



Moving Beyond Civility to Understanding

by Kelley Arnold

In an age of increased polarization, many state leaders, political experts and constituents themselves are advocating for a “return to civility.” Civility at its core is the idea that people with opposing and sometimes radically different viewpoints can disagree with integrity, but civility alone is not enough. Seeking to truly understand differing points of view in the governing process not only opens the door to collaboration, but sets the standard within our communities that people come first.

To really demonstrate a commitment to decreased polarization, we need to move beyond the baseline behavior of civility and move toward listening, understanding and respect. Understanding doesn't mean abandoning your deeply held beliefs, but it does require us to give everyone the space to hold and express their equally deeply held beliefs. It also requires each of us to ask “why” from a place of sincerity. Why do people believe what they believe? What personal life experiences have shaped their worldview?

While not always the easiest path forward, making sound and informed decisions that improve the lives of constituents without divisive rhetoric is possible. Powerful discourse is an important part of the fabric of our democracy; however, equally important, is having open hearts and minds to the many perspectives that compose our state houses and communities. By actively seeking understanding, we not only better serve our constituents and communities, we also become catalysts for stronger governance and, ultimately, a stronger union.



Rep. Catherine Toll

Vermont
CSG 2015 Toll Fellow

As the new chair of the House Appropriations Committee, it was a priority to develop the fiscal year 2018 Vermont State Budget using an open and inclusive process. Too often, debate regarding legislation can be limited to a few individuals or contained within the walls of the committee of jurisdiction. Encouraging Vermonters to voice concerns at public hearings was key in crafting this year's budget. In addition, legislators were invited to actively participate in open dialogue to present ideas; each Appropriations Committee member was expected to reach out to colleagues and committees of jurisdiction. Partisan politics were set aside and work focused on the needs of Vermonters. These efforts moved us beyond civility to understanding.

Most notably, the budget contains critical investments, reserves are filled above statutory levels, and provisions are included to help prepare for future uncertainties. Of importance for members of all political stripes is the fact that the total growth rate of 1.3 percent is far below the official revenue forecast of 3.7 percent. This document was not constructed by a small partisan group behind closed doors, but rather it was truly a budget of the whole.

Many proposals were incorporated in the final product as evidenced by a strong bipartisan vote. On the budget's first trip through the House and Senate, it passed on votes of 143-1 and 30-0 respectively. News outlets reported the budget to be highly successful. However, just a few days prior to adjournment, the budget bill was targeted as a vehicle to carry a controversial initiative proposed by the administration and the budget is now the subject of a veto. While it was an unfortunate end to a highly collaborative effort, the exercise of promoting listening and understanding between ourselves and our constituents allowed for a stronger political process.



Assemblyman Tyrone Thompson

Nevada
CSG 2016 Toll Fellow

As legislators, we are accustomed to dealing with disagreements. In fact, the legislative process, as it has developed over the centuries, is intended to limit and channel disagreements and move a deliberative body toward a decision. The legislative process places a high value on civility, which makes democratic governance possible.

But the legislative process has its limitations. It does not explicitly provide for deeper exploration of our differences. We listen to each other's points of view, buttressed by arguments and evidence, but we do not actually explore the origins of our differing opinions.

If we want to move beyond mere civility and toward understanding, we must know where other participants in the legislative process are coming from. We need to listen not just to their points of view, but to their story. Everyone has a narrative identity, an internal, evolving story that gives life a sense of purpose and unity. This story has characters, episodes, plots and themes. It has villains and heroes. Our narrative identity is shaped by our life experiences and the meaning that we give to them. It is also shaped by the experiences of our ancestors and the history of the ethnic, religious or cultural groups to which we belong.

Understanding this narrative identity will enable us to connect with other participants in the legislative process in a deeper, more satisfying way and to craft more fruitful public policies.



Rep. Rob Taylor

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It took a recent near tragedy on a baseball field in Alexandria, Virginia, to give me hope that civility was not dead, but rather, buried under the political rhetoric of both American political parties. The poet Samuel Johnson wrote in the 1700s, “Once the forms of civility are violated, there remains little hope of return to kindness or decency.” What Johnson could not foresee is the uniqueness of Americans to come together regardless of party affiliation in times of heartbreak. The space shuttle tragedies, an assassination attempt on a president, the 911 terrorist attacks, the Orlando nightclub shootings and most recently the assassination attempts on members of Congress are all examples of how tragedies unite us as a people. It's times like these that give us an opportunity to unite, inspire and accomplish great things as Americans and for our constituents.

John F. Kennedy once pleaded for us to hit the “reset button” regarding civility. He said, “So let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us.”

I firmly believe that in American politics today, the biggest communication problems we face with one another are created because we don't listen to understand, we listen to reply. We must move toward not only hearing what others say when they speak, but also listening to what is being said. Hearing is easy; listening requires us all to put in effort and sincerity.

Those best at listening, engage others with an open mind and seek to understand opposing views, different perspectives, ideas and concepts; they do not see those with different views as “the enemy.” I was inspired by the amount of unity, civility and understanding that took place after the near-tragedy on the baseball field in Alexandria and it reminded me that civility in America is not dead—it just takes some understanding to keep it alive. I challenge all of us to seek out someone that rarely agrees with our point of view and build a relationship with them. There is always something to learn.