

EBONÉ BELL

12 MONTH BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES BEFORE THE MIDTERMS GUIDE: A MONTH-TO-MONTH GUIDE TO BUILD BETTER CONVERSATIONS

Election years tend to bring out strong opinions – and strong feelings. But they also bring opportunities: opportunities to listen, to learn, and to lead differently. Over the next year, try one small but meaningful action each month to strengthen your ability to engage with others, especially when conversations get tough. The goal isn't to agree on everything—it's to learn how to lead through difference.

These are the same tools I explore in my keynotes and workshops on civil discourse and leadership – helping institutions create spaces where people feel seen, heard, and respected, even when they disagree.

DECEMBER: Practice Active Listening

Active listening is defined as the practice of engaging closely with what a person is saying and indicating understanding. This month, choose one conversation where you focus solely on listening—no interruptions, no corrections, just curiosity. Ask follow-up questions to better understand the other person's perspective. The more you practice, the more you'll strengthen your listening ear.

JANUARY: Map Your Values

Write down your top three personal or leadership values. These could be things like honesty, community, fairness, creativity, courage, or respect. Then, take a few minutes to reflect on how these values show up when you're in tough conversations or making decisions that affect others.

Let's say one of your core values is respect. When a classmate shares an opinion, you strongly disagree with, that value might remind you to pause and listen before responding—because for you, respect means treating others with dignity even when you differ. Or maybe your value is justice. That might guide you to speak up when you notice someone being left out of a discussion or treated unfairly.

FEBRUARY: Learn to "Pause Before Reacting"

Next time you feel frustrated or defensive in a conversation, take a breath before responding. Notice what's happening emotionally and give yourself a moment to respond thoughtfully, not impulsively. This is what I call the difference between being reactive and proactive.

MARCH: Have a Courageous Conversation

I always say change happens in conversation. When audience members share their personal and powerful stories with me, I often respond, "I want to encourage you to share your story with someone else this week." Identify one topic you've been avoiding—maybe politics, identity, or something changing on campus—and talk about it with someone you trust. Lead with curiosity and respect, and notice what shifts when you both choose to listen and learn.

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APRIL:

Attend an Event with
Different Perspectives

Go to a panel, lecture, or community event featuring viewpoints different from your own. Listen for what you can learn—not just what you agree or disagree with.

A couple of years ago, I gave this same homework assignment to faculty and staff at the University of Wisconsin–Stout. The stories they later shared were powerful—not just because of what they learned, but because of the impact their presence had on the individuals and communities they engaged with.

MAY:

Amplify Another Voice

What if I told you you're sitting on a power that you don't even realize you have? The power to make people feel seen, heard and respected. Well, it's time to start putting that power into action. Share the story, idea, or initiative of someone whose perspective is often overlooked. This could be a peer, a student group, or a local community member.

JUNE:

Practice "Yes, And" Thinking

Borrowed from improv, this approach helps build bridges in discussions. Instead of rejecting someone's idea outright, acknowledge their point ("yes") and build on it ("and") to find common ground.

JULY:

Learn Something Local

Research one issue impacting your campus or local community. Who's involved? What's at stake? Understanding local context helps you lead with empathy and awareness. This is also a great time to support Black and Brown-owned businesses, women's initiatives, AAPI organizations, LGBTQ organizations, and other similar communities and causes in your area.

AUGUST:

Step Back to Step Up

Take a week to notice when you tend to speak the most. In your next group discussion or meeting, make space for others to share before you contribute. This is a great exercise in strengthening your leadership skills through inclusive leadership and humility.

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SEPTEMBER:

Reflect on Your Media Diet

With just two months to go until the midterms, we'll be bombarded with ads, clickbait, emotional stories, and endless opinions. It's a lot—and it can take a toll.

This month, notice your media habits. Are you feeling informed, or just drained? Give yourself permission to take breaks when you need to. Step away from the noise to protect your peace and refocus your energy. And when you tune back in, seek out a mix of reliable sources to help you see the bigger picture. Good leadership starts with clarity, not overload.

OCTOBER:

Reconnect with Purpose

As the midterm season approaches, revisit your "why." What kind of leader, peer, or community member do you want to be during times of tension and change?

NOVEMBER:

Host a Dialogue Circle
or Reflection Space

Invite peers or colleagues to come together and reflect on what they've learned over the year. Create a space where people can voice their feelings, concerns, and hopes without fear of judgment. The goal isn't to fix or debate—it's simply to listen, connect, and be heard.

Several institutions I've worked with host monthly virtual reflection circles that follow this same model. There's no agenda, just a space for people to show up as they are and share what's on their hearts. These spaces sometimes remind us that we're not alone and that belonging starts with being seen and heard.



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If you commit to these practices, I truly believe you'll make a difference—not only for those around you, but for yourself as well. These actions can strengthen your own sense of calm, confidence, and civil well-being while helping you build stronger, more connected communities.

And remember, we can't control how others show up in election conversations – but we can choose to lead with empathy, integrity, and courage.