Beyond Civility — Update

Two years ago, on the 10th anniversary of September 11th, two prominent members of our Bar, Tim Burke and Alex Triantafilou, respectively the chairmen of the Hamilton Country Democratic and Republican Parties, issued a joint press release suggesting core values that both parties and all Americans hold in common. Soon after, partly inspired by that press release, a group of judges, lawyers, and other civic leaders formed Beyond Civility: Communication for Effective Governance (beyondcivility.org). They were also responding to ABA Resolution 108, also adopted that year, calling on lawyers and bar associations to take a leadership role in addressing the problems of political polarization and paralyzing modes of discourse.

In a September 2012 CBA Report article about Beyond Civility I wrote that in a healthy democracy, as in any healthy relationship, it is critical that people with different views be able to hear and be heard by each other. We reported on communication workshops for elected and civic leaders, and described a plan for Side-by-Side presentations in which pairs of high-profile leaders would tell of people and events that shaped them from childhood, audiences reported in overwhelming percentages that their most negative assumptions and attitudes about the presenting individuals were softened or even changed. While they might still disagree with the presenter, they thought they could more easily have a productive conversation with that person and would be more likely to listen to what he or she had to say in the future. Many were surprised by the change in their attitude.

It seems these personal stories transformed the presenters in the audience’s eyes from political symbols to people with families and influences and troubles much like their own, opening the space for empathy and enabling a more genuine human connection.

In a unique event we called a Back-to-Back, Republican State Rep. Lou Blessing and Democratic State Rep. Denise Driehaus bravely took the stage at the College of Mount St. Joseph to present the opposing party’s position on several controversial statewide issues. This format virtually eliminated the spin and emotion typically employed to obfuscate truly debatable points. Each presenter was asked to keep explaining the other side’s positions and rationales until the other said, “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

It’s hard to measure the true impact of something like this, but the audience reported in overwhelming percentages that the reverse debate format contributed to their ability to “hear and appreciate the different perspectives presented.” More than 80 percent said they felt “much better informed about the issues,” and almost half said their opinions were affected by the presentations. While changing minds was not the goal, opening minds was, and that appears to have occurred.

The Beyond Civility group now is another person’s mind on a political or religious topic knows, these beliefs can be unshakable. To argue facts against them is not just futile, but often counter-productive. Only within rigorous disciplines like law or science might facts ultimately trump people’s preconceived beliefs.

So, how can minds be changed or at least opened to different ideas?

From the four Side-by-Sides, we saw the power of stories to build connections between people. After our Side-by-Side presenters described their families and the people and events that shaped them from childhood, audiences reported in overwhelming percentages that their most negative assumptions and attitudes about the presenting individuals were softened or even changed. While they might still disagree with the presenter, they thought they could more easily have a productive conversation with that person and would be more likely to listen to what he or she had to say in the future. Many were surprised by the change in their attitude.

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The Beyond Civility group now is

By Robert W. Rack, Jr.
redesigning the communication workshops for a new group and planning another series of Side-by-Sides to start in the fall. We are looking for more public figures willing to engage in Back-to-Back issue discussions, though it’s a bit tricky for those who must run for office. Other initiatives, including CLE programs based on these formats, are on the drawing board and will be announced soon. Meanwhile, we hope leaders and citizens alike will experiment with ways to increase real, problem-solving conversation. A healthy democratic society depends on it.

Rack is co-founder of Beyond Civility and retired chief circuit mediator, United States Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit.

### Beyond Civility Steering Committee

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- **Hon. Timothy Black, Esq.** United States District Judge, Southern District of Ohio, Western Division at Cincinnati

**Founders**

- **Bea Larsen, Esq.** Senior Mediator, Center for the Resolution of Disputes
- **Robert Rack, Esq.** Retired Chief Circuit Mediator, United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit

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- **Lou Blessing, Esq.** Former Speaker Pro tem, Ohio House
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