

Civility in public dialogue

Civil discourse is rare but not extinct. It can be a constructive part of the political process.

By **Linda Mather**

Is civil discourse achievable today? Can we be on good behavior when there are so few models?

Can we address the ideals of democracy when the level of discourse on the national and local level is too frequently characterized by rancor, one-upmanship and verbal fighting?

In the recent past, as elections have become more contentious, elected officials have been maligned for self-interest and for focusing on the sole goal of reelection. Recent polls show that Americans are tired of the rancor and partisanship that hinder resolution of complex societal problems.

Certainly, the recent New Jersey budget process does not speak well for civil discourse among our state representatives as well as among citizens. Was any light shed on who an essential state worker is? Or was the question only fodder for comedy shows?

Natural politeness

The good news: Civil discourse is rare but not extinct. Given the will and the opportunity, it can be a constructive part of the political process. Experience both in New Jersey and other states demonstrates

that elected and appointed officials can come together to work on issues critical to the state and its residents. Yes, there are officials anxious and eager to find ways to serve the citizen.

For more than a decade, Forums Institute for Public Policy in Princeton has convened meetings focusing on health care for state decision makers. More than half the respondents to a survey of participants said they had called, e-mailed or written someone they met about issues they discussed.

What is needed to expand this kind of civil public dialogue?

■ **Lesson I:** The importance of opportunity. Like many people, elected and appointed officials are faced with the overwhelming demands of their jobs and pressures from special interests and constituents.

Officials need the opportunity to get away, to think, to consider and to say, "What if." They need venues where they can learn and explore ideas in a safe space created by a neutral convener. They need to be able to get away from the camera and the reporter's notepad.

■ **Lesson II:** The importance of relationships. Officials need the opportunity to build rela-

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tionships with one another. Yes, they often work together; however, they are not necessarily building alliances that will stand the test of time. And these alliances should cross party lines. In our experience, simply introducing people from various departments of state government who are working on the same issue starts the process.

For example, the Forums Institute recently conducted a summit in Bergen County on pandemic flu. Participants included emergency service workers, municipal officials and hospital administrators. It was clear that there were big gaps in their information and big gaps in their knowledge of each other. If the flu hit big-time, everyone would have been involved and would have needed to know not just what each had to do but what the other would be doing. They noted that until the summit they had not had an opportunity to meet. Many expressed a need and desire to continue to communicate and to include businesses and school districts in the dialogue.

Opening up

In this case, civility generated communication and participants opened up to the possibilities of other viewpoints.

■ Lesson III: The importance of process. The standard meeting doesn't work to produce change in the long run. People come, hear the information, gather the handouts, file them when they get back to the office and lose the information in the morass of their daily lives.

In one New Jersey municipality, informal meetings regarding building sidewalks were quickly and easily improved when ground rules were adopted. These rules included one person speaking at a time and people listening to each other, challenging assumptions and looking at all sides of an issue.

Another part of the process is the use of a facilitator. This person provides a space for all to participate on an equal footing with differing viewpoints honored.

In Union County, for example, municipal representatives came together at a session to consider the possibilities of shared services. The standard view is that New Jersey towns are reluctant to embrace a comprehensive shared-service system. Given a safe harbor of a moderator-led session, town officials were able to discuss this issue and, as in the Bergen summit on emergency services, asked for more opportunities to communicate with each other.

Developing democratic impulse

Few problems are easily solved. Property tax reduction continues to bedevil state and local elected officials. Regional planning, school excellence and affordable health care are all difficult because of their complexity.

As officials face those issues — and others — we recommend that they look for venues for civil discourse and learn to model effective communication that truly supports a democracy.

As Minister John Buehrens, once said: “Democracies give everyone the right to speak and deliberate the common good. But that's useless without a broadly shared concern for the quality of discourse in public forums and for standards of civility and respect in dealing with one another.”

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