



DIALOGUE
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Bringing people together

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Uncivil discourse. Mob Mentality. Groupthink. Divide and Conquer. Extreme polarization. You are either with us, or you are against us. You are bad and I am good. Some people just like to say "No".

Whatever you want to call it, there is more of it, it is louder and it happens with increasing frequency in communities and organizations around the globe. And it takes place in your projects and your processes – as well as outside them, online and face-to-face.

On one side, these situations are characterized by opposition, protest, polarization and emotional appeals from a wide variety of people. There is a distinct difference however between the right to protest, dissent or disagree – and the level of extreme incivility and polarization that takes a conversation from constructive to destructive discourse.

On the other side, they are characterized by organizations focused on deciding, announcing, defending and controlling a situation along with persuasion and extolling of benefits and virtues of a given course of action by a wide variety of organizations. Whatever it looks like, its foundation lies in demonizing “the other side”, and this focus takes a conversation from constructive to destructive discourse.

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In a world that is increasingly complex and where all the “easy” problems have been solved, the potential for more conflict and controversy will grow. With issues like fiscal crises, infrastructure deficits, climate change, poverty, food security, immigration and human rights – the solutions are neither simple nor easy, and the opportunity for difference, disagreement, and conflict increases.

When the conversation becomes about winning, about who is “good” and who is “bad” we all lose the ability to solve any problem.

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Trust...or the lack of it

In situations where there is high trust, the opportunities to engage in values based conversations focused on mutually beneficial solutions are easier as parties come together to work through their differences and to identify ways to move forward that work for all.



However, where trust is not present the opposite is true. (This lack of trust is more and more the case in western democracies – if you want to know more you can watch this TED video by Ivan Krastev that discusses the gap between between policy makers and the public http://www.ted.com/talks/ivan_krastev_can_democracy_exist_without_trust.html)

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Your lizard brain kicks in

Trust is based in both emotion and reason, where we make meaning from how we feel and also the knowledge we hold. When you put the two together, you make meaning, in all its fullness where emotions and reason merge. This meaning is made from two parts of your brain: the part that processes information and is logical and analytical; and the part of your brain that protects you from danger and ignites the fight or flight response (i.e. your “lizard brain”).

If your emotional response toward a person (or organization) is negative – because of perceived threat or assignment of negative intention or a lack of understanding or values conflict – then your reason will align with those negative feelings. It won't matter what new facts and arguments the person or organization presents, you will be likely to see them as attempts to win you over or to persuade you of things that are untrue. In fact, the more the facts and arguments that are presented to sway your views, the more likely you will be to be certain of your view. Your brain will trust your emotional response, and make meaning from that response, aligning your analysis and logical processing with that emotion.

The higher the level of animosity, aggression and incivility in the exchanges, the worse the polarization becomes and the further apart the sides get.

In a situation where emotions are triggered, physiological responses take place and blood recedes from thinking part of the brain, rushes to reptilian brain, triggering fight or flight and rendering new information useless and impossible. Your reaction to run away or strike back has its uses in situations of danger, but it also means we take this instinct into situations where it can increase our challenges, where there are better ways to respond. We fail to distinguish between situations that endanger us and those that make us uncomfortable and this stops our learning, understanding and growing and takes all of us away from the opportunity to create something new and better.

Organizations often make one of three choices in a situation where they are faced with this emotional reaction or response. Sometimes they will do more than one.

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- 1) They will either revert to reason and logic, sometimes extolling the benefits and advantages of a given course of action, thinking this will “win” over those who are opposed.
- 2) They will ignore the emotional response and reaction, dismissing it as originating in the far fringes of outside perspective, and move forward without change.
- 3) They will appeal only to the emotional trigger, reaction and response of a group of people or the broader public at large in an attempt to win their emotional support for an issue, manipulating their emotional response of support to further marginalize any opposition.

It is this third choice that contributes to increasing polarization and incivility in discourse. Now that is not to say that actions in this third category are the CAUSE of an increase in aggression, animosity and incivility by the public or community. In fact, those factors can be present entirely without the third choice by an organization.

It is the presence of manipulation, marginalization and incivility on ANY side that causes the constructive conversation to degenerate into a destructive process, frequently with a force of its own.

Groupthink and Mob Mentality

So what can happen when a large group of highly emotional people get together face-to-face or online to talk about a controversial and/or complex issue?



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What is Groupthink?

Groupthink, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment”. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision-making.

This groupthink is present face-to-face and increasingly, in online exchanges and forums.

Symptoms of Groupthink

There are eight symptoms of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability – People become confident in their view and take risks beyond what they would normally do, believing they cannot be defeated
2. Collective rationalization – People do not stop to question their assumption, and believe in the certainty of their position.
3. Belief in inherent morality – Infused with a righteous belief that they are on the “side of angels”, they believe that consequences are irrelevant or worth because they are “good” and others are “bad”
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups – People view those who are not with them, are against them, and therefore there is no need to try to resolve the impasse
5. Direct pressure on dissenters – There is no room for diverse or alternate opinion in the group, and attempts to express those are met with intimidation, exclusion and pressure
6. Self-censorship – If people do not agree entirely, they do not express these views for fear of being excluded or ostracized from the group, in order to preserve their sense of connection and belonging.
7. Illusion of unanimity – People assume everyone agrees with them, and say things like “We all think...” “Everyone here knows...”

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8. Self-appointed 'mindguards' – Members protect the group from information that is problematic or contradictory to the group's cohesiveness, view, and/or decisions, and immediately dismiss those ideas or views.

(Adapted from: http://www.psyc.org/about/pubs_resources/groupthink%20overview.htm)

In addition, in situations of groupthink, an additional factor can come in to play. Called Bystander effect it happens when people in a crowd are less likely to risk their own safety for someone in danger. It creates a diffusion of responsibility, where people are prone to believe someone else will take care of the individual or group being targeted, and where there can be anxiety about the social cost of intervening.

But this same group togetherness can also be a powerful motivator to take action. It creates opportunities to identify when it is time to stand up, and can allow for behaviour that can generate courage. This courage may make it more likely people will be able to take responsibility, and to help others – if we view others as part of our in-group and/or we identify or connect with them. Every great movement or revolution was started by a group of people who had power stripped away from them, and who had the courage and compassion to change the world.

But changing the world takes more than standing up and claiming your power and calling for change. It takes the ability to take others with you, to inspire change in situations of challenge, to call on courage and compassion and work together with others for the collective good. It is about more than protests or petitions.

As noted by Parker Palmer in his 2011 book *"Healing the Heart of Democracy – The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit"*:

Only in totalitarian society is conflict "banished". Conflict does not disappear, of course, but is merely driven underground, replaced with a public illusion of unity that must be enforced by violence. In a healthy democracy, public conflict is not only inevitable but also prized. Taking advantage of our right to disagree fuels our creativity and allows us to adjudicate critical questions of many sorts: true versus false, right versus wrong, just versus unjust. But when our debates degenerate into

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throwing fragment grenades, we go well beyond behaving like boors and barbarians at democracy's gates. We drive from the public square many citizens who do not want a life of combat, citizens who retreat to the illusory safety of their private lives, leaving a public vacuum that antidemocratic powers are eager to fill. When one cannot show up as a citizen without being literally or metaphorically armed, democracy is in decline.

The challenge arises when any one side – or both sides – who differ or disagree choose a course of action that demonizes, diminishes or dismisses the other in order to bolster up their own views and course of action.

- When any party wields emotion as a tool to win an argument, rather than seeking to deeply understand and consider another worldview, value or perspective.
- When the sense of entitlement, power or control becomes so certain for any one group, that there is no room for compromise, difference or exchange of views.
- When an individual or group chooses incivility, aggression (versus assertion), manipulation or polarization as an appropriate means to engage.
- When any one side surrounds themselves overwhelmingly only with those who agree with them, in order to find comfort and security in the rightness of their views.

A recent study by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, supports the negative impact that incivility has on our perception and understanding – being called the “nasty effect”. This article by Meghan Daum of the LA Times, provides an excellent summary of the findings. <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-daum-comments-nasty-effect-20130307,0,833520.column>

“As the researchers found, rude comments don't just affect mood or frame of mind. They affect how the mind frames ideas and processes information. As I've observed it, they have a dramatic effect on how writers write and, perhaps more important, on how readers read — especially those who don't remember a time before electronic media.”

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These are the challenges to our democracy, to any meaningful public engagement process, to our ability as a society to solve complex problems and challenges. These challenges result from the choices we each make, along with the choices our friends, colleagues, neighbours and governing organizations make about the ways in which we participate in discussion with each other.

In face-to-face and online situations, there are many examples of this happening:

- The Our Voice. Our Hamilton. Public engagement process Dialogue Partners planned in early 2013 is a prime example of the power of social media to marginalize, oppose, exclude all voices from being heard, and of groupthink applied in a social media setting.
- All eight symptoms of groupthink, incivility, aggression and manipulation are present in this project.
- You can read more in our blog posts [here](http://dialoguepartners.ca/uncivil-discourse-and-mob-mentality/) (<http://dialoguepartners.ca/uncivil-discourse-and-mob-mentality/>) and an article that provides a different perspective in The Bay Observer here <http://bayobserver.ca/public-engagement-or-cyber-vandalism/>

Another example in the news on a regular basis is the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline project:

- As evidenced in an Open Letter from Minister Joe Oliver published in the Globe and Mail newspaper <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/an-open-letter-from-natural-resources-minister-joe-oliver/article4085663/> and the Northern Gateway Alliance campaign found here <http://northerngatewayalliance.ca/> present a nuanced attempt to marginalize, demonize and/or polarize the “other” side
- Leadnow’s online petition and letter writing campaign against the same pipeline project <http://www.leadnow.ca/canadas-interests> and a similar campaign by Greenpeace

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<http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/campaigns/Energy/tarsands/Get-involved/stop-the-pipeline/> PipeupagainstEnbridge
<http://www.pipeupagainstenbridge.ca/timeline> and many other organizations also take the right to protest, oppose and dissent to a level where polarization and marginalization are viewed as the right means to achieve an end.

Like every public engagement situation, there are many sides and perspectives to any given situation. That includes both the great opportunity, and the great challenge, of groups gathering to talk with open minds and open hearts about their differences.

Changing the conversation. Changing the space. Changing the context.

Democracy is not a spectator sport. It works best when all people participate, take action, find their voice and speak it clearly. But democracy is also not about demanding your way or opposing an idea because you don't like it. It is not saying NO and expecting the other side to stop what they are doing. It is not trying to convince people of the merit of your proposed idea or solution, and then demonizing or dismissing them when they don't agree.

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Democracy requires great courage. Courage to speak your mind AND hear the voices of others. To seek to understand the views and perspectives of people who are the same as you AND of people who are different than you. It is not about gathering those who think like you, and confirming with each other that your view is the “right” one.

When we don't talk about the hard things, we don't grow, change or make progress. We must hold our tensions and differences and talk about them. It is a fallacy that if we do not have conflict we are all safe and fine, and relieved from our suffering. If we sweep it under the carpet, and avoid and hide from it, we aren't better off - we are less than we could be, and we have lost the chance for growth, learning and for collective good. The truth is if we talk about our differences, if we truly understand

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each other, if we stop demonizing each other and drawing lines in the sand, we might be able to come together to solve the complex problems we face.

Just because I don't agree with you, doesn't make me bad. The more you know about someone else the less likely you are to think of them as "the other" or to demonize them, their values or world views. The more you can understand about them, the less likely you are to judge, assume or dismiss them.

We must protect all of our rights to free and open discourse on the things we don't agree about. If we are to be part of a free society, we must all protect each other's right to think and feel differently than we do, even if we don't agree with them. We must act responsibly to care for all of us and speak without fear about all that diminishes. We like these guidelines for civil discourse presented on <http://www.deseretnews.com/site/comments> that create an atmosphere for constructive discourse. Our picture of the month presents another way of encouraging civil and responsible discourse online.

Groupthink (on all sides) is the opposite of participatory democracy. In the power of the group, and the certainty that we all believe the same and are on the "right" side, we lose the courage to speak up and speak for our values, differences and needs and change the world for the better. In dismissing or demonizing those who are opposed to us, we focus our energies on the rightness of our course of action, and lose the opportunity to make better and more sustainable solutions that benefit all.

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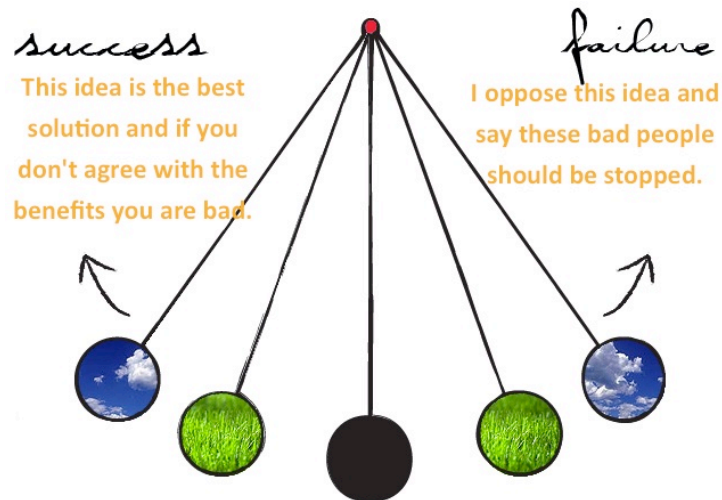
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Like a pendulum, democracy works best when we sit together in the middle of those two extremes and seek to understand, learn and grow – TOGETHER.



I welcome your comments and input, and your stories and experiences too.
Stephani

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