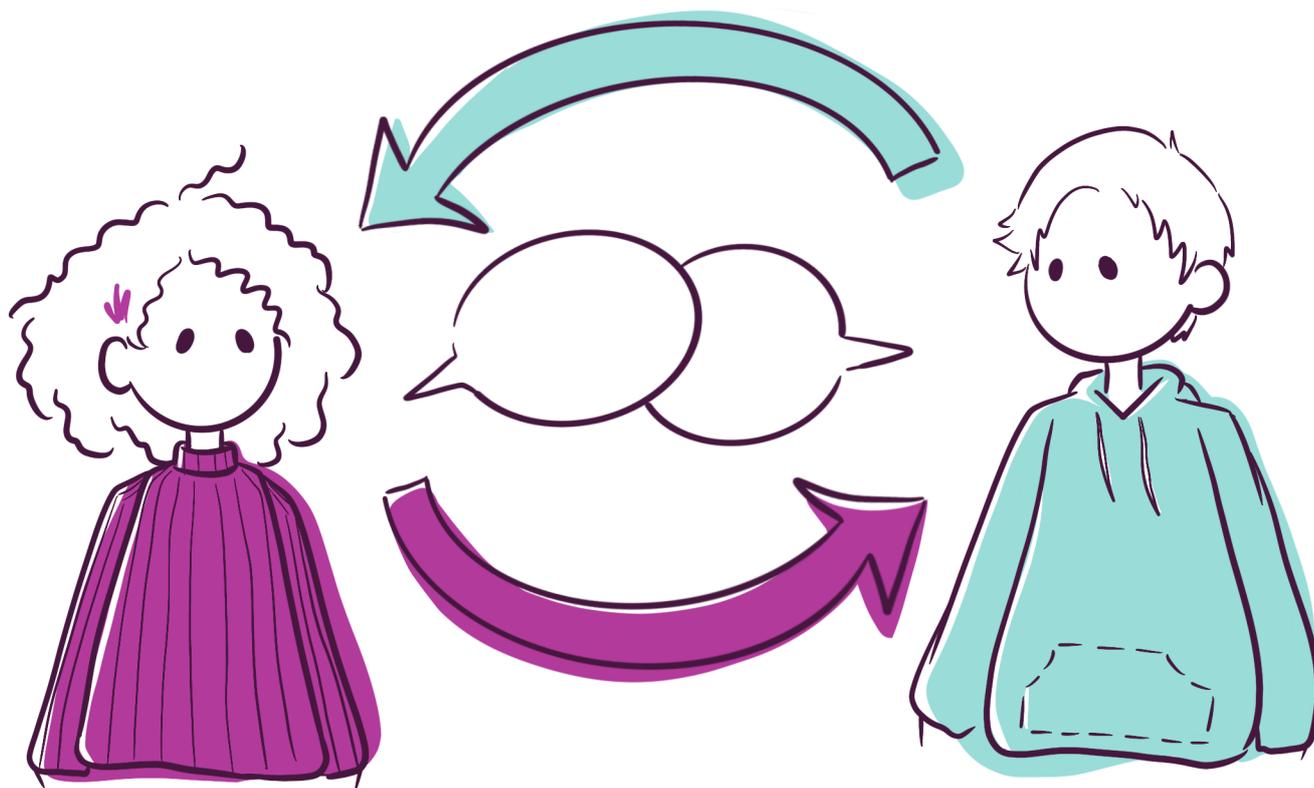
## Why is it important to hold discussions?



**Human development largely depends on being able to understand the surrounding reality and possessing social and emotional skills** that make it possible to overcome the so-called developmental crises (Erik Erikson distinguished 8 such crises in human life), conquer one's own limitations (Józef Koziellecki referred to such act as "transgression") or, in general – solve conflicts that we encounter throughout our lives. Each day, we are exposed to a dynamic environment which influences us, and we have a chance to have an impact on it in return. How does it work? First of all, we achieve it through broadening and enriching the way we think and developing our social abilities, especially in the field of communication, here understood as the exchange of ideas. To this end, we often engage in a discussion or, as sociologists would say, "negotiation" of reality. During a discussion, we have the opportunity to articulate our beliefs, by formulating them into arguments, and exchange them with others.

**Discussion can be regarded as a “marketplace” of thoughts, which we convey in the process of communication.** Such an exchange of opinions also provides us with the chance to get to know the thoughts of other people, who sometimes can surprise us! How is it possible? Because despite the many traits we share as the human species, every person is different. It results from the psycho-physical structure, which is unique for every individual, our accumulated experiences and the socio-cultural context in which we grow up and live and which shapes our perception of reality. An example here may be the use of vocabulary distinguishing several varieties of snow by the population inhabiting the Arctic Circle, who thus recognise differences in snow’s consistency and appearance. At the same time, such characteristics will not be noticed by an average Pole. This shows that our way of thinking is conditioned by a set of factors, which are arranged slightly differently in each individual case. Hence, we differ in terms of how we think and, which brings us closer to the subject matter of this chapter, formulate arguments in discussions to share our personal views of reality. Consequently, **engaging in a dialogue allows us to become acquainted with new perspectives, which broaden our horizons. However, there is one condition – we must be willing to understand and accept another point of view,** which is not that simple. Why? First of all, because it has been proven long ago that people tend to prefer what is their own and attach themselves to it. Any novelty that requires us to be open and learn something new forces us to exert additional energy, which our economically functioning brain is not willing to do. As Professor Edward Necka would say, the human brain works on the basis of absolute priority – it draws 20-25% of energy from our body and is reluctant to share it with any other internal organs. Learning new things and opening up to an argument that is unknown to us consumes energy. Therefore, it can be said that accepting other people’s thoughts and perspectives, which is the basis of an effective discussion, requires a considerable amount of effort.





So why is it advisable to hold discussions? **Discussion and the arguments that we encounter in the process provide us with an extraordinary opportunity to enrich ourselves with new knowledge.** Therefore, making the effort and incurring the costs of energy investment can pay off. What is more, history and, probably also our own experiences, show that by talking, exchanging arguments and negotiating, we can protect ourselves from various dangers, which could lead to the loss of health or even life. From this perspective, the ability to hold discussions can be considered a human developmental and civilisational achievement in terms of maintaining social networks, or even entire cultures, and participating in exchanges on a global scale. Undoubtedly, holding a dialogue<sup>1</sup> can be particularly difficult in some situations, especially when emotions are involved. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an example of failed attempts at mutual understanding. What is important, however, is that not all disputes in which different parties present their perspectives are solvable – for instance, disagreements based on values (Pruit, Carnevale 1982; Deutsch 1994). It is helpful to remember this fact, as sometimes in a discussion we reach a so-called wall – the more we try to raise awareness, the greater resistance we encounter. It usually means that we have to accept the presented opposite point of view, which is non-negotiable and cannot be changed. This is certainly a difficult moment in a debate. We would probably prefer that it did not occur and that the free exchange of ideas proceeded smoothly (the arguments of one side were accepted by the other side), but it definitely proves that we are all different. However, it does not necessarily mean that we are hostile towards each other.

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this guide, the terms discussion, debate and dialogue will be used interchangeably, as a generalised form of communication involving at least two people.

The challenges related to holding a discussion will be explored in [chapter 3 \(What makes discussing difficult issues so challenging?\)](#). However, before addressing this question, [chapter 2](#) will focus on the most common subject of discussions, namely dilemmas and contentious issues related to the socio-political field. During the analysis of various topics that are considered controversial, we will try to understand why they are perceived as such. [Chapter 4 \(Why is it good to keep emotions in check?\)](#) is aimed at demonstrating that our affective states – the feelings we experience – often influence the way we think. When a discussion becomes very heated, strong emotions tend to cloud our reasoning and it can be difficult to make rational judgements. It is useful to be familiar with various methods and techniques that enable us to push our emotions aside or at least make us aware of their temperature.

In [the chapter entitled Verbal and non-verbal communication – how to effectively exchange information?](#), various channels of communication will be examined, especially in terms of the so-called body language, here seen as the dominant method of interacting with other people. We are not always aware of the fact that most communication (according to Albert Mehrabian, in the case of ambivalent and contradictory messages, it is nearly 90%) is conveyed through body language, i.e. voice intonation, body posture or the rate of speech.

The next chapter ([What is the art of listening?](#)) addresses the other side of communication, namely the reception of messages. In the heat of a debate, we often stop listening to our interlocutors, e.g. when preparing what we are going to say next, even though, according to research, it is mainly listening that makes dialogue possible. Finally, in the concluding chapter ([How to effectively conduct a discussion?](#)), we will put ourselves in the role of a leader, which will enable us to learn how to arrange the interior in the best possible way, how to prepare ourselves substantively and what techniques to use to ensure a smooth discussion.

I hope that all the abovementioned information and your reflections, based on your personal experience of holding discussions in various situations, e.g. at school, will help you broaden your knowledge and skills, which are best formed and applied in everyday practice. Therefore, I would like to wish you fruitful reading, successful development in the difficult direction of carrying out effective discussions and, above all, the pleasure of encountering a point of view other than your own, which is always enriching!



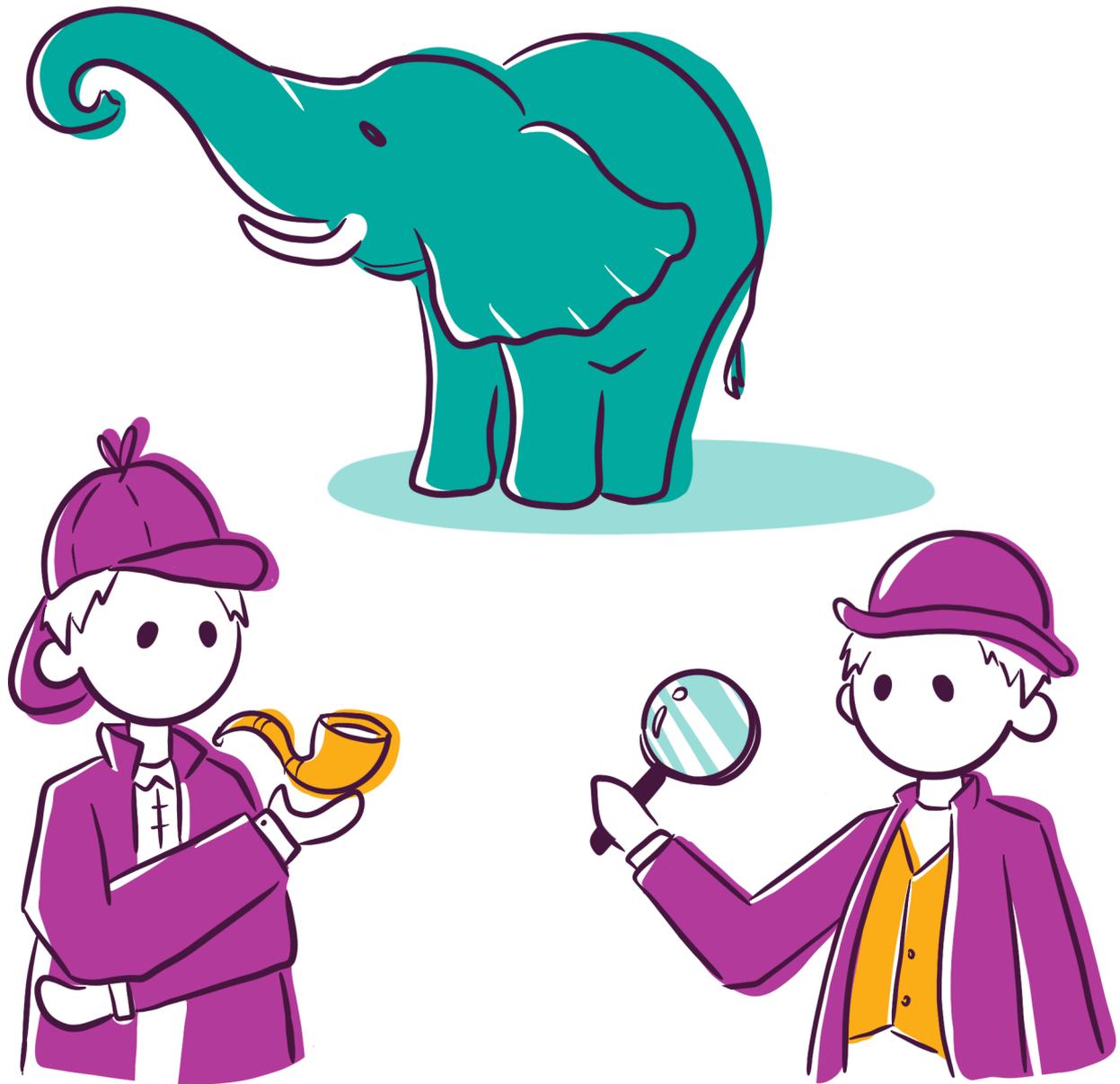
An explanation of what are contentious issues and dilemmas. An indication of their developmental values – new perspectives emerge, leading to more satisfactory solutions.

## What are contentious issues and socio-political dilemmas?

**Contentious issues are those involving differing points of view. They are usually connected to distinct interests, sometimes conflicting with each other.**

Generally, the notion can be understood as a situation of conflict between two standpoints – the disagreement can vary in nature and subject matter: data, profits, unequal access to resources, relationships or values (Moore 2009). Such a conflict usually results from a lack of ability to coordinate different perspectives. What does this mean? A parable about an elephant explains it best:

*In a certain small village, the local people were informed that a huge animal was prowling nearby, wreaking havoc on the local wildlife. The creature could probably soon threaten the lives of the villagers as well. The three most courageous men decided to sneak into the animal's lair at night to take a closer look. However, when they arrived at the spot, it was already dark. Each of them blindly touched a different part of the creature – an elephant. When they returned to the village, they all gave a completely distinct account. The boldest and most courageous man, who touched the elephant's leg, said that the animal was rough, roll-shaped and tall. The second villager, who had been identifying the animal by its trunk, immediately contradicted the other man, saying that the creature was long rather than tall, and soft and flexible like a snake. The last man, who had touched the elephant's ear, exclaimed with even greater enthusiasm that this was not true, as the animal resembled a velvety, huge butterfly, which created breeze with every movement. Who among them was right? The local people were very confused...*



Based on this parable, we can conclude that having all the information and being able to fully understand the different elements of a given phenomenon allows us to perceive it in its entirety, which eliminates the grounds for a conflict. In general, the more understanding there is, the less reason for disagreement and the greater the chance of reaching consensus or cooperation between the parties. **However, there are some types of disputes that are impossible to resolve. This is often the case when there is a conflict of values. Why? Because they are very strongly rooted in our identity – one could even say that they are an inherent part of us.** Hence, rejecting one's own values leads to the fear of contradicting oneself, one's family and culture of origin. It may even result in a feeling of betraying oneself. However, it is important to remember that the more we see and the greater perspective from which we observe a phenomenon, the greater the chance that we will see the whole. Only then can the conflict be resolved – the condition is to see the "whole elephant".

*An overview of various difficulties encountered by people when exchanging views with opponents – resistance, reluctance to open oneself to unfamiliar argumentation, unwillingness to change an attitude, cognitive effort, emotional involvement, the use of complex arguments. Complex thinking. Decentration and adoption of other people's perspectives.*

## What makes discussing difficult issues so challenging?

Sometimes we hear that “thinking hurts”. What does this mean and is there any truth to it? Research in the field of neuropsychology has revealed that the involvement of higher (more complex) brain structures in the thinking process, i.e. their activation, is associated with a greater loss of energy. Therefore, it can be concluded that our daily portion of energy, intended to serve our entire organism, can be exhausted in a situation of cognitive effort, an example of which is complex thinking (critical, analytical, logical, and multi-level). How does the brain react to this? Usually not very well, since – as mentioned before – the brain's priority is survival, not an excessive expenditure of energy. Hence, in the event of such an additional effort, our brain quickly begins to give us signs in the form of fatigue, a sense of exhaustion or a general aversion, thus suggesting that intensive mental work is not in its interest. Therefore, it can be argued that the signals from our brain rebelling against the consumption of additional energy through the process of thinking can take a form that is indirectly associated with some kind of pain.



Research conducted by American psychologist Roy Baumeister has shown that people whose brain had previously been engaged in solving puzzles, later performed worse at finding answers to mathematical problems than individuals who had not experienced such an overuse of their mental resources. Furthermore, the same researcher proved that the use of our energy resources results in a decrease in the presence of simple sugars in the blood, which leads to a conclusion that if the body is provided with additional glucose before a difficult mental task, the quality of the results will increase.

**What is complex thinking? It is a type of thinking aimed at enabling us to comprehend something that is multi-connected and ambiguous.** Complex and simple thinking differ in their construction. Please read the following three different accounts of the same event:

- When Janek entered the classroom at 16:45, no one was present. The chairs were placed in different positions and the table was moved against the wall.
- As Janek arrived at the debate early, i.e. at 16:45, no one was present in the classroom when he entered it. The table and chairs were in disarray since the organisers had not yet arrived.
- Janek, as one of the three organisers of the debate that was to take place at 17:00, was surprised when he entered the classroom fifteen minutes early and saw that the chairs and table were in the wrong positions – he thought that there was not enough time to prepare everything by himself and the debate might not start on time.



Each of the above statements refers to the same situation, but perceptions and messages about it differ. In what way? The experience is perceived dissimilarly and, therefore, in each case uniquely presented in the form of a verbal description. One could observe that all these accounts describe the same thing, but differently. The first one refers exclusively to the experience of what is witnessed “here and now”. This descriptive way of reporting events can be considered simplistic, as it is not accompanied by any wider reflection on the causes of a given situation, context, time or intentions of the people appearing in the statement. The second description does, in fact, address a certain cause-and-effect relationship – the reasons for said circumstances have been indicated, which allows us to find a meaning in what we see. Thus, the second account has additional dimensions, through which we are able to come to a greater understanding of what is actually happening. Therefore, one could say that the first statement seems shallow and one-dimensional in comparison with the second one.

The last of the abovementioned accounts (point C) is the most comprehensive. We can learn from it not only about the broader context of what happened “before” and “now”, but also what is expected in the near future (the delay of the debate). Moreover, we gain access to the inner world of the reporting entity. It can be said that the third utterance is multidimensional and profound. [Figure 1](#) below illustrates these different ways of expression, reflecting the way people think about a given situation and understand it:

**Figure 1. Schematic representation of various styles of expression**

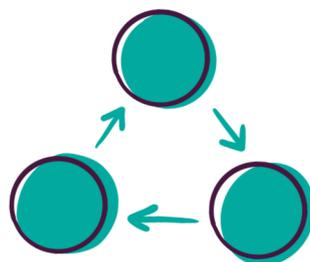
a) a simplified style of expression, limited to the “here and now”



b) a style of expression based on the cause-and-effect relationship



c) multidimensional, systematic style of expression



How does this relate to participation in a debate? In many ways.

**Firstly**, the above patterns make us aware that people differ in their way of thinking, which can be recognised by their style of expression.

**Secondly**, the utterances and, therefore, one's thoughts on various issues, vary significantly, which sometimes results in difficulties in communication.

**Finally**, it is necessary to remember that the more complex and unfamiliar a problem is, the more we tend to have a simplified view (the example of utterances A and B) and understanding of a given phenomenon. For instance, we do not usually think about how to solve the dilemma related to the tendency to simultaneously reduce taxes and increase the scope of social services financed by them. In short, it is an example of a "having a cake and eating it too" dilemma.

In summary, it can be said that the way in which we reason and, therefore, express our opinions on various topics is of great importance for our ability to formulate thoughts in a debate. Our voice can have a simplistic character (equivalent to "playing solo") or a polyphonic nature, i.e. the voices blend, interpermeate and, at the same time, amplify each other, which results in a harmonious melody. What factors determine that? Above all, our ability (or lack thereof) to advance beyond our own point of view in regard to the way we reason and perceive things. However, before elaborating on this thought, I suggest performing [exercise 1](#).

## Exercise 1

Based on the different styles of expression presented earlier (A, B, C), try to use the same pattern of thinking (A – simplified, B – based on the cause-and-effect relationship, C – multidimensional) to describe the situation you see in the picture<sup>2</sup> below. This statement should be made in the third person (as the narrator). I suggest that you divide yourselves into three groups. Assign each of them one of the styles of expression and then share the picture with only one of the teams (group A – simplified style), without showing it to the other two groups. After reviewing the photo, group A will be asked to describe what they see in the form of an account corresponding to the simplified style – i.e. they can only say what they actually look at, without indicating meaning, context or the course of events. An example of the description could be: “There are some people in the photo. Some of them are sitting, others are standing, some are holding cameras in their hands. The table is large, circular (you can deliberately omit the phrase ‘round table’, thus making the situation more ambiguous). In the middle of the table, there are flowers...”. The other two teams try to guess what is happening in the picture. The account given by group A should be consistent with what is visible in the photo, but should not reveal the historical context. Regardless of whether the remaining groups guess what the picture represents based on the provided description, it is time to proceed to the next step – ask group B to explain what they see according to the cause-and-effect style. This team can start, for instance, with the following words: “In the picture, there are people – some are sitting, others are standing, because there is a crowd at the table. Besides, taking pictures requires capturing all important guests. It is likely that the recordings are intended to immortalise this significant event, as well as enable broadcasting it on television during or after the proceedings...”.



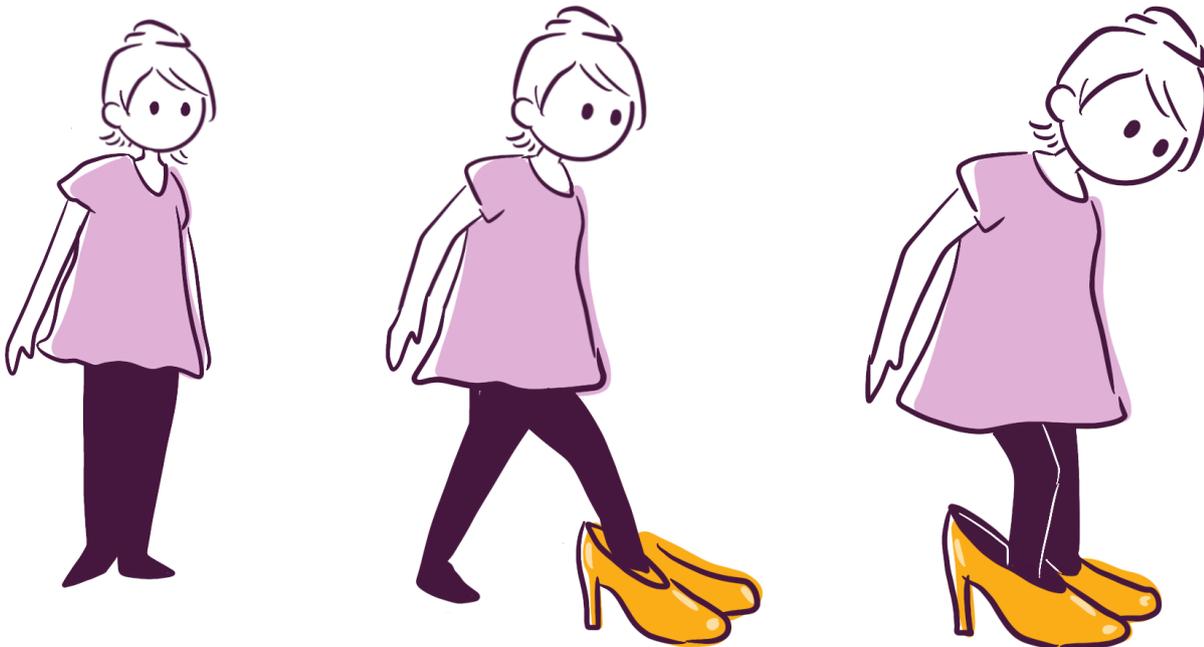
As for the message that will follow the multidimensional style of expression (style C), it would be sufficient to say “the events of the Round Table”, but it is worth making oneself and others aware that this brief statement contains numerous meanings, referring to the historical period, context, important figures and atmosphere as well as the influence of that event on the current socio-political situation in Poland. Therefore, group C should try to expand its “voice” in the form of a polyphony that contains all these elements of expression.

<sup>2</sup> The picture is available on the following website, from where it can be easily printed: <https://nowahistoria.interia.pl/historia-na-fotografii/obrazy-okraglego-stolu-zdjecie.ild.1285371.iAId.98522>.

This exercise is intended to make it clear that the voice brought into the debate may take a form that is more or less complex – the more layered (multidimensional, systematic) a statement is, the more understandable it is and the less grounds for controversy it creates. One could say that such a thoughtful voice in a discussion is invaluable, because it introduces content and points of view that may not be apparent to other participants. After all, **the purpose of a debate is to create a comprehensive picture of the situation or problem in question**, which requires certain tools for thinking and presenting one's own voice efficiently. Now, it is time to return to the issue of being able to adopt a point of view different from one's own.

What does a "different point of view" mean? Some might say: "We cannot step outside ourselves and look at a problem through someone else's eyes!". And yet, it is possible. We are among the only creatures in the world (recent research shows that dolphins, elephants and some higher primates, such as chimpanzees, display some of this ability) capable of perceiving things from the perspective of others. This is a remarkable evolutionary achievement, which allows us to predict the actions of others, to understand them, and – in terms of the socio-political world – to reflect in our thinking the complex systems that we can view from different perspectives. For example, we can consider the issue of abortion from the point of view of a woman, the health service or politics. In general, regarding various things from many angles is a skill that we use to comprehend complex situations.





The ability to “put yourself in someone else’s shoes”, i.e. to see things from a different perspective than one’s own, develops throughout life – young children, who are dominated by an egocentric point of view, are not capable of doing it. A child, knowing that he or she likes raspberry-flavoured ice cream the most, believes that this is the best dessert to give his/her mother for her birthday, as it is, after all, “the best flavour in the world”. **Such an overestimation of one’s own point of view and placing it above all others is called “cognitive centrism”** (Piaget 1966), **and is sometimes referred to as “egocentrism”**. Usually, people tend to counteract such an attitude in others. However, we often do not take into account that a rigid adherence to one’s own position, without trying to understand the other side, may result specifically from a lack of the skills described in this chapter. Furthermore, in difficult situations, remote from one’s everyday life (e.g. related to the field of politics, if a person is not a politician), people are inclined to resort to such a simplified way of thinking and to insist on their own standpoint, which can easily lead to a conflict.

Clinging to one’s own position and adopting a “playing solo” attitude in a debate can signal a lack of ability to understand any other point of view. How to overcome it? It is recommended to refrain from trying to combat such an attitude, as it can only aggravate the situation (it is not possible to teach someone in five minutes something that usually takes years, unless it is a temporary indisposition resulting, for example, from strong emotions that are experienced at the moment – this issue will be discussed in another chapter). Instead, it is advisable to create an atmosphere of understanding of the presented perspective, which, despite being limited to a single point of view, may considerably contribute to the perception of the entire picture ([the parable about the elephant!](#)). And what can be done once we have succeeded in refraining from imposing our own thesis on the person who presents a one-sided stance in the debate? Preferably, embrace the perspective of such a person and enrich it with elements of other opinions, which are brought to the discussion by remaining participants – after all, this is the main purpose of a debate!

We should not expect everyone to begin a dialogue with a complex, multi-layered understanding of a given problem, especially when addressing difficult issues. However, each participant can contribute their own point of view, which enriches the overall discussion and allows everyone to learn from each other how to consider an issue from various perspectives. It works on a basis comparable to organising a potluck dinner, where each guest brings their own unique dish they have prepared (even though some may be similar). This way, despite bringing only one dish, we have the opportunity to try all of them and thus taste more various types of food. What is necessary is a friendly attitude towards others and expressing gratitude or, at least, an interest in the dishes other guests have provided. This exact attitude is also expected of people participating in a debate.

In a certain experiment, participants were asked to adopt someone else's point of view. Financial incentives were given to the group who was supposed to be in favour of cannabis, to encourage them to side with their adversaries. As it turned out, the incentivised team ended up considering the penalisation of the use of marijuana themselves. Moreover, the less money they were offered, the more convinced they became of the option they had previously opposed.



## Exercise 2

Reflect on the issues that are usually considered controversial and evoke a lot of emotions:

- abortion,
- death penalty,
- tax increases.

Think of your own attitude towards these topics – write down on a piece of paper, in general terms for now, whether you are “for” or “against”. Next, try to view them from the perspective of your opponents – find three arguments that support the position of the opposing side and present them to your colleague.

You can perform this exercise in class by dividing into two groups – protagonists and adversaries. Then, hold a discussion between the two teams whose task is to defend their positions. Afterwards, you can suggest to reflect together on whether this issue can be seen as a dilemma involving two different values and try to develop a common solution or establish conditions under which it would be possible to choose one of the options: “for” or “against”.



Another obstacle to holding a dialogue is the notion known as cognitive biases and irregularities in our thinking, which translate into the way we speak and participate in discussions. What are these biases? I will try to present them in points:

1. **The fundamental attribution error** – it is based on underestimating the influence of the context on a given problem or situation, while at the same time overestimating the internal attribution, i.e. assigning the cause of various actions and deeds to the characteristics of a person, and not to the situation in which he or she finds themselves. In other words, we tend to judge others by their actions, which can quickly lead us to the statement: “Because he/she is a good/bad person”. People sometimes come to this conclusion even though the real world is usually much more complex, as human behaviour is influenced by many factors, which we are not able to perceive at first. During a debate, a fundamental attribution error can manifest itself in a tendency to judge people’s actions one-sidedly, which usually leads the judging party astray. Such attitude can also result in a conflict, division or entrenchment in one’s own position (stalemate). By considering the wider context (see the parable of the elephant!), it is possible to become more lenient in one’s assessment and recognise that people’s actions are not always (or, to be honest, rarely) motivated by bad intentions. How can one counteract the fundamental attribution error? Above all, it is crucial to refrain from immediately judging a given person. Instead, gather facts to identify the wider context, i.e. the various factors that influenced such individual to act in the way they did.

2. **Group conformity** – it is one of the mechanisms of social influence, which involves yielding to the pressure of the opinion held by the majority of people in a group. This phenomenon can lead to the so-called groupthink syndrome, which causes a team to care more about its own coherence than a realistic assessment of reality, including potential risks. People are social beings, which means that we like to be accepted. This often makes it difficult for us to contradict others in a group, especially if we are isolated in our opinion. How to overcome the phenomenon of group conformity? For example, by adopting a debate format which assumes that provided perspectives are not judged (write the debate rules on a board/flipchart – this issue will be discussed in greater detail in the last chapter). Furthermore, it is useful to encourage the participants of a discussion to present even the less popular opinions on a given topic in order to recreate the discourse that has been ongoing in the public space (convince some of the speakers to assume the role of the so-called “devil’s advocate”, i.e. someone who talks about issues that are uncomfortable, difficult or unpopular in a given environment). The idea is to allow very different opinions to emerge during a debate (which resembles various dishes brought to a party), as it will enable avoiding the bias that I am now going to present.

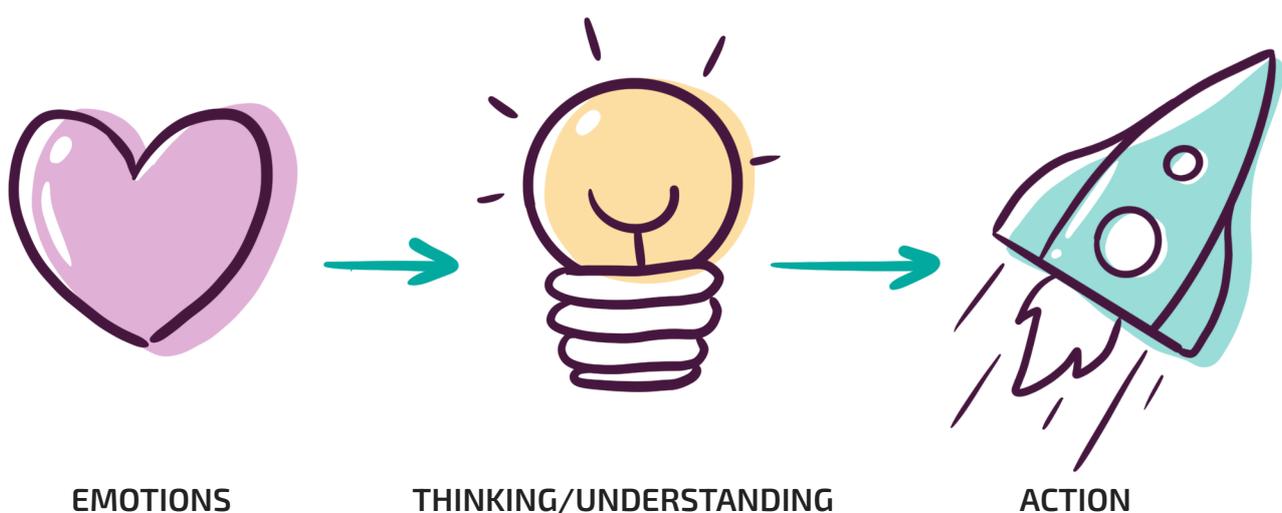
3. **The effect of polarisation of beliefs** – it is the strengthening of beliefs in a group, which promotes their radicalisation and results in team members following the “only right direction”. During a debate, this effect blocks the discussion and makes it impossible for the participants to understand arguments other than their own. How to prevent the polarisation effect? It is necessary not to allow one option to be adopted too quickly – this should happen in the final phase of the debate, when all positions and arguments have been presented. If the polarisation of beliefs occurs at the beginning of a discussion, there is no chance to address any issue in a comprehensive way.

Chapter aimed at pointing out that emotions get in the way of critical thinking and reduce its complexity.

# Why is it good to keep emotions in check?

An emotion (e-movere in Latin) is something that moves someone. The emotions generated due to the tension that appears when our needs are not satisfied allow humans to function in the world (motivation to act). In this respect, emotions serve as fuel which powers our actions – people would not be able to do anything without emotions. Contact with them is usually an important signal that something is happening in our inner, psycho-physical or outer world. However, this can only be directly communicated to us by our higher mental functions, i.e. our understanding. Hence, the best combination to ensure our proper functioning and adaptation in the world is to use both emotional signals and reason, which can interpret what is actually happening. Only then should an action be taken (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Schematic representation of the chain of reactions – from emotions to action



Sometimes, however, during a very strong emotional agitation, we find it difficult to activate the thinking process, so we proceed directly to action. We usually refer to such a situation as a **state of emotional alarm**, in which we operate under the influence of emotions. Unfortunately, this state can also take us by surprise during a debate. When does the alarm signal usually occur? For example, when other people disagree with our opinion to which we are very strongly (emotionally!) attached.

In the course of a debate, it is useful to realise to what extent we are emotional about the discussed subject. If we are emotionally distanced from it, we will act differently than when being in a state of constant activation, which is interpreted by our brain as a need to mobilise against an attack. Such readiness for a confrontation is not conducive to maintaining a rational attitude during a discussion.



## Exercise 3

Consider the following issues:

- 1) banning abortion,
- 2) introducing the death penalty,
- 3) raising taxes,
- 4) abolishing public health services,
- 5) introducing a higher age limit on pensions,
- 6) teachers striking during high school final examinations.

Now, rate how emotionally you feel about each of these matters on a scale of 1 to 7. Once you have measured the temperature of your emotions, try to find two arguments for and against each of the issues that you rated highest. Wait at least half an hour. Then, read through the prepared arguments and try to rate the above problems again, using the same scale. Would you assess the temperature of your emotions a little lower this time? If not, ask yourself why.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

banning abortion

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

introducing the death penalty

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

raising taxes

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

abolishing public health services

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

introducing a higher age limit on pensions

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

teachers striking during high school final examinations

*An overview of the range of non-verbal communication's impact and presentation of the ways to communicate effectively and avoid the so-called communication loops.*

# Verbal and non-verbal communication – how to effectively exchange information?

A crucial aspect of a debate is communication itself – how we exchange information and establish contact with our interlocutors. According to research in the field of psychology of communication (cf. Mehrabian 2009), when information we receive is contradictory, unclear or ambivalent, as much as ninety percent (or more) of the message is attributed to what is known as body language. Said study has been criticised due to the fact that the results were based solely on an analysis of non-verbal communication in specific situations, when attitudes and opinions affected by emotions were taken into account. Nevertheless, it is still generally agreed that non-verbal communication, i.e. the mentioned body language, is a dominant factor in the reception and processing of information.

**What is considered body language?** It involves posture, gestures, facial expressions, voice intonation, rate of speech, the way we look at others and even the distance (the so-called “proxemics”) from other participants of the communication act. Why is so much of a message read by us from the non-verbal layer? It is evolutionarily justified – speech was not always the dominant mode of communication and the brain centres (neocortex) responsible for the use of language are relatively young in terms of the evolution of the human brain. In addition, their activation usually takes more time than in the case of non-verbal communication. Moreover, the centres of the limbic system, representing the “old brain”, which is also responsible for the creation of emotions, activate almost automatically. Thus, our reactions to the images (messages) transmitted directly to/from our eyeball, i.e. what we see, and then to the limbic system, occur almost reflexively, often bypassing the longer route associated with the analysis of linguistic messages. In other words, what we see reaches us faster than what we hear, which results in an automatic response being evoked. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in our primal defence mechanisms, aimed at survival. Of course, nowadays we face completely different challenges than in the past, when threats such as attacks of lions, bears and wolves were part of everyday life. In those days, all that mattered was a quick (automatic) defensive reaction, prompting us to fight, flee or stand still – each of these behaviours guaranteed a higher probability of survival. Currently, we are very rarely forced to deal with similar immediate life-threatening experiences, but our brain structures are still active in this regard

and any event interpreted by it as dangerous to our health or life can trigger such automatic responses. Unfortunately, these are often inappropriate in terms of the actual context of our reality, which can sometimes lead to an actual conflict or to consequences that truly put our lives in danger. For instance, we may feel, or even say, during a debate: “He is fighting with his interlocutor as if it was a matter of life and death”, “We have to defend ourselves” or “He is attacking me”. Such an interpretation of reality can actually stimulate our adaptive mechanisms responsible for survival, by which point it is rather easy to begin a genuine war. How does this relate to body language during a discussion? Some of the non-verbal messages may signal a hostile attitude, which in turn provokes a combative, defensive or uncooperative response from the other side. To avoid blocking the discussion with inappropriate non-verbal messages, it is useful to act in accordance with the descriptions provided below:



a) body posture – open; arms loosely placed at the side of the body (try not to cross your arms on the chest); legs should preferably not be crossed either; the body should be slightly leaning towards your interlocutors;

b) gestures – casual; each of us has slightly different ways of expression, so it is difficult to advise people to either move their hands or keep them still; however, it is worth avoiding raising the hands above the chest line (the so-called rallying posture), as lifting them above the head can be perceived as a way of exerting pressure and domination (often seen during the speeches of dictators); in addition, too vivid gestures can hinder the reception of the verbal message, as the interlocutors will focus on the hand movement instead of the content of a statement;

c) facial expressions – similarly to gestures, it is a matter of individual expression resulting from one’s temper; however, it is commonly accepted that smiling is an expression of openness and willingness to establish contact; research shows that a smile encourages others to return the positive attitude, but there is one condition – it must be sincere; if smiling at others is not in one’s nature, it is better not to try to act against it and behave artificially, as it will be immediately detected by the interlocutors and will have the opposite effect than intended;



d) way of looking at others – eye contact is something desirable in an interaction, as it is usually perceived as a sign of sincerity and openness; however, it is important to avoid excessive staring, which can be interpreted as a sign of dominance or even aggression;

e) distance from the interlocutors (proxemics) – it varies in different cultures; the distance considered appropriate in a situation of social contact (social distance) in Europe is 120-360 cm, i.e. enough to prevent physical contact; there is also the so-called individual distance (45-120 cm), which can be observed when more direct contact is allowed; in summary, we usually communicate with others at a distance of about 70 cm;

f) rate of speech – it is worth paying attention to how quickly we speak; studies show that the optimal pace, i.e. one that does not bore the audience and, at the same time, ensures that the message is understandable, is medium-fast;

g) intonation and timbre of the voice – research indicates that a low timbre of the voice is usually associated with a relaxed throat and, therefore, with the absence of danger or stress, which is what most people are fond of; however, this does not mean that women with high-pitched voices will not be listened to – quite the contrary; it is rather that the timbre of the voice should signal calmness and composure; certainly, a varied intonation helps to attract attention, especially if the utterance is long – this is something that can be practised by, for example, reciting poetry or singing;

h) interjections – people sometimes produce sounds like “uh-huh”, “aha”, etc. when listening to someone with engagement (the so-called “active listening”, which will be discussed later in this guide); such messages are thought to strengthen the speaker and make it clear that he/she is being heard and even understood.

In conclusion, to allow for communication to take place in a free and smooth manner, it is important to make sure that the content level of a message is coherent (congruent) with what happens at the level of body language. Completing [exercise 4](#) below may be helpful in illustrating this relation.

## Exercise 4

Pair up to hold two short conversations in successive rounds, in which there is a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication – this is about the lack of consistency in a message. After each round of conversations, you can ask the other person whether the task was difficult and if the answer is yes – what was the problem.

Talk about topics associated with everyday life, e.g. “I like cats” or “I think it is best to relax at the seaside”, rather than political views or ethical beliefs.

Round 1.

Discussing a topic on which both people have the same opinion.

Body language is not synchronous.

CONTENT = CONSENSUS

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION = LACK OF CONSENSUS



Round 2.

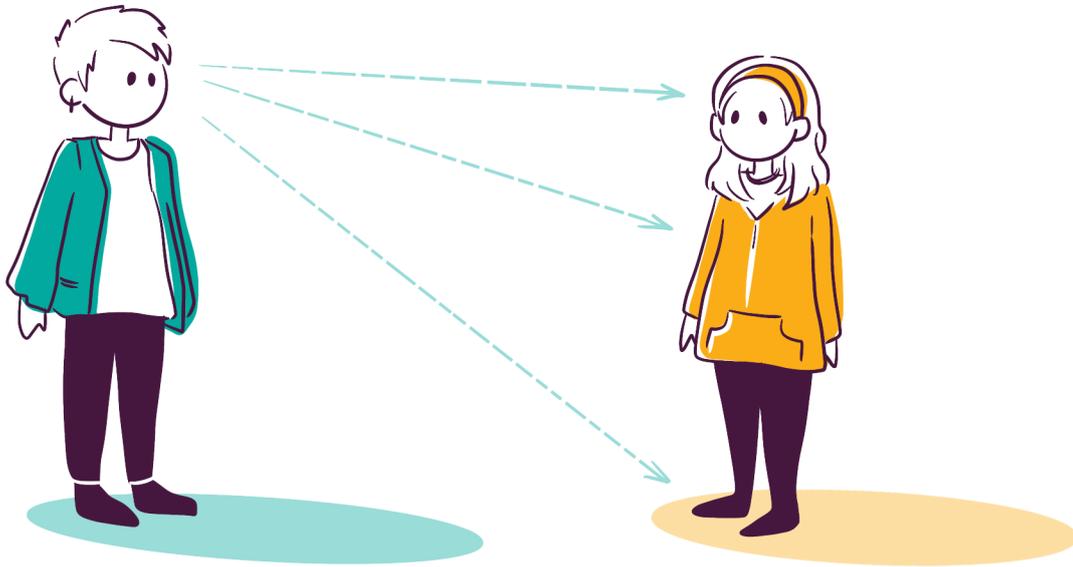
Talking about a topic on which the interlocutors have a different opinion.

Body language is synchronous.

CONTENT = LACK OF CONSENSUS

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION = CONSENSUS





In the context of debating, it is thus necessary to realise the importance of the role of body language in communication. After all, attitudes towards other people are shaped mainly based on non-verbal messages. **Over 90% of our opinions about our interlocutors are formed in the first 10 seconds of an interaction.** That is why the first impression, which is non-verbal and subliminal, is so important! Non-verbal messages allow for a quick assessment in regard to various aspects, including: dominance and leadership, friendliness/sympathy and concern, self-confidence, honesty and untruthfulness as well as positive, neutral and negative judgements.

**The effects that accompany non-verbal communication are:**

- the “recency effect” – the impact of the first impression,
- the “halo effect” – the first impression influences other elements of our perception, e.g. positive aesthetic impressions (physical attractiveness) may be associated with such qualities as intelligence, responsibility, nobility, etc.

**It is also crucial to remember that the first impression is difficult to change.**

Therefore, if you are hoping for a fruitful debate, you should present yourself as an open person, expressing readiness to exchange ideas – after all, it is again similar to welcoming guests with whom you would like to share a tasty meal.

*Listening as an art leading to understanding. A presentation of different techniques for effective listening.*

# What is the art of listening?

**Listening, despite being a key element of an effectively conducted debate, is often underestimated.** Why does this happen? Because people tend to associate listening with taking a passive, withdrawn position, whereas participating in a debate – mainly with speaking and being active. Although such views are true, one can never forget that in order to be able to actively take part in a debate, it is useful to learn what the interlocutors have to say. Unfortunately, when preparing to present our own position, we often focus only on ourselves, which can result in missing the important points presented by others. In this regard, by not listening to the opinions of other people, we no longer actively participate in a discussion.

Listening can range from passive (“turning a deaf ear”) to active. The latter can be described as an “eyes and ears open” attitude. **There are five basic levels of listening:**

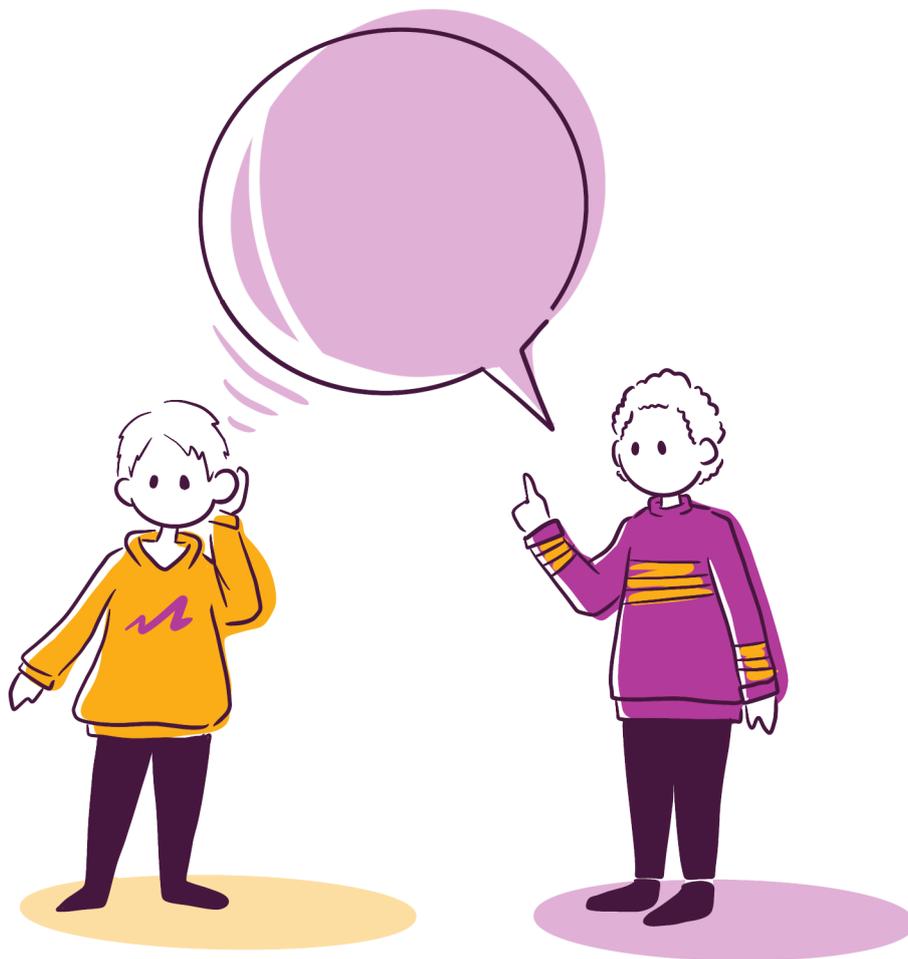
1. ignoring, which is essentially equal to not listening;
2. pretending to listen – listening without interest, in order to give the impression of politeness;
3. selective listening – listening only to certain parts of the conversation;
4. attentive listening – concentrating on the words of a speaker, without attempting to interpret them;
5. active (empathic) listening – listening with the intention of understanding the interlocutor (his/her intentions, needs, situation and feelings).



Active listening is based on a genuine interest in the speaker and in what they have to say:

- focusing on what the speaker is communicating;
- refraining from expressing one's own opinion and interrupting the message;
- body slightly leaning towards the speaker;
- eye contact maintained during 15-30% of the conversation;
- being open to points of view other than one's own;
- using encouraging phrases to stimulate the conversation;
- empathy: sympathising with the emotions and situations the speaker is talking about;
- understanding the role of body language (both one's own and that of the speaker);
- compatibility of body language with the content of the message (it becomes especially important to know one's own facial expressions).

It is significant to remember that active listening does not mean agreeing with interlocutors, but rather understanding what is being said. The key to listening genuinely and carefully is engagement and intention to truly hear what the other person has to say (deliberately focusing one's attention on the interlocutor and analysing their messages).



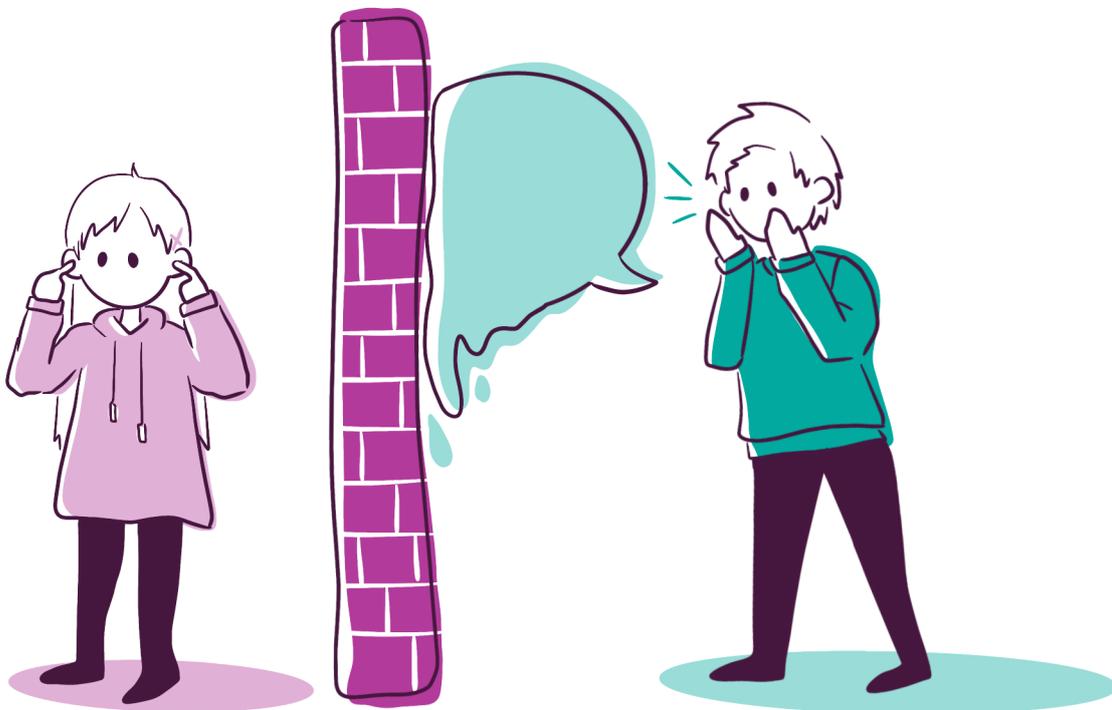
Techniques supporting active listening include:

- paraphrasing – repeating in one’s own words what a person thinks their interlocutor has said; it can start with a phrase: *“If I have understood you correctly...”*;
- specifying – asking questions to get a more complete picture of the situation or to resolve doubts;
- clarifying – organising and generalising the essential elements of the partner’s statement; it often acts as a summary and begins with the words: *“Does this mean that...”* or *“If I understood you correctly, then...”*;
- summarising – gathering all the most important information and findings from a conversation (*“In summary, ...”*, *“So we agree to...”*);
- asking questions – both open (e.g. starting with *“why?”* or *“how?”*) and closed (beginning with *“is/are...?”*), which are often more conclusive.

There are several conditions that have to be met for active listening to be successful: treating the other person as a partner, trying not to judge, generalise or impose interpretations, caring whether the interlocutor understands what is said and attempting to formulate the I-communicates to express your needs, points of view or suggestions.



In the course of a conversation, one can encounter **communication blocks, which hinder the exchange of ideas**. Said blocks include: disruptions from the environment (e.g. noise), different ways of reasoning ([see chapter 1](#)), unequal social status, aversion to the interlocutor which leads to the lack of active listening, language barriers resulting from cultural differences as well as the divergence of the interlocutors' intentions (e.g. deliberate misinformation, manipulation). Sometimes listening to the other side can be difficult to bear, especially if a speech is long and we have already prepared a sharp retort. In such situation, we face an example of communication blocks at an interpersonal level, which also include: judging and criticising or giving advice (superiority position); filtering information and not allowing another point of view to be heard; unexpected turns of events, i.e. suddenly switching to another topic; making comparisons to other statements; or ingratiation, i.e. flattering the interlocutor in order to win their favour.



How can we try to counteract communication blocks?

First of all, it is worth cultivating an attitude of openness, combined with the curiosity about the other person's position, e.g.

X: "I do not agree with your opinion."

(invitation for confrontation);

Y: "That is interesting, could you tell me why?"

(neutralising, clarifying).

Secondly, one can try to identify common elements of given statements, e.g.

X: "None of it makes sense, there is no point in discussing it anymore!"

(desire to end a dialogue, discouragement);

Y: "Why don't we try to clarify this issue together – after all, we are both interested in solving it, even though it is very complex."

(reminding of responsibility for the outcome of the conversation and sharing this burden).

Finally, it is advisable to use the I-communicate, e.g.

X: "It is not as simple as you think..."

(direct reference to the interlocutor, which can be perceived as a provocation);

Y: "From my point of view, it also looks like a complicated problem."

(neutralisation by expressing one's own feelings, without addressing the emotions, thoughts or opinions implied by the other person).



## Exercise 5

Pair up. First, one person (X) makes the below statements and their partner (Y) answers according to key 1. Then, both people switch sides and the person who used to be X responds to the sentences based on key 2.

X: Today's meeting is pointless.

Y: key 1: clarification; key 2: display of interest.

X: You are mistaken when you say that you are right. You only think you are!

Y: key 1: the I-communicate; key 2: paraphrase

X: We can end our meeting here, as I do not think that anything good may come out of it – I can see that we will not reach any agreement or find any solutions.

Y: key 1: the search for common elements; key 2: an open question.



*Formulation of recommendations for people holding a discussion in terms of the arrangement of the interiors, preparation of the subject matter and psychological techniques used during the presentation. Concepts: Oxford Debate, Delphi method.*

## How to effectively conduct a discussion?

**Conducting a debate effectively is definitely not easy.** The more difficult and controversial the subject, the more attention should be paid to organisational details, which, as history has shown, can often be a factor with decisive influence on the final substantive outcome of a discussion.

The most important aspect of organising a debate is to **ensure the proper atmosphere and the equal participation** of all invited guests, which should be manifested by determining:

- the venue (accessibility for persons with disabilities);
- the duration – a debate should be planned in advance, with its conclusion being clearly established (the most important opinions are usually expressed at the end of the discussion);
- the order of speeches and the method of giving the floor – a well-structured debate encourages the free expression of opinions in an atmosphere of mutual respect;
- the arrangement of the furniture, which usually indicates where the various participants will be seated;
- the availability of refreshments (or lack thereof), which is particularly important in hot weather, when there may be a greater tendency to frustration, which leads to irritation and, consequently, conflict (see *Twelve Angry Men*, directed by Sidney Lumet, 1957).



# Oxford debate

It is the most popular type of a debate, originating from Oxford University. Although Oxford Debate is based on a dialogue, in which theses are confronted with antitheses, there is no room for synthesis – the final verdict can only be either for or against a given issue. The main condition for the debate to take place is the division of the participants into three groups: an “affirmative” team, the opposition and the audience. Two important figures are the Chairman and the Secretary, who moderate the discussion panel. Now, I am going to present the course of such a debate, but it is essential to bear in mind that its rules may subtly differ depending on the circumstances.



## The course of the Oxford Debate

The initial step is to determine a thesis to be discussed by the teams. The first – affirmative – group has the task to defend the selected thesis with substantive arguments. The objective of the second team is to refute (oppose) that thesis. It is crucial to remember that both groups are required to present their position **ad rem, i.e. by confronting the core of the problem** – it is forbidden to use the **ad personam** arguments (**make personal remarks**), as they do not contribute anything to the discussion. It may also be useful to **argue ad hominem**, which, as explained by Artur Schopenhauer, means **playing by the rules of one's opponent** – i.e. using their reasoning despite believing that it is wrong. Indeed, while the reasoning of the other person may seem incorrect to us, we often tend to use it when we notice an advantage in it – a chance to defeat the interlocutor with their own weapon. However, it should be emphasised that the use of this method is risky, as it distracts us from the essence of the discussion and, at the same time, adds a false tone to our statement – we begin to advocate a cause that we do not support.

There are various ways of assigning members to teams. For example, we can allow the participants in the discussion to choose their own group, i.e. to decide for themselves whether they want to defend or attack a given thesis. The division can also be made by the Chairman, which can result in the dispute being a bit calmer, as some of the speakers may not actually agree with the position to which they have been assigned. This creates an opportunity for a fair debate, based on mutual respect between both sides and deprived of excessive emotions or personal remarks. The third method is to form the two teams independently, according to the choice of the participants. Once the groups are established, the Chairman assigns positions to them – even though the teams were formed arbitrarily, their members do not know whether they will defend or refute the thesis.

The third, seemingly neutral, group is the audience, whose task is to settle the dispute through a vote once both positions have been presented. However, before voting, the audience is required to listen carefully to the arguments “for” and “against”. The members of this team also have the opportunity to ask questions after every speech. Each speaker should receive one question from the audience.



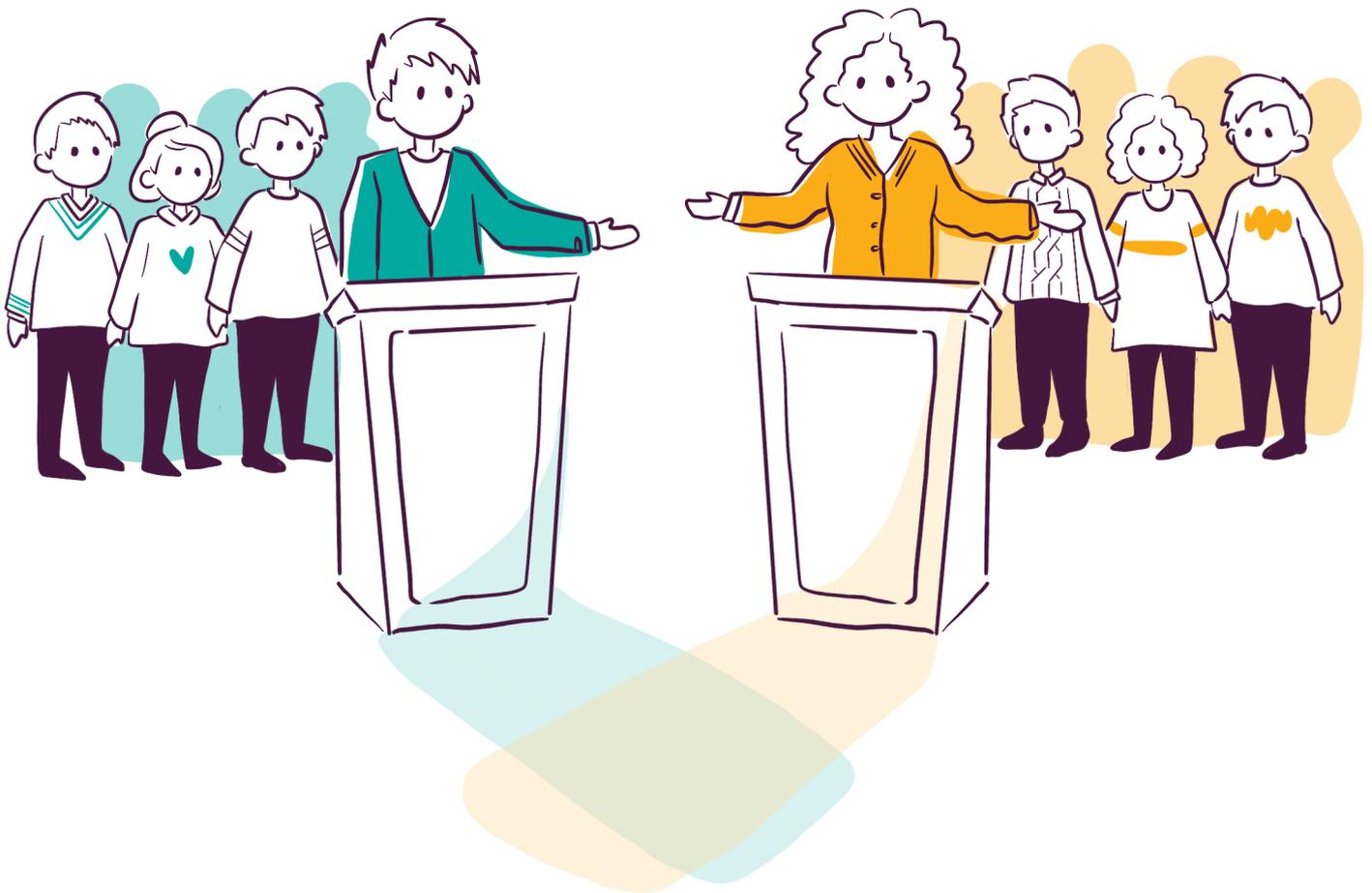
Once the roles of the participants have been established, the debate proceeds as follows:

1. The Secretary makes a speech, introducing the participants in the discussion and the issues which will be addressed during the meeting;
2. Once the teams have been formed, it is determined which group defends the thesis and which opposes it;
3. Then, it is time for a 10-minute deliberation by both teams to establish a rhetorical strategy; meanwhile, the Chairman asks the audience to vote on the thesis for the first time – they raise their hands depending whether a person is “for”, “against” or wishes to “abstain”; the votes are counted by the Secretary;
4. After the deliberations, the Chairman gives the floor to the affirmative team; from now on, participants can only speak in turns and may not modify the order; the Secretary is responsible for making sure that the time limits are observed (3-4 minutes per speech), the statements are polite and the order of speakers is respected; the first speaker of each group uses substantive arguments to present the position of his/her team; the subsequent people try to refute the statements of the previous participants, while introducing their own claims; the last member of each team summarises their side’s arguments, aiming to reach a conclusion in favour of their group’s position;
5. When all speakers have finished presenting, the Chairman calls for another vote from the audience (the first vote concerns the thesis itself, while the second – whether the audience is for or against it); in most cases, this is done through a show of hands, but voting through writing down decisions on paper is also permitted if secrecy is desired; the second vote is aimed at determining the winner of the debate;
6. In each case, the votes are counted by the Secretary, who passes the results to the Chairman; he/she first announces the victorious thesis before the discussion, then the one that won after the debate and finally – the winners; at the end, the Chairman congratulates the participants and thanks the audience.

The line of arguments and counterarguments should be coherent and they should not be repeated. Teams should not deviate from the thesis, as this defeats the purpose of the debate. When providing counterarguments, it is necessary not to distort the opponent’s claims or analyse them superficially. Speeches have to be comprehensible and logical and the statements made by members of the same team should not contradict each other.

## Exercise 6

Conduct an Oxford Debate in your class! Appoint the class president as the Chairman and ask him/her to determine two teams, consisting of four people. A coin toss will decide which side will defend the thesis specified by the audience and which team will argue against it. The rest of the class will become the audience, excluding the treasurer, who in this situation will assume the role of the Secretary. Let each team have time until the next lesson to prepare substantive arguments. Then, conduct the debate according to the rules outlined in this guide. For your topic, choose something that is very controversial in the current political discourse. Ask everyone to think about whether their opinion on that issue has changed after listening to the arguments of both teams. The winning team can be rewarded with good grades. Good luck!



The possibility of winning does not depend on the outcome of the debate – for example, the audience may vote against a given thesis, while at the same time awarding victory to the team that defended that position because they used better argumentation. However, this presents us with the following question: is argumentation really that important in a discussion and is debate itself truly necessary? After all, does the fact that the team which presented more complex, multi-faceted arguments had lost not mean that the decision had been made by the audience prior to the discussion? Indeed, when the spectators become participants of a debate, they are already prejudiced by their own views. Perhaps it is not logical reasoning but intuition that tells us what decision to make, and intuition itself is present before the dialogue begins. For instance, it is rare for a declared feminist to change her views after hearing the arguments of the opposing side – much more frequently, such a person becomes even more strongly convinced of the rightness of her views. As Hegel said, the stronger the thesis, the more powerful the antithesis – in terms of a debate, this statement is absolutely true.

The Oxford Debate requires participants to demonstrate goodwill and to refrain from excessive emotions, which can be difficult when the discussion revolves around subjects that are important to the persons involved. There is also an interesting question related to the audience: is a person really able to change their opinion as a result of listening to a set of speeches lasting several minutes? This would require a high degree of maturity and open-mindedness from such a listener. The Oxford Debate may prove to be an insufficient tool in this regard when changing one's views is related to moral judgements. As research described by Haidt (2017) has shown, ethical judgements are made by us a priori, which results in the intuition often prevailing over the intellect. When participating in a debate that addresses moral dilemmas, we are often unaware of the decision we have already made, which may not be influenced by substantive arguments in any meaningful way. As has been stated before, there is no room for excessive emotions in the Oxford Debate, which often leads to **status quo** being set.

*Status quo means the existing state of affairs, the way things are now.*





In view of the above, a debate model that forces participants to defend a thesis with which they actually disagree may create a new quality of discussion. The disadvantage of such an approach may be the disproportion between the significance of one's convictions and the will to win (for example, an openly homosexual person would probably not want to win a debate from the position condemning this orientation). Attempt at such a discussion would most likely end with a reluctant exchange of perfunctory arguments. We can also imagine that a discussion on aesthetic preferences would be very different from an Oxford Debate on women's rights, or that if such a debate included both women and men, it would considerably vary from one which excluded the involvement of either gender. Therefore, when choosing the participants of a debate, it is advisable to make sure that they represent different views – discussions between people with diverse opinions and affiliations can surprise us with a richness of conclusions that is more difficult to find in homogeneous environments.

A disadvantage of the Oxford Debate is its binary nature – the thesis cannot be altered in any way, as the participants are only supposed to either confirm or refute it. This aspect narrows the effectiveness of the discussion to the questions that can only be answered with "yes" or "no", making it impossible to search for compromises or intermediate qualities.

## The Delphi method

You are probably familiar with the parable of Socrates, whom Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, considered to be the wisest man in Athens (and, as we can deduce from Plato's works, she was not mistaken). Pythia, a priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, was thought to be a medium – according to beliefs, she was able to foretell the future. That is why the next technique discussed in this guide is called the Delphi method – it aims at determining the probability or a time of a given event taking place (in other words, to predict the future, almost like the Oracle). **It is a heuristic method, which is applied in the case of the absence of information – heuristics replace it with predictions based on existing data.** This technique does not necessarily have to solve the problem – sometimes the role of heuristics is simply to encourage us to reflect on various potential events.





The Delphi method is based on surveys conducted among experts in a given field. Such statistics cannot be random – individuals completing the questionnaires must meet certain standards in terms of education. The experts' opinions are anonymous and independent. Sometimes, the personality of certain scientists allows them to dominate in a team, thus influencing the results of the forecasts – in case of the Delphi method, the surveys are filled out independently, so such an impact is considerably smaller. Usually, questionnaires provided to experts regard a specific topic, but sometimes they are asked to suggest a subject matter themselves. At first, sample surveys are sent out, which allows to determine their final form. Extreme responses require the specialists to justify their position. Then, once the answers have been collected and viewed as a whole, an overall forecast is made.

The Delphi method also has its shortcomings. As you may have noticed, it is spread over time, as this technique involves the participation of a large number of people, who first have to give their consent. The determination of the final content of the survey is also time-consuming. In addition, the questionnaires are monothematic and the consistency of opinion is considered to be the final resort in the search for truth. It is also difficult to select a specific group of experts in a way that guarantees stable results – sometimes the decision as to whom to ask for opinions and whom to exclude is not entirely obvious. Moreover, the experts themselves are deprived of the possibility of communicating with each other directly.

# Final conclusions

Debating is an intrinsic component of a properly functioning democracy in any civil society, although in some cases it is difficult to set clear boundaries as to who should be allowed to participate in this form of a dialogue. It would seem that all citizens should be involved in a debate, hence it is important that they have the abilities necessary for engagement in any discussion. In some cases, however, we do not have sufficient knowledge about a given issue, which is when we have to give the floor to experts – this is best manifested in the Delphi method.

*Being able to hold a debate (and participate in it) provides us with a tool against hate speech, which threatens equality and freedom of expression.*



When performing exercises or using advice and knowledge presented in this guide, **it is essential to remember about the higher goals of a debate, as it is, after all, an essential element of a democratic system and a foundation of an unrestricted dialogue on any subject.** Therefore, I hope for myself and for all readers that this dialogue continues to develop and expand.

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