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?” those deeply held beliefs. 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 open the door to collaboration, but sets the standard within our communities that people come first.

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 multipartisan vote. On the budget’s first trip through the House and Senate, it passed on votes of 143-1 and 30-0 respectively.

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.

A s the new chair of the House Appropriations Committee, I 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.

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 dismissing it as being bad. Listening is easy. Listening requires us at all to put 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. A challenge of our time is to seek out someone that rarely agrees with our point of view and build a relationship with them. There is always something to learn.