[Celeste Headlee: How Can We Have Civil Conversations With The Other Side](http://www.npr.org/2017/10/17/560195583/celeste-headlee-how-can-we-have-civil-conversations-with-the-other-side)

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GUY RAZ, HOST:

It's the TED Radio Hour from NPR. I'm Guy Raz. And on the show today - ideas about dialogue and exchange. And in some ways, it might seem like we're already doing a lot of that on the phone through texts and social media.

CELESTE HEADLEE, BYLINE: Right. I think we trick ourselves into thinking we are because we're talking more and in more different ways, but we're not actually having conversations.

RAZ: This is journalist Celeste Headlee.

HEADLEE: And I'm the host of On Second Thought at Georgia Public Broadcasting.

RAZ: Celeste also wrote a book called "We Need To Talk."

HEADLEE: Yeah, which usually makes people afraid.

RAZ: Oh, my God, well, if somebody comes up to me and says, we need to talk, I'm - my heart starts to race. I'm freaking out.

HEADLEE: Yeah, and I want to reclaim that, actually, because we need to start actually talking to one another, not at one another.

RAZ: OK, so obviously, a lot of us are not doing this, right? Like, at this point in our history, a lot of people have a hard time talking, and exchanging ideas and hearing other points of view. So where do you even start?

HEADLEE: OK, so there is a place to start. And the first thing I would say is that we don't have to reinvent the wheel here. There have been people who were able to have productive, and respectful, and human, warm conversations with others whose views were absolutely repugnant to them. And I tell the great story in the book about Xernona Clayton and Calvin Craig. And...

RAZ: And she was, like, a civil rights activist.

HEADLEE: Yeah, and Calvin Craig was a grand dragon in the KKK. And over the course of months, they would just have conversations, and then he announced - he had a press conference and said, I'm leaving the KKK; my mind has been changed by Xernona Clayton. You know, and I've spoken with Xernona a few times, and she said, I didn't try to change his mind; I just listened to him.

She said, you know, there was nothing, I, a black woman, was going to be able to say to him that was going to make any difference. And she also said Martin Luther King - she was a good friend of the King family. And she said, you know, he always said, just take the person where they are, and accept them where they are.

And so that's where you start. I would say, let go of this idea that you're entering into a conversation in order to change someone's mind or educate them because that's always going to be frustrating. And that's probably where the anger comes from because that's not going to happen. So let go of that intention. And instead, enter into the conversation saying, OK, I'm going to learn something from this conversation. That's something you have control over.

RAZ: So this story about Xernona Clayton is incredible. And I guess she would say that this isn't impossible.

HEADLEE: Yeah.

RAZ: And you talk about some of these things in your book and in your TED Talk about ways that you can actually have constructive and productive conversations.

HEADLEE: Right, and they're simple. They're not easy, but they're simple.

HEADLEE (SOUNDBITE OF TEDx TALK): Number one, don't multitask. And I don't mean just set down your cellphone, or your tablet, or your car keys or whatever's in your hand. I mean, be present. Be in that moment. Use open-ended questions. In this case, take a cue from journalists. Start your questions with who, what, where, when, why or how.

Go with the flow. That means thoughts will come into your mind, and you need to let them go out of your mind. We're sitting there having a conversation with someone, and then we remember that time that we met Hugh Jackman in a coffee shop. (LAUGHTER)

HEADLEE: And we stop listening. Stories and ideas are going to come to you. You need to let them come, and let them go. Don't equate your experience with theirs. If they're talking about the trouble that they're having at work, don't tell them about how much you hate your job. It's not the same. It is never the same. All experiences are individual. And more importantly, it is not about you.

One more rule - listen. I cannot tell you how many really important people have said that listening is perhaps the most - the No. 1 most important skill that you could develop. And look, I know it takes effort and energy to actually pay attention to someone, but if you can't do that, you're not in a conversation. You're just two people shouting out barely related sentences in the same place. (LAUGHTER)

RAZ: You know, I find myself having, like, really serious conversations with friends about things we disagree on, and it can get pretty heated.

HEADLEE: Yeah.

RAZ: And I try to employ a lot of these rules. But what do you do when your core values are just totally misaligned with the person that you're talking with - like, to such an extent that the things they believe just offend you to your core? Do you still engage?

HEADLEE: I do. And I can give you an example of this. So I am a mixed-race person. The last time my family lived in Georgia, we were owned. And I think most people would understand my feelings on the Confederate battle flag. But I have a number of friends that absolutely think that is about heritage, and it's not about hate, et cetera, et cetera.

And I was having one of these discussions with someone earlier, and he started to say to me, well, I'm not going to talk about this with you because I know where you stand. And I said, you know what? That actually frees us up. Just tell me what you think because here's the thing. Our views are opposed on this, but I am interested in your perspective, why this is so important to you. And if I can just start from the outset and allay those expectations that someone's going to change my mind, sometimes it just sort of relieves that pressure. Then it just becomes about hearing someone's perspective.

RAZ: So you wouldn't respond to his argument. You would just listen to what he said.

HEADLEE: I might. I might, but I start by just listening and asking questions, but because he likes me and respects me, usually he leaves an opening for me to express my feelings, and I do honestly without condemnation. But, you know, it's hard for people to open up like this. It's hard. That makes you vulnerable.

RAZ: Yeah. It's interesting because it's very true, and yet, it creates a conflict because you think, well, the act of listening suggests that those views can be aired publicly. Like, you know, there's some things that you could say people should just keep inside their heads because it's not acceptable to say them or hear them out.

HEADLEE: OK. But how well has that worked? Because that's been our strategy so far.

RAZ: Yeah.

HEADLEE: And we're still fighting the Civil War.

RAZ: Look, I think you're right about that. I think that makes sense. But at the same time, I wonder whether it's a one-way street because by being willing to listen to somebody else you're essentially sending a message that you are an open-minded person, and that other person may not be open-minded.

HEADLEE: Yeah, but how do we as a society change that? You know, one of the things that struck me after the march in Charlottesville, they went and interviewed the mother of the man who murdered the anti-fascist protester.

RAZ: Yeah.

HEADLEE: And she was stunned at what he was involved in. And they said, did you not know? She said, no, no, no, no, no, we never - we never talked about that stuff. We don't talk about politics. And I thought to myself I wonder what would have changed in some of these minds if people actually didn't avoid these conversations and allowed human compassion to eventually work. Because I think when you get isolated into an ideological bubble and you're only hearing people that agree with you, it pushes you further and further toward the fringes. And the dangerous situation we find ourselves in is that most Americans are now in an ideological bubble whether they're on the right or the left.

RAZ: Yeah.

HEADLEE: So it's no longer going to be the fringes unless we begin to pop the bubble and hear opinions that we find repugnant. And so until we start listening to these opinions we don't like, it's going to get worse.

RAZ: Celeste Headlee - her book is called "We Need To Talk: How To Have Conversations That Matter." You can find her entire talk at ted.com.

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