CIVIL WAYS TO SOLVE REAL PROBLEMS

Can partisan politicians govern collaboratively? We still hope so.

In an Enquirer op-ed last September, a local group of civic leaders calling itself Beyond Civility: Communication for Effective Governance announced its intention to address the disabiling problem of political polarization. We noted 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 promised a series of Side-by-Side presentations in which pairs of high-profile leaders would tell stories of their early political and social formation. Now, a year later, we’d like to share what we’ve learned from this experience.

First, we learned from recent studies in psychology and neuroscience that people form what moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls our moral intuitions early in life. Those beliefs steer our thinking and listening into and through adulthood. They dictate whom we trust and believe and what we accept as true or false. As anyone who has tried to change another person’s mind on a political or religious topic knows, these beliefs are usually unshakable. To argue against them is not just futile, but often counter-productive.

The next discovery was 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 negative assumptions and attitudes about the presenting individuals were softened or even changed. While they might still disagree with the presenter whose party affiliation was different from their own, they said they believed they could more easily have a productive conversation with that person and that they 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 the stories transformed the presenters from political symbols to people with families and influences and troubles not so unlike our 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 argue as persuasively as possible the opposing party’s position on several controversial statewide issues. And they had to keep explaining 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 redesigning the communication workshops and planning another series of Side-by-Sides to start in the fall. If there are more public figures willing to engage in Back-to-Back issue discussions, we’d love to do that again, also. Other initiatives are on the drawing board and will be announced. Meanwhile, we hope leaders and citizens alike will experiment with ways to increase real, problem-solving conversation. A healthy democratic society depends on it.