Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: Race. Politics. Immigration. Gun control. These are some of the hot button issues in America today. They elicit strong emotions in people and often cause conflict in conversations. However, tense discussions don't have to be disrespectful or result in screaming matches. While it takes effort and practice, being civil in our conversations is possible. I’m Emily Yeap.

Emily Yeap: Dr. Elizabeth Dudash-Buskirk is associate professor of communication at Missouri State University. She's also the director of Be Civil Be Heard, a nonprofit through Community Foundation of the Ozarks and administered out of MSU’s Center for Community Engagement. She joins me today to discuss how we can strive for more civil conversations with others.

Elizabeth D.: A civil conversation doesn't look like two people who get together and start agreeing with each other or listening to the other and then saying, "Oh, of course you're right." Civility has to do with first giving that prompt and that space to listen, because that's the first civil thing we can do.

And then a conversation requires that the person on the other side be willing to do the same. So if we look at it less as a "When do I get to speak?" and more as a "When do I get to listen?" then that's what a civil conversation looks like. Allowing people to disagree, allowing people to be angry sometimes because we have to respect not just what people say but how they say it.

Emily Yeap: Why is it important for a person to listen first and then speak?

Elizabeth D.: Is it to give me some sort of advantage? And the answer is, we're not looking for an advantage in a conversation. We're looking to learn and to contribute to a learning experience. So if people enter into a conversation, a debate, with an idea of being civil, then what they'll do is look at it less as a "How do I win?" and instead choose to say, "How is it we're going to all learn from this and how can I contribute to the learning?" That has to start with being open to the ideas that might be out there that are different from ours.

Emily Yeap: Listening is key in having civil conversations because people want to be heard.

Elizabeth D.: The first rule of rhetoric that comes from ancient Egypt says that a person would rather be heard and rejected than ignored. And that goes for us, too. We just want to be heard. When the city of Springfield named Be Civil Be Heard, it was with the intention of not Be Civil and Speak Civilly. It was Be Civil Be Heard because we know that what people want is to actually be heard.

How do you do that? Well online, that's very difficult, right? You can't shout the loudest. I guess you could use caps but that's considered uncivil. But you can repeat your message constantly and be consistent in it. Because online, the number of times that you say something is far more important than how loud you are when you say it. There are ways online to just be consistent.

Emily Yeap: Besides listening, take time to engage in a frank exchange of views.

Elizabeth D.: If we start viewing other human beings that we're interacting with no matter how well we know them as people who are going to hold us accountable for what we say, it's pretty amazing how much better we interact. Through that, we're more effective naturally.

I had an experience the other day where I had a political candidate who was out and about. We were sitting at a coffee shop, we invited citizens to come and talk to him, and his opponent showed up. His opponent said, “Could I sit down and have coffee?” The answer had to be "yes." The answer had to be, "Yes, let's talk about where we differ."

That is absolutely essential because that idea of inviting people to conversation is an indicator that you are going to listen to them and hear them out. At the end of it, if you walk away saying, "We disagree but that's okay." Knowing where you disagree is sometimes as important as screaming that you disagree. Because if you can find the point where you disagree, that means you found things that you can agree on, that an issue is important.

It's not a process that can be done without work and without practice. It's a process of understanding interactions, of engaging interactions, and of always asking for them to speak first.

Emily Yeap: You can read about Be Civil Be Heard's 10 Tenets of Civility at becivilbeheard.org/ten-tenets. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at KSMU.org.