



The Role of the Great Decisions Discussion Group Participant

Great Decisions discussion group participants are the most important element of any discussion program. The interest, enthusiasm, and commitment of each participant ultimately determine the successful dynamics of the group.

The goal of a discussion group is not to master the eight topics of the **Great Decisions** briefing book, but rather to deepen one's awareness and understanding of these important issues as they relate to and shape U.S. foreign policy objectives.

A good discussion is characterized by the informed and thought-provoking dialogue between individuals like you!



A few key points

Make every effort to attend all meetings • The comfort level of the group depends upon the familiarity with other participants, not just as acquaintances of members of the same organization, but as peers in this particular group with its own special history and fellowship.

Communicate with the discussion group facilitator • The discussion group facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points. The facilitator may need advice from the group members when this is necessary. Chances are you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

Help keep the discussion on track • Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how your points are related to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

Address your remarks to the group rather than the facilitator • Address your questions to a particular participant; especially one who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas, but avoid judging their ideas, suggestions, or perceptions.

Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you • Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants point of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to respect people who disagree with you. They have reasons for their beliefs that are usually valid or rea-

sonable. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with. This level of comprehension and empathy will make you a much better advocate for whatever position you come to.

Listen carefully to others • Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak. Keep a pen handy to jot down your thoughts; this may help you listen more attentively since you will not be concerned about losing the point you want to make.

Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion • Expressing your ideas is important, but discussion groups are most successful when more views are shared. Leave room for other group members to get their points across.

Don't withdraw from the discussion • You have a responsibility beyond that of listening. Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience for all. Contributing your opinions, questions, and experiences adds to the knowledge that group members gain from one another.

Engage in friendly disagreement • Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogenous on the surface. Don't be afraid to play devil's advocate, but don't go overboard. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself and others whether reason or emotion is running the show.

Humor and a pleasant manner go far in making a point • A belligerent attitude may prevent acceptance of your assertions. Be aware that aggressive body language can close you off from the group.

Maintain an open mind • You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your earlier statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider.

Think critically • Don't accept without question the statements made by authors of the readings, the facilitator, or other participants. Carefully consider all information presented. Be on the lookout for deceptive argument techniques such as bandwagon or scare tactics, personal attack, faulty deductive reasoning, and vague generalizations.

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