

Leadership and Civil Civic Dialogue Across “Enemy” Lines: Promoting the Will for Dialogue

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Abstract

Leaders often display the all-too-human characteristic of talking only or mostly to people with whom they agree. Yet, to be effective as a leader in many circumstances requires reaching out and engaging in dialogue with those who one may fundamentally disagree and may even view as an enemy. To do so requires a particular conception of leadership, one that values dialogue. Effective dialogue, however, requires both skill and will. This article describes the concepts and strategies of a university program developed to encourage the will to engage in dialogue.

Introduction

Leaders often display the all-too-human characteristic of talking only or mostly to people with whom they agree. Yet, to be effective as a leader in many circumstances requires reaching out and engaging in dialogue even with those with whom one has fundamental disagreements and may even view as an enemy. To do so requires a particular view of leadership, one that values dialogue, as well as courage.

In the past, and for many today, leaders have been assumed to be the ones with the vision and the answers. A still popular conception of leaders is that they get people to do what they want done. This old command and control type of leadership did not lend itself to dialogue. Fortunately, changing conceptions of leadership provide a different view of a leader's role and a more hospitable climate for dialogue (Burns, 1978; Groysberg & Slind, 2012; Heifetz, 1994; Perreault, 1996). Heifetz (1994), for example, in *Leadership without Easy Answers*, provides a view of leadership that challenges such popular conceptions of leadership. His basic argument is that while a leader **can** provide the solution

or vision for a group in some situations, in other cases a leader may need to engage with others in seeking solutions because the problems faced by leaders are without easy answers.

Heifetz (1994) illustrates his point well with his discussion of a conflict in Tacoma, Washington. Arsaco had been polluting the area for decades, and William Ruckelhaus, head of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was called in to resolve the problem. Arsaco expected Ruckelhaus to decide in their favor and the environmentalists expected him to side with them. What Ruckelhaus did instead was to engage the entire community in dialogue and problem solving. People came to the early town hall meetings polarized, with buttons saying jobs or environment; but, towards the end of the series of meetings, the buttons read both. As a leader, Ruckelhaus took the risk of stepping out of traditional expectations of a leader's role, and trusting the citizens to resolve the issue. Many of today's problems require the kind of dialogue initiated by Ruckelhaus.

A second example comes from the civil rights era. Ann Atwater, a civil rights leader, and C. P. Ellis, a Ku Klux Klan leader, were asked to serve on a new committee, Save Our Schools (SOS), which was focused on public school desegregation. In a book, *Best of Enemies*, Davidson (1996) recounts how the leaders of this project knew the power of bringing together opposing views. Meeting initially as enemies, Atwater and Ellis over time came to know each other through the formal and informal opportunities they had for dialogue, to see their commonalities, and to become best friends. Their story is also recounted in the documentary, *An Unlikely Friendship* (Bloom, 2003).

It is the many stories like these and the dispiriting lack of civil dialogue in United States political life that was the inspiration for development of the *Civic Discourse and Opposing Views* series at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), sponsored by the American Democracy Project (ADP). To improve the level of discourse and civility necessary for the functioning of a democracy, people need to develop both the ability and the willingness to listen to and hear views with which they disagree. Although it is common to educate for the ability to listen, the UNI series addresses the willingness to listen.

The Civic Discourse and Opposing Views Series

The UNI series is an opportunity for students to experience both presenting and listening to a position with which they disagree. For each event, a controversial topic is selected and a two-part program is presented. For the first half, students are paired up and provided with talking points on the topic chosen. An example is the question, "Should the U.S. re-institute a draft?" The audience is provided with

six yes and no talking points, and may add their own arguments. For example, an argument for the draft is that a draft is fairer; service should not fall mostly on people who need the money. An argument against is that a draft is unfair, that some would still be able to get exemptions.

After students are paired up, they are asked to decide who will take which position in the first round, and are given a couple of minutes to learn their position. Students are encouraged to try to put themselves into the position and talk as if they really held that position. This is the most challenging part of this exercise, that is persuading students to really get into the position as if it was their own and not just read off the talking points to each other. For the second round, students switch sides.

After each student has had the opportunity to present both sides, debriefing follows. Discussion questions include the following: What was it like to argue a view with which you disagreed? Why do people not want to listen to people with whom they disagree? and, What do you see as the benefits of understanding the point of view of someone with whom you may disagree?

For the second half of the session, students engage with a panel that represents the different sides. The panel is also intended to model civil civic discourse for the students. It is important to emphasize this verbally and in writing to the panel members. If the panel members do not know each other, it may be helpful to bring them together for a face-to-face meeting prior to the event. Doing this may enable them to establish a rapport that would increase the likelihood of civil dialogue being modeled.

Dialogue, Not Debate

Central to being able to engage in civil civic dialogue is an understanding of the differences between dialogue and more adversarial interactions. Clarifying the differences between dialogue and debate can be useful in helping people think through how they are approaching a situation. The goals and the outcomes of the two are quite different. Yankelovich (1999) in *The Magic of Dialogue* outlines a number of contrasts between them. For example, in a debate context, participants attempt to prove the other side wrong whereas in a dialogue context, participants work together toward common understanding.

A person's mindset and stance toward others is quite different under these two approaches. Martin Buber (1923, 1996) in *I and Thou* provides one of the best – and inspirational – groundings of what it means to engage in dialogue Buber posits two attitudes human beings may adopt toward the world: *I-Thou*, a relation

of subject to subject, and *I-It*, a relation of subject to object. For Buber, dialogue within an *I-Thou* relationship is a way of being. The relationship of *I-Thou*, he states, “can only be spoken with one’s whole being.” (pp. 54, 62). Thou “has no borders” so when someone says Thou, “he stands in relation” (p. 55). Buber also discusses the difference between an *I-Thou* relationship and an *I-It* relationship by contrasting egos and persons as follows: “Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos” and “Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons” (p. 112).

The *I-Thou* relationship is, then, a relationship between persons, not egos. It is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, as implied by the contrasts delineated above.

Similar to Martin Buber (1923, 1996), Nancy M. Dixon (1996) in *Perspectives on Dialogue* sees dialogue as “talk, a special kind of talk--that affirms the person-to-person relationship among discussants” and affirms “the legitimacy of others’ perspectives” (p. 24). It is this affirmation of others and their perspectives that is so central to dialogue, and which a UNI panel is intended to model – and to inspire!

Interestingly, a recent article by Groysberg and Slind (2012) in *Harvard Business Review* proposes a model of leadership as a conversation to replace a top-down leadership model that has become less viable. They advocate that leaders engage in “genuine conversation with the people who work for and with them” (p. 79). The article almost reads as if Buber’s (1923, 1996) perspective has been applied to today’s organizations.

Motivational Issues Impacting the Will to Engage

Awareness that not everyone values listening to views opposed to their own is an important consideration when engaging in civic dialogue. Not so long ago, it seemed a given that listening to others was always to be welcomed. It has become distressingly clear how false that assumption was. Not everyone considers listening to opposing views important or even desirable; this is especially true for the idea of listening to those deemed to be enemies. A number of reasons why people might take such a position – mostly unconscious – can be identified:

- They believe listening may convey legitimacy. Some believe listening to an opposing view might be interpreted as giving legitimacy to a view with which they disagree. They confuse understanding with agreement, and need to recognize that understanding a position does not mean one agrees with it. This confusion can lead to negative reactions to a leader’s attempt to collaborate, as seen in the reaction to leaders of pro-life and pro-choice

groups who engage in dialogue with each other but who are labeled traitors by their followers (Isaacson-Jones, 1992; Public Conversations Project, 2001).

- They may believe that to listen to someone with whom they have a disagreement is a sign of weakness.
- They fear that listening may result in being labeled as wishy-washy. Only wishy-washy liberals do that was a response received in a discussion with a colleague on the importance of listening to people with whom one disagrees.
- They fear they may be challenged. People's sense of self is often tightly linked to their belief system, and if they are challenged on their beliefs, and even put down, their sense of self as a person might be disrupted or shaken.
- They do not believe in compromise. People differ on their willingness to compromise, and some leaders may be influenced by followers who do not want them to compromise. See, for example, a study (Garrett, 2010) that found that 49% of respondents admire political leaders who do not compromise. If one is not willing to compromise, why listen to different views.
- They may view not listening as an important component of a conscious strategy, a strategy that may be most tempting for people in powerful leadership positions. For example, the Bush White House (2000-2008) had a particular take on listening to people or groups deemed to be enemies. For them, listening was a reward for agreement, not a prelude to discussion that may lead to an agreement. For examples refer to Froomkin (2009), Gannon (2001), and other discussions of Iran during those years.

Much of the unwillingness to engage in dialogue with people with whom one disagrees lies at an unconscious level, making it harder to change. Related to the belief that some people fear they may be challenged, Yankelovich (1999) in *The Magic of Dialogue* discusses the views of Bohm (1990, 1996) from Bohm's 2006 book, *On Dialogue*, about how assumptions can be so ingrained they become obstacles to dialogue:

David Bohm emphasizes that our most ingrained thought patterns, operating at the tacit level, create many of the obstacles that isolate us from one another. Bohm stresses the link between people's assumptions and their sense of self. He is, in effect, saying, "When your deepest-rooted

assumptions about who you are and what you deem most important in life are attacked, you react as if you are being attacked personally. (p. 45)

A UNI session on civil discourse addresses motivation in multiple ways as discussed above: the hands-on exercise, discussion of the reasons and fears people may have, and real-life examples. In addition, discussion of benefits and potential outcomes is included. The benefits that resulted from the interactions between enemies in the Atwater-Ellis and the Ruckelhaus stories are noted as well as a number of potential outcomes, such as listening to and understanding each other tends to build respect, and you thereby build trust and a basis for working together in the future. Students would also find interesting studies that show that success in business is related to being able to understand the perspective of another person (e.g., McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

Promoting civil dialogue requires attention to people's belief systems and fears; otherwise, the willingness, the motivation, to listen will be blocked. The UNI civic discourse series intends to help students increase their willingness to talk with people with whom they disagree. One student, for example, did not want to argue for a military draft. She said there was no way she could do that because she was so opposed to any draft. The explanation of the reasons for the exercise was repeated, and in the discussion afterward she was one of the students who said the exercise had changed her views. Although she was still opposed to a draft, she could understand how people could hold other views. For such a student the will to engage in dialogue in the future had been enhanced.

Conclusion

Civility, including civil civic discourse, is an issue for our organizations and for our nation as a democracy. Brungardt (2011) discusses the skills gap in the development of soft skills. This gap applies to civility and listening ability and even more so to the willingness to listen to those whose views may be opposed to one's own. Fortunately, although not everyone values listening and according respect to the views of people with whom they disagree, other voices do express the need for such listening, even on the national and political scene. Former Secretary of State James Baker, co-chair of the bipartisan committee on Iraq policy, explained: "I believe in talking to your enemies. I don't think you restrict your conversation to your friends. In my view, it's not appeasement to talk with your enemies" (cited in Pinkerton, 2006, p. C2). Pinkerton, *Newsday* columnist and former Reagan official, supports Baker. He is the source of the Baker quotation in a column titled, *Talking to Bad People Can be a Good Idea*. A significant quotation because of the writer's position is one by Moshe Dayan, former Israeli general and politician, who pointed out, "If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends, you talk to your enemies" (2006, C2).

Leaders, take note. Leaders need to assess their beliefs and fears about engaging in dialogue with their enemies and have the courage to lead, as Heifetz (1994) did. The University of Northern Iowa's *Civic Discourse and Opposing Views* project is intended to be one small contribution to developing the will to engage in dialogue as leaders and as citizens and to influencing development of the civility needed for effective functioning and survival of our organizations and our democracy.

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