Engaging with opposing perspectives: New approaches and classic frameworks

Julia A. Minson

Harvard Kennedy School

Catherine Tinsley

McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University

Abstract

The recent increase in ideological polarization -- and its deleterious effects on relationships, society, and the workplace -- has spurred research on ways to help individuals bridge divisions on polarizing issues. Here, we focus on the benefits of a promising strategy, receptive communication, drawing on evidence from varied and organizationally relevant literatures including marketing, communications, and negotiations. Receptive communicators wish to understand their counterpart's beliefs rather than educate or persuade them. We show how receptive communication is akin to, but also moves beyond, integrative bargaining in enabling productive dialogue on identity-relevant, often emotionally-laden, and thus polarizing issues. We also differentiate receptive communication from a receptive mindset, showing how current research elucidates the unique benefits of the former as especially helpful for conflicting parties and the organizations in which they are embedded. We conclude with empirically based prescriptions on how organizational leaders and members can model and incentivize receptive communication.

Introduction

Both in the United States and worldwide, intolerance for opposing ideologies has grown in startling ways. Recent research shows that dislike of political outgroups exceeds affection toward ingroups (Finkel et al., 2020), and partisan antipathy has outpaced long-standing racial prejudices (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Westwood et al., 2018). This phenomenon -- known as "affective polarization" -- has alarmed lay people and scholars alike because of its deleterious effects on democratic functioning and our ability to solve common societal problems (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). And although issues of ideological disagreement most frequently affect the public policy sphere, recently they have also come to have powerful effects on organizational life.

The expectation that employees should be able to "bring their whole selves" to work has increased workplace expression on politicized topics. Recent events such as the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the US Supreme Court ruling overturning Roe v. Wade have seen companies take public stands on issues laden with ideological conflict (to the jubilation of some employees and the consternation of others). As a result of these dynamics, the ability to deal with ideologically-based disagreement among a variety of stakeholders has become crucial to the success of today's global organizations. Carefully curating language for inclusiveness; balancing personnel analytics with employee privacy; protecting public health while respecting individual liberties; choosing the appropriate level of support for reproductive health – have become common organizational dilemmas colored, at least in part, by ideology. When members of organizations disagree with each other on such matters, entrenched conflict often follows impairing efficient organizational functioning. For example, parties avoid receiving advice and information from ideologically opposed others (Marks et al., 2019), withhold resources from

them (Fowler & Kam, 2007), are less trusting (Hagmann et al., 2024) and less willing to collaborate (Yeomans, 2020). With ideological disagreement taking center stage in organizational life, developing tools and frameworks to navigate such situations has become an important area for scholarship and intervention.

When confronted with opposing views, people often seek to educate or persuade their counterparts towards their preferred positions. Indeed, extensive scholarship has been devoted to identifying theory-driven strategies to help individuals persuade more effectively, even when dealing with deeply moralized and politicized domains (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Fernbach et al., 2013; Fishkin et al., 2021). Indeed, a growing resurgence in debate training suggests that many share the belief that making better arguments for the "correct" positions will help people overcome partisan divisions (e.g., Hasan, 2023).

In the present manuscript, we explain why the fundamental assumption that people's attitudes need to be changed via some form of more effective persuasion is counterproductive to the goal of de-escalating conflict and identifying viable solutions to common organizational dilemmas. Instead, we propose that greater effort should be exerted toward implementing interventions to increase employees' and leaders' level of receptiveness to opposing views (Minson & Chen, 2022; Minson et al., 2020; Yeomans et al., 2020), such that individuals work to more fully understand disagreeing counterparts, their beliefs and their values, rather than to persuade them towards change. Moreover, employees should be taught how to behaviorally signal their receptiveness with clear linguistic cues, a communication approach that should be modeled and incentivized by organizational leaders.

Our perspective is motivated by the idea that at its core, persuasion is a win-lose endeavor because at the conclusion of the process, one party must surrender their beliefs (either

fully or partially) towards those advocated by the other. In this manner, persuasion is analogous to zero-sum bargaining extensively studied in the negotiations literature, and risks similar pitfalls. Central to our argument is the idea that because of its zero-sum nature, persuasion engenders resistance, with both sides motivated to defend staked-out positions. Furthermore, persuasion assumes that the solution space is generally known (laid out on a dimension ranging from one party's views to those of the other), and thus the question facing each party is how far they will yield. By contrast, to the extent that our ability to understand each other's points of view and learn from each other's perspectives is unlimited, receptiveness provides opportunities for both sides to walk away with new and more sophisticated insights. These insights should, in turn, result in conflict de-escalation, greater mutual regard, and the identification of novel, value-creating solutions.

In the next sections, we use research from communication, marketing, decision science, organizational justice, and in particular negotiation theory to articulate how and why greater receptiveness rather than more effective persuasion might pave the way for future cooperation and joint problem-solving across a variety of organizational disagreements. We discuss the parallels between persuasion and distributive bargaining, as well as receptiveness and integrative bargaining. We then extend this analogy to consider the gains that a consistent practice of receptive communication can generate for parties engaged in ideologically-fueled disagreement relative to the more common practice of persuasion.

Although a large prior practitioner literature has called out the benefits of more effective listening and a greater focus on learning in the face of disagreement, the last decade has seen a growing body of empirical research on these topics, sharpening our understanding of the relevant interpersonal dynamics required for these prescriptions to be effective. Thus, in the final sections

we distinguish between building receptive communication skills and fostering a receptive mindset. This distinction enables us to articulate concrete recommendations for individual and organizational behaviors to more effectively manage ideological conflicts.

Persuasion imposes a fixed pie constraint

Persuasion is traditionally defined as "processes that govern the formation and change of attitudes" (Chaiken et al., 1996). And although persuasion is studied across a variety of social science disciplines, all traditional conceptualizations of the process include the modification of an individual's original views under the influence of another. For example, McGuire's (1968, 1972) classic five-step persuasion process begins with exposure to a message, attending to its content, understanding said content, and then yielding to it, before adopting the new content as a changed attitude. McGuire's fourth step is critical for understanding the fixed pie nature of persuasion—for persuasion to be successful, one party must relinquish ground and yield to another's influence. And although some persuasion attempts may be pleasant and willingly endured (i.e., your dinner date convincing you to try a new dessert), a large literature has documented resistance to persuasion, attesting to the idea that the process often turns adversarial.

The literature on psychological reactance – the motivation to resist any action that is perceived to threaten one's free will (Brehm, 1966), dates nearly as far back as the literature on persuasion itself. Reactance arises when individuals view their autonomy as being constrained. Persuasion can thus trigger reactance when the target of persuasion envisions a limitation on their future behavior, even if that limitation is simply no longer being able to retain one's original attitude. Persuasion results in a winner and a loser – labels that are clearly associated with positions in a status hierarchy (Loewenstein et al., 2005). Successful persuasion implies that

the persuader has achieved a dominant position over the target – an implication that most people who find themselves on the receiving end of a persuasion attempt do not relish. Although people in social situations may simply walk away to avoid another's persuasion attempt, in a workplace characterized by interdependent work flows, team coordination, and hierarchical reporting relationships, simply avoiding exposure to opponents' views is, at best, awkward.

The recognition that most people do not enjoy being the targets of persuasion has given rise to an extensive body of research focused on developing more subtle influence strategies. For example, Petty and Cacioppo famously introduced the distinction between the "central" and "peripheral" routes to persuasion (1986), whereby the peripheral route is less subject to the target's awareness and thereby invites less resistance. Similarly, the literature on "nudging" focuses on small changes to the environment that elicit minimal resistance because targets are often unaware that their behavior is being shaped. For instance, switching "default" processes from ones where willing individuals must opt-in to a behavior, to processes where unwilling individuals must opt-out has been shown to increase organ donation and retirement savings rates (Benartzi & Thaler, 2007; Johnson & Goldstein, 2003; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Thaler et al., 2010). And although there is some debate about the ethicality of such paternalistic approaches (Hédoin, 2015; Schmidt & Engelen, 2020), these techniques have been shown to effectively change people's behavior, and (sometimes), their attitudes.

Yet, in many important instances, peripheral routes to persuasion, aside from being morally ambiguous, are simply not viable. In contexts rife with ideological conflict, differences of opinion are manifest and salient. Consequently, in debates about hotly contested and bitterly debated organizational policies, nudging change is often not possible, whereas direct persuasion

will likely lead to resistance, negative attributions about the motives, intelligence, and trustworthiness of the persuaders, and ultimately – conflict escalation.

Such situations are made even more challenging by the fact that in addition to being resistant to persuasion themselves, individuals also often have trouble tolerating anyone else continuing to adhere to a position different from their own (i.e., they refuse to "agree to disagree"). Instead, people become highly motivated to change what they believe to be the inaccurate, unethical, or outright deluded beliefs of their counterparts. However, when both sides of a debate enter the conversation with the goal of persuasion, what emerges is "argument culture" (Tannen, 1998) where progress is unlikely because both sides are motivated to simultaneously influence others and resist being influenced. And although a rational analysis might suggest that in the end the strongest set of arguments will prevail, research shows that individuals on both sides of disagreements easily convince themselves that they will succeed because truth (or facts, or science, or morality) favors their position (Logg et al., 2022; Lord et al., 1979; Minson et al., 2020; Pronin et al., 2004; Ross, 2018; Schwalbe et al., 2020; Skitka, 2010).

When both parties in a conflict feel overconfident regarding the evidentiary and moral superiority of their arguments, the result is not persuasion, but growing anger and frustration with the other side's obstinacy in the face of seemingly unimpeachable evidence[1]. In organizational settings specifically, this can result in mutual avoidance (even on tasks that are unrelated to the focal topic of disagreement) (Marks et al., 2019), as well as lower willingness to

[1] Of course, in some debates one side does enjoy access to better evidence. Extensive research has tested interventions to persuade individuals on topics where concern with human welfare or an overwhelming body of scientific evidence clearly supports one viewpoint (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Fishkin et al., 2021; Kahan et al., 2012; Nyhan et al., 2014). The effects in these studies are small, showing that our best, theory-driven and empirically validated techniques to moderate entrenched beliefs yield only modest results even when the scientific evidence overwhelmingly favors one side.

share resources (Fowler & Kam, 2007) and seek advice (Yeomans et al., 2020). Such behaviors are not only disadvantageous to both employee productivity and well-being but also thwart organizational effectiveness.

In the next section, we propose an alternative set of goals and behaviors that parties in attitude conflict might embrace, one that we believe will lead to more productive interactions. Specifically, we suggest that in cases of disagreement on ideologically-laden topics individuals should first and foremost strive to cultivate and demonstrate receptiveness to their opponent's beliefs and values, rather than striving to change their views. Organizational leaders, in turn, should place a greater emphasis on developing support structures and skill building opportunities for increasing the capacity for receptive engagement among employees in disagreement.

Receptiveness allows for multi-dimensional discussion

Although an extensive practitioner and popular literature has suggested alternative approaches to a variety of "difficult conversations," (e.g. Stone et al., 1999), it is only recently that these approaches have come under extensive empirical investigation. In the present work, we specifically focus on cognitive and behavioral approaches to engagement with opposing perspectives (as opposed to other conversations that are difficult because they are hurtful, confusing, or challenging for other reasons) in order to be able to offer concrete and scientifically rigorous recommendations.

Our focus is on recent research which defines receptiveness to opposing views as the "willingness to access, attend to and evaluate belief confirming and belief disconfirming views in a relatively impartial manner" (Minson et al., 2020). In other words, receptiveness requires devoting a comparable level of awareness, attention, and evaluative scrutiny towards the

attitudes of opposing parties and the beliefs that support these attitudes, as one does to ideas from our own side. This definition is considerably more precise (and enjoys greater empirical support) than prior advice to be curious or take on an "inquiry mindset." Specifically, receptiveness requires that beyond being broadly curious – which might involve seeking out opposing views and then quickly dismissing them – individuals cognitively engage with and thoughtfully evaluate the counterattitudinal information they encounter. Indeed, a recent scale measure of receptiveness to opposing views has been shown to successfully predict individuals' performance on a variety of cognitive tasks, such as attention and retention of ideologically disconfirming arguments, showing that receptive processing thus results in demonstrably less biased information consumption and evaluation (Minson et al. 2020). Furthermore, the presence of a validated measure of receptiveness has also enabled it to be distinguished from other conceptually related constructs such as Need for Cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), Actively Open-Minded Thinking (Baron 2019; Baron, 2023; Stanovich & West, 1997), or the Big Five trait of Openness (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Although the initial work on receptiveness primarily focused on the cognitive processing of opposing views, to the extent that conflicting parties cannot be aware of each other's mental processes, demonstrating one's receptive intentions has also become a vibrant topic of research. Thus, recent scholarship has sought to identify specific behaviors that enhance partisans' perceptions of each other's receptiveness and the errors people make in this endeavor (Collins et al., 2023; Hussein & Tormala, 2021; Minson et al., 2024; Yeomans et al., 2020).

Most important for our present interest in identifying alternatives to persuasion, although the definition of receptiveness cited above hews closely to the first three steps of McGuire's (1968, 1972) attitude formation process, it stops short of requiring one party to yield to another's

arguments. Specifically, attending to, seriously considering, and fairly evaluating opposing information requires no explicit or implicit yielding towards the other party's arguments, but rather a thoughtful reflection on those arguments.

For example, imagine two colleagues who disagree about the appropriateness of altering hiring practices to increase gender diversity in a male-dominated organization. Such debates often feature one party accusing the other of wanting to "lower standards," while facing reciprocal accusations of gender bias from their counterpart. However, a conversation focused on deeply understanding each other's positions might uncover a new set of considerations that clarifies the beliefs and values that lead well-meaning and intelligent people to embrace different conclusions. To expand on the example, perhaps the person who wants to shift hiring practices to favor women believes that there are highly qualified women for the work in question but that the image of the organization makes them feel unwelcome, producing a largely male applicant pool. By contrast, the person who does not want to change hiring practices might worry that such changes would make the women in the organization feel like "affirmative action hires," and is insisting on highly competitive hiring practices exactly *because* they respect their female colleagues.

This example illustrates how receptive dialogue has the potential to uncover three types of differences that might cause reasonable people to disagree: 1) differences in how shared values are weighted (e.g., some people value creating an inclusive culture over maintaining meritocracy, and others prioritize the reverse); 2) differences in beliefs about past events (e.g., some people might believe that the current cutthroat culture resulted from the over-representation of men, but others might believe it emerged from market forces and has nothing to do with gender); and 3) differences in beliefs about the implications of current actions for the future (e.g.,

some people might believe that hiring a female CEO will increase gender equity at all leadership levels, while others believe it will make no difference or alienate those who might feel this leader does not deserve the role). We argue that deep understanding of such differences in turn, allows dialogue to proceed more productively than attempts at mutual persuasion based on initially stated positions.

In line with this reasoning, the ultimate goal of receptive dialogue is generating new insights – new insights that were not known to the parties before they began communicating. Those new insights are likely to shift parties' perceptions of each other, their perceptions of the nature of the problem they are facing, and/or the menu of potential solutions. Novel solutions identified through parties' greater understanding of the beliefs and values underlying each other's attitudes would, in turn, enable them to avoid many of the pitfalls inherent in a more persuasion-focused approach.

We propose that the key difference between receptive and persuasive engagement lies in the fact that without the pressure to persuade or defend, parties are more likely to relinquish their adversarial mindsets. When parties' only choices are to win or lose, as is the case in persuasive dialogue, the context incentivizes the use of the most aggressive and extreme arguments. By contrast, if the context is such that neither party is required to yield their position, the incentive towards posturing and adversarial listening (listening simply to rebut) dissipates. Instead, at the core of receptiveness is the desire to clarify ideas and understand the root of each other's attitudes in order to appreciate how such conflicting worldviews came to be without resorting to rhetorical coercion (Brandt & Crawford, 2020; Brandt et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2011; Koltko-Rivera, 2004). This mutual understanding then creates opportunities for joint problem-solving,

ideally generating more and better ideas than those that may have been known prior to the conversation.

Expert negotiators might readily recognize the structural similarities between receptive dialogue and the principles of interest-based bargaining whereby negotiators seek to discover the underlying cause of each party's manifest position (Fisher et al., 1991; Walton & McKersie, 1965). Interest-based bargaining approaches have been used for tasks as diverse as deal-making (Bazerman & Neale, 1986), team task allocation (Brett, 1991; Thompson, 2005), and resolving conflict over scarce resources (Faure & Rubin, 1993). This approach is founded upon the recognition that when parties restrict discussions to their stated positions they often become deadlocked, requiring alternative approaches. To this end, the negotiations literature has identified two key strategies: increasing the number of issues under consideration and/or shifting the discussion to underlying interests – i.e., the needs, desires, or concerns that parties truly wish to satisfy (Ury et al., 1988).

Several elements are critical to interest-based bargaining. First, this approach requires parties to temporarily set aside their demands in order to mutually explore their individual reasons for staked out positions. This is analogous to parties engaged in receptive communication becoming more aware of each other's divergent weighting of values and recognizing different beliefs about past or future events. Second, this exploration leads to the discovery of new issues, interests, and priorities that can enable a (theoretically) infinite number of solutions. Importantly, the solutions that emerge from the discussion are often ones that no party could have generated prior to the conversation since they require a deeper understanding of the other side's beliefs and preferences.

As a result, interest-based bargaining offers several benefits relative to position-based bargaining, including the greater frequency of getting a deal (Fisher et al., 1991), greater satisfaction with the outcome (Ury et al., 1988), and increased mutual trust (Gunia et al., 2011). These positive correlates, in turn, lead to more valuable deals (Thompson et al., 2010), increased compliance with the agreed terms, and decreased probability of future conflict (Ury et al., 1988).

Analogously, receptive dialogue dismisses persuasion as its immediate goal, enabling both parties to set aside their opposing attitudes in order to be curious about the beliefs and values underlying the other party's positions. Receptiveness can thus be thought of as listening for understanding rather than listening for persuasion. In the words of Carl Rogers, a founding leader of the humanistic psychology tradition, "To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice" (Rogers, 1975).

Further extending the analogy, we can see that opposing positions in interest-based bargaining are analogous to opposing attitudes in ideological conflict. Thus, exploring the true interest underlying parties' stated positions is parallel to inquiring as to the beliefs and values underlying parties' opposing attitudes. Like a person's stated position in a negotiation, disagreement on a particular issue may appear to, but in fact often does not, exist in a unidimensional space. Rather, each party's attitude on the focal issue is the product of that person's constellation of values and beliefs. For example, a person's stated attitude about a particular parental leave policy is likely to be a function of their own upbringing, their beliefs about the relationship between childrearing and career advancement, knowledge of the policies at other organizations, personal experience with caregiving, their beliefs about childhood development, and values related to both equality and equity. Rather than engaging in persuasion

to convince one side of the error or bias in their stance, identifying differences in values and beliefs that undergird the apparent attitudinal differences may reveal new perspectives, insights, and solutions that neither party had considered before the conversation. Thus, whereas, in persuasive communication (like distributive bargaining) the possible outcomes are known and parties experience conceding to the other's solution as capitulation, in receptive communication and integrative bargaining, new possible outcomes emerge as information is shared.

The Consequences of Receptive Communication

To take another example, let us consider the potential outcomes of receptive versus persuasive dialogue in an organization struggling with how to balance its carbon footprint with the necessity of business travel.

In this disagreement—one that is relatively common in today's global organizations—one side (perhaps the group driving corporate social responsibility initiatives) may argue passionately for the urgent need for every business to take action against climate change. This side might point to the hugely polluting effects of airplane travel (Daley, 2016; Wuebbles et al., 2007) and the many alternative methods of electronic communication that make getting in the air largely unnecessary. By contrast, counterparts on the other side (perhaps the sales team) might argue for the necessity of face-to-face connection for building client relationships. They might further point out that, as concerning as climate change may be, it remains less concerning than going out of business. While one side makes arguments grounded in climate science, bolstered with pleas about the future of the warming planet, the other side might call out the hypocrisy of the proposed policies which would disproportionately affect the sales team, and have a trivial environmental impact in the grand scheme of things.

In the case above, and in many others, extensive research has shown that a conversation focused on persuasion is unlikely to lead to positive outcomes. Indeed, research on biased assimilation (Dandekar et al., 2012; Lord et al., 1979) and confirmation bias (Jonas et al., 2001; Zhou & Shen, 2022) suggests that such a conversation might even lead to greater entrenchment. On moralized topics in particular, engagement often leads to conflict escalation (Skitka, 2002; Skitka et al., 2021; Skitka & Houston, 2001). However, three types of outcomes are possible through receptive dialogue that would be unlikely via the persuasion route.

First, we expect that as a result of receptive dialogue, the individuals representing both sides would achieve some insights *about each other*, improving their attributions about the bases for others' beliefs, and thus the conclusions they reach about each other's intelligence, objectivity, and moral character. For example, studies have shown that disagreeing counterparts that behave in a more receptive manner by demonstrating their willingness to learn about each other's views or showing engagement with each other's arguments are evaluated as more trustworthy and as more desirable colleagues (Yeomans et al., 2020). Even in such heated settings as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the debates about affirmative action in hiring, counterparts who appear willing to learn about our own perspectives are seen as more ethical, more reasonable, and as making stronger arguments (Collins et al., 2022). These studies have also shown that such individuals are seen as having better judgment and are more likely to be sought out for future discussions. Unlike the feeling of status from "winning" an argument, the benefits of generating more positive interpersonal evaluations can accrue to both parties.

Work in the related domain of procedural justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975, 1978) and interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies, 2001) also suggests that being receptive to an opposing perspective, even one with which you fundamentally disagree, can help build the

interpersonal relationship by communicating to people that they are valued and respected (Blader & Tyler, 2015; Kass, 2008). Not surprisingly, people like to have their views heard by others, even if ultimately these views are not incorporated into final decisions (Cropanzano et al., 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Simply allowing everyone a voice and listening to their views with consideration, suggest mutual respect (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Tyler & Bies, 1990) which increases perceptions of fairness (Shapiro & Brett, 1993) and helps build relationships (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996).

A second key outcome of receptiveness is the laying of groundwork for future engagement both on the focal issue (in this example, air travel), as well as other, related topics. For example, a thoughtful conversation about travel might reveal both parties' values regarding obligations to the global community and future generations versus company shareholders. Better insight into such values and greater comfort in discussing them are likely to ease future conversations about other difficult collective choices. Here, a more successful conversation about the role of business in the fight against climate change (balancing environmental and shareholder concerns), might lead to lesser conflict next year when the company considers introducing mental health days or increasing support for employees from marginalized groups (weighing employee versus shareholder concerns). Indeed, recent research indicates that when individuals see their counterparts as more receptive, they are more willing to engage in future discussions with them and learn about their views on other topics (Minson et al., 2024).

Finally, we expect receptive dialogue to produce novel solutions to issues of mutual concern, ones that may go undiscovered when parties engage in a unidimensional persuasion struggle. Such solutions emerge because of both the emergence of a better relationship and a greater understanding of the other party, without which parties may fail to ask important

clarifying questions or suggest "outside the box" ideas for options that might be acceptable to their counterparts. For example, the team seeking to limit environmental impact may be open to frequent business travel if it were conducted via train or a fleet of electric cars. Relatedly, the sales team might be more than happy to have the company invest in a set of electric vehicles for their use or to allow for greater time away from the office that train travel necessitates. Thus, airplane travel can be limited and in person sales calls can continue, with the company reducing its carbon footprint and enjoying the positive publicity that would accrue from announcing this policy. Notice that unlike the traditional integrative negotiation framework where individuals are expected to trade off less important priorities in order to gain ground on more important ones, possible solutions that emerge as a result of receptive communication do not always require parties to cede ground. They merely require them to understand each other's values and preferences with sufficient clarity so as to recognize that certain solutions would in fact be acceptable to all.

Of course, it is also possible that receptive dialogue will ultimately lead to traditional integrative bargaining with parties trading concessions to arrive at jointly acceptable solutions. Indeed, greater understanding of each other's values and interests enables more fruitful tradeoffs (Fisher et al., 1991). However, our contention is that without parties making any concessions, receptive dialogue is likely to lead to a variety of interpersonal benefits, enabling the disputants to continue to co-exist and collaborate. Moreover, we would argue that because receptive communication does *not always* lead to mutual agreement on the focal issue, it becomes a path toward building a more robust relationship between the parties – one that is not confined to the issue at hand, as negotiated outcomes often are.

The Risks of Receptiveness

Although up to this point, our discussion has focused on the merits of receptiveness, it is worth stepping back to consider its drawbacks. For example, our students regularly express a concern that coming across as being receptive to an opponent might make one appear irresolute or fickle, suggesting to counterparts that one is in fact open to persuasion. Thus, whereas people may be eager to put newly learned integrative bargaining skills to use, they may be less eager to implement receptive communication skills at every opportunity. However, experimental evidence does not bear out this risk. In fact, some studies have found that intentional use of receptive language is more persuasive than direct argumentation (Yeomans et al., 2020). A recent review of the persuasion literature corroborates this account by suggesting that a variety of behaviors that scholars broadly associate with receptiveness (e.g., asking questions, hedging one's claims) enhance persuasion because they lead to deeper processing of the persuasive message (Hussein & Tormala, 2021). Importantly, receptive speech is often imitated by counterparts, such that rather than becoming more aggressive, the counterparts of those who demonstrate receptiveness repay their efforts in kind, leading to a positive conversational spiral (Pruitt, 1981; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Minson et al., 2024).

Another consideration is that receptiveness might send the wrong message to observers who may view the receptive party less positively for appearing to be insufficiently strong in their convictions and commitments. Recent research has explored this concern (Heltzel & Laurin, 2021) by examining how people react when their ingroup members are receptive to holders of opposing views on divisive political issues. Surprisingly, even strong partisans evaluated individuals more positively when they were more receptive towards common opponents, finding them to be tolerant, cooperative, and rational. This insight is particularly important for

organizational leaders, suggesting that they will not be punished for demonstrating receptiveness rather than "decisively" opining.

A final concern has to do with the risks of engaging receptively with truly harmful ideas – for example, racist stereotypes or widely-disproven conspiracy theories. On one hand, it is hard to imagine the benefit of giving serious consideration to people who argue for the Earth being flat or for the idea that fluorinated water is part of a government mind control plot. Furthermore, some conversations – those that, for example, raise questions about the humanity or rights of specific individuals or groups – may cause enough emotional harm that they should simply not be entertained.

However, borrowing yet again from negotiation analysis, it is important to consider the most attractive alternatives available to the parties. In other words, what will the parties do if and when they reach an impasse? A similar question should be asked about what the parties will do when they are unable to reach consensus on issues of values and policy, and especially when they find that the other side refuses to entertain their views. It would be tempting to believe that universal disengagement will show the racists and the conspiracy theorists the error of their ways and finally compel them to change their beliefs. However, what seems more likely is that after being ejected from mainstream discourse, these individuals will find support for their beliefs among like-minded others, support which will help foster a strong sense of group identity as a result of having been ostracized. Indeed, research on the formation of cults and extremist groups supports the idea that individuals are often drawn to such organizations after being shunned by others (Hales & Williams, 2018; Jong et al., 2015; Sunstein, 1999; Williams, 2007; Williams et al., 2019). In other words, by refusing to entertain ideas we find ridiculous or abhorrent, we may in fact be strengthening their foothold.

Organizational Implications

Although many readers might conceptually agree with our conclusions, empirically validated interventions for creating receptive dialogue in the face of strong disagreement are only now emerging. Below, we review approaches for enhancing receptive dialogue grounded in extant research and go beyond the current literature. We begin by highlighting the idea that recognizing the distinct, yet related concepts of having a receptive mindset and engaging in receptive communication offer several suggestions for leveraging research conclusions for organizational contexts.

Cultivating a Receptive Mindset

An important barrier to receptive conversations arises from the various misperceptions individuals hold with regard to those they strongly disagree with. The research on false polarization demonstrates that people expect opponents to be more extreme in their views than they really are (Blatz & Mercier, 2018; Robinson et al., 1995). Relatedly, research on errors in meta-perceptions reveals that while opposing partisans do in fact hold negative beliefs about each other, they believe that the magnitude of that negativity on the other side is much greater than is actually the case (Lees & Cikara, 2020). Perhaps not surprisingly then, individuals expect learning about views from the other side to be far more emotionally aversive than it turns out to be in practice (Dorison et al., 2019). Correcting such misperceptions through simple informational interventions can increase willingness to engage in understanding opposing others.

Yet, research also shows that a receptive mindset, while important in and of itself, is often insufficient for fruitful dialogue. People are inherently poor at projecting an open, receptive mindset to others (Collins et al., 2022) and counterparts often start from the assumption that the mere presence of disagreement means that the other is not listening. While cultivating a mental

habit of receptiveness is an important starting point, individuals need to master clear, recognizable ways of signaling these internal mental efforts.

Learning Receptive Communication Markers

To help individuals with concrete tools for demonstrating their willingness to engage with opposing views, we can turn to recent research that leverages natural language processing. This work has identified specific "linguistic markers" (i.e. words and phrases) that lead individuals to infer that their counterpart is being receptive (Yeomans et al., 2020). These markers include acknowledgment of other perspectives by using phrases such as "I understand that…" or "You are saying…". This work dovetails with classic practitioner advice with mediators and therapists often advising individuals to explicitly restate their counterpart's point of view in their own words to behaviorally demonstrate understanding (Peck, 2010; Staff, 2022).

Other features of receptive language include finding areas of agreement in the midst of disagreement, by saying things like "I agree that…," or "We both want to…". Finding areas of agreement does not imply compromise or ceding one's original position, but rather the recognition that everyone can agree on some broad set of values and principles, grounding the conversation in a common set of beliefs and goals. Additionally, receptive language is marked with hedging words such as "sometimes," "occasionally," and "probably" – words that acknowledge the uncertainty and nuance in any given point of view, no matter how sensible and well-supported. Finally, language that is perceived as more receptive is generally more positive in tone, relying on fewer negations (such as "no," "don't," "can't" or "won't") and using more positive emotion words.

It is notable that the above approaches are primarily focused on increasing the externally observable behaviors that counterparts perceive as receptive, rather than shifting internal mental

processes. The emphasis on observable behavior has proven effective because research has shown that individuals tend to mimic the conversational style of their counterparts (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2012; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002) and receptiveness is no different (Minson et al., 2024). Thus, to the extent that one party in an interaction wishes to engage in a receptive dialogue they are likely to induce some amount of receptiveness in the other.

A frequently cited component of "active listening" (Itzchakov et al., 2017) is asking questions. People tend to have more positive impressions of and greater willingness to engage with counterparts who they believe are interested in learning about their point of view rather than narrowly focusing on persuasion (Collins et al., 2022). Furthermore, interventions that encourage individuals to ask questions of counterparts lead to more positive interpersonal evaluations and greater conversational enjoyment (Huang et al., 2017). However, not all questions are created equal. For example, sarcastic questions ("Who would possibly believe that?") or questions that demand that the respondent justify or defend their position are unlikely to be effective. Instead, research supports the effectiveness of "elaboration questions" – questions that ask the speaker to elaborate on their previous point (Chen et al., 2010) so as to demonstrate one's desire to learn more about the speaker's position.

How Organizations can Promote Receptive Communication

Structured training on receptiveness. The approaches reviewed above focus on interventions at the individual and interpersonal levels. These interventions can be delivered in the form of training sessions and workshops that dispel common myths about the dynamics of disagreement and offer participants concrete tools for having conversations across opposing perspectives. Importantly, any training needs to feature extensive opportunities to practice effective disagreement skills around common organizational topics. Like any habit, disagreeing

receptively and constructively takes practice and repetition, something people generally lack because they seek to avoid the negative emotions that disagreement often creates. Thus, training interventions must provide participants with concrete tools and ideas and then create the environment for practicing these skills while minimizing interpersonal risk.

Cultivating a culture of receptiveness. Beyond training receptiveness as an individual skill, organizations can and should invest in processes that support a robust culture of receptive communication. For example, at the point of hiring new employees, organizations could signal an interest in recruiting individuals who are able to navigate disagreement well. Employee screening -- which often includes various personality and aptitude tests -- could also include the evaluation of an individual's receptiveness to opposing views using a recently validated, easy to administer scale (Minson et al., 2020) and a discussion about a candidate's experiences navigating workplace disagreement on difficult topics.

Most organizations have regular "touch points" such as weekly team meetings or one-on-ones between employees and their immediate supervisors. Incorporating a practice of receptive disagreement into such existing practices can reinforce the message that the organization is committed to a receptive approach to disagreement without creating more "busywork." For example, decision-making meetings could routinely feature a "devil's advocate" whose job is to disagree with the consensus of the majority and uncover weaknesses in any given plan of action. Observing both the "devil's advocate" and the most senior individual in the room engage with disagreement receptively and explore contradicting ideas with curiosity would model this approach to the other individuals present. A parallel process could be implemented at more formal and infrequent gatherings such as town-hall meetings or annual retreats to show that the practice of receptive disagreement permeates the entire organization, top to bottom.

Incentivizing receptiveness. In addition to training people on receptive disagreement and modeling its effective use, organizations should consider adding this skillset to their routine performance evaluations. A popular saying reminds us that "what is measured improves" – suggesting that like with most skills, regular evaluation of an individual's capacity for managing disagreement is likely to lead to measurable gains. Performance evaluations often ask employees to rate themselves and each other on a variety of interpersonal skills including teamwork, leadership, and communication. Receptive engagement with opposing perspectives could easily be added to these commonly-measured attributes to highlight its importance to organizational success.

Considering the impact of communication norms. In seeking to foster receptive communication, organizations should consider how and where employees most frequently communicate. Many online tools, such as Slack or other texting platforms encourage short, informal interactions which increase efficiency but can also foster misunderstanding and contribute to conflict escalation. Recent research points to the important benefits of the human voice for fostering rapport and humanizing conflict counterparts (Schroeder et al., 2017). In order to foster receptive communication, organizations should consider the norms and habits around how employees interact during disagreement or when making consequential decisions. Encouraging more frequent voice calls, video calls, and in person interactions can actually increase efficiency and save time by preventing miscommunication and allowing for the fostering of stronger interpersonal connections.

Identifying organizational barriers to receptiveness. Beyond implementing the concrete recommendations outlined above, leaders should regularly ask themselves what prevents their organization from embracing receptive disagreement. For example, could aspects of the culture

be reinforcing “arguments for arguments’ sake”? Are individuals so surrounded by like-minded others that they have little opportunity to disagree even if they wanted to? Is the organization so committed to a particular ideology that opposing views are poorly tolerated when encountered? Only through robust inquiry and reflection can leaders hope to build a culture that fully integrates receptive communication into its very fabric.

Conclusion

Extensive organizationally-based literatures in communications, marketing, negotiations, and decision science have examined the dynamics of persuasion and attitude change. Yet, in the face of deeply entrenched views, persuasion is rarely effective. In the current manuscript, we highlight an alternative approach that parties in disagreement might pursue – namely fostering receptiveness to opposing perspectives. We further propose several interventions for increasing receptiveness – an approach to conflictual dialogue possessing many commonalities with integrative bargaining in negotiations.

Our argument hinges on the idea that persuasion begets resistance, often resulting in greater entrenchment. By contrast, receptiveness enables a deeper consideration of the values and beliefs that led to the current disagreement and a broader exploration of the issue space, resulting in identification of novel solutions. Furthermore, receptiveness often has interpersonal benefits, increasing the likelihood of future dialogue as well as the implementation of mutually designed agreements.

Throughout human history, soaring rhetoric intended to change hearts and minds has enjoyed a privileged place in communication. Yet, as the world becomes more interconnected and people from all walks of life gain greater access to information and communities that support and re-affirm their beliefs, we must consider other approaches to solving the challenges of

conflicting ideologies. We hope that the current work leads to a broader and more robust discussion of approaches to maintaining organizational effectiveness by building cooperation in an ever more complicated and interdependent world.

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