



Tolerating Disagreement

A PRIMER FOR NONPROFITS
WORKING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Introduction: Staying in Relationship When It Gets Hard

Most nonprofits serve, partner with, or depend on people who see the world differently than their staff or leadership. Diversity in experience, belief, and identity is both the great strength and the great challenge of nonprofit work. Whether the difference is racial, cultural, political, or rooted in faith or geography, it inevitably brings disagreement — about priorities, language, or even what “justice” means.

For organizations whose impact depends on trust and collaboration, disagreement can feel risky. It can surface pain, slow decisions, or strain partnerships. Yet, as research by Cohesion Strategy Allison K. Ralph, Ph.D. shows, thriving organizations don’t eliminate disagreement — they learn to tolerate it.

To tolerate disagreement is not to avoid conflict or lower standards. It means developing the skill, discipline, and structures to hold difference without rupture — to stay in relationship when things get hard. It’s a practice of humility, curiosity, and long-term thinking.

When nonprofits learn to tolerate disagreement, they become better equipped to navigate diversity with integrity, maintain trust with multiple communities, and model the kind of resilient pluralism that healthy democracies require.



What It Means to Tolerate Disagreement

Tolerating disagreement is the capacity to keep working together amid honest, unresolved difference. It recognizes that collaboration across race, class, faith, or ideology will always include tension — and that this tension can be productive rather than destructive.

Organizations that tolerate disagreement:

- **Acknowledge differences openly rather than pretending them away.**
- **Hold tension in service of shared purpose, not against it.**
- **Distinguish between values that are core and those that can flex.**
- **Stay in relationship even when alignment is incomplete.**

Allison's study of multifaith organizations shows that diverse faith communities often disagreed deeply about issues such as gender, sexuality, or theology — yet they still collaborated successfully on local problems like housing, child care, and mental health. These groups didn't aim for uniformity; they practiced durable connection.

As one leader put it, "There is tension when you work with real people who have real differences — but that's democracy at its best."

Why It Matters for Nonprofits



1. It Expands the Circle of Collaboration

When disagreement doesn't automatically end a partnership, more people can participate. Nonprofits that practice toleration can bridge divides among community members, funders, and partner organizations that might otherwise never work together.

2. It Builds Credibility and Trust

Communities recognize authenticity. When nonprofits are transparent about differences and demonstrate respect in the face of them, they gain legitimacy and trust — even from those who don't fully agree.

3. It Reduces Polarization Within and Beyond the Organization

Movements often fracture when internal debate hardens into purity tests. Tolerating disagreement keeps relationships intact and prevents ideological “purification” that weakens long-term coalitions.

4. It Models Democratic Practice

Listening, negotiation, and principled disagreement are democratic skills. Nonprofits that cultivate them contribute directly to civic renewal and healthier public discourse.



PRACTICING TOLERATION: FIVE CORE STRATEGIES

1. Name Difference Early and Respectfully

- a. Acknowledge diverse perspectives from the outset. Naming difference reduces defensiveness and builds safety. Silence about disagreement often breeds mistrust.

2. Anchor Collaboration in Shared Purpose

- a. People can disagree on beliefs yet still act together for common goals — whether improving schools, reducing violence, or caring for neighbors. Keep the focus on shared outcomes rather than identical motives.

3. Design for Dialogue, Not Uniformity

- a. Build space for honest conversation. Use clear facilitation practices, ground rules, or reflection time. Replace “consensus-only” models with frameworks that prioritize mutual understanding and progress. Hire skilled external facilitators when the going gets tough.

4. Define the Non-Negotiables

- a. Identify which values or commitments are core to your mission and which areas allow for diversity. This clarity lets you hold firm where integrity requires it while working through disagreement elsewhere.

5. Repair and Reflect After Conflict

- a. Disagreement will sometimes cause friction or harm. Address it quickly, transparently, and with humility. Build feedback and learning into your team culture so relationships can deepen after rupture.

Examples in Practice:

- **Together West Michigan** focuses on shared issues like housing and mental health, explicitly steering clear of the most polarizing topics. By naming its boundaries, it preserves unity while enabling meaningful action.
- **Interfaith Action of Southwest Michigan** allows congregations to “opt out” of certain advocacy actions while continuing to collaborate on others — keeping a diverse network intact over time.
- **Michigan Interfaith Power & Light** continues energy efficiency partnerships with conservative congregations even when they disagree on broader social issues. This continuity sustains trust and real progress.

These organizations demonstrate that tolerating disagreement is not weakness; it's strategic resilience. It enables steady, incremental change that outlasts ideological cycles.

BUILDING A CULTURE THAT CAN HOLD DIFFERENCE



Tolerating disagreement works best when it becomes part of an organization's DNA.

- **Model from the top.** Leaders should practice humility, curiosity, and transparent decision-making.
- **Invest in skill-building.** Train staff and volunteers in facilitation, conflict transformation, and cross-cultural communication.
- **Create reflective space.** Encourage debriefs after challenging conversations; honor the learning that emerges from discomfort.
- **Reward collaboration across divides.** Celebrate examples of relationship maintenance and compromise as much as advocacy wins.

When nonprofits normalize disagreement as a natural part of progress, they create cultures that are adaptive, relational, and emotionally intelligent — the kind of cultures that last.



Conclusion: The Strength to Stay

Tolerating disagreement is not about being “neutral” or avoiding hard truths. It’s about choosing relationship over rupture — about keeping the circle wide enough for continued work even when consensus is out of reach.

In a diverse and divided world, the capacity to hold disagreement with integrity is one of the most important competencies a nonprofit can cultivate. It keeps communities connected through change, sustains partnerships through challenge, and makes possible the long arc of transformation that short-term alignment never achieves.

In the end, tolerating disagreement is not just a skill. It’s an act of hope — the belief that we can stay in relationship, even when we don’t yet see eye to eye.