How to Talk about Migration, Race, Gay Marriage, Climate Change, Abortion, Religion, and Other Hot Political Issues Without Attacking Each Other

by Kenneth Cloke

We have all watched political conversations degenerate into angry quarrels, pointless personal attacks and antagonistic power contests. We have all seen people sink into screaming matches, shaming and blaming, and personal viciousness, often over the loftiest ideas, deepest passions and most profound political principles. We all know that these tirades can easily descend into senseless violence and appalling acts of brutality. And we have all participated in these arguments, fanned the flames, or stood passively by and done nothing.

Yet political conversations matter; they concern our future, our values and integrity, our ethics and morality, our beliefs and behaviors, not only as individuals and nation states, but as *human beings* who are responsible for the world our grandchildren, and our grandchildren's grandchildren, will inherit. And, as the Greek statesman Pericles remarked nearly 2500 years ago, "Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you."

Successful political decision-making requires not silence or pointless rage, but dialogue; not apathy or aggression, but collaborative negotiation; not passivity or

accommodation, but courageous, constructive, *creative* contention. Silence in the face of critical issues signifies not merely the absence of speech, but the loss of *integrity*, and therefore of self, of values, of citizenship, of democracy, of community, of humanity. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. presciently warned, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

Whatever our justifications for treating each other as enemies or remaining silent when political ideas are discussed, our ability to address the highly complex, increasingly challenging issues that characterize modern political life is no longer optional. As our world shrinks, these issues impact us in increasingly significant ways, allowing distant social, economic and political decisions, environmental choices, and technological changes to acutely affect our lives.

Indeed, it is conceivable that in the absence of improved communications, and the development of more advanced dialogue, negotiation and conflict resolution skills, it will become impossible for us to survive as a species. Political issues have become so costly, destructive and global that there is really no alternative than for us than to learn how to talk about these issues constructively and work together across our political differences to solve them. Fortunately, recent innovations in communication, dialogue negotiation and conflict resolution techniques reveal powerful and effective ways of doing so.

For example, in dialogue, collaborative negotiation and conflict resolution, we separate people's *positions* (what they want) from their *interests* (why they want it), allowing us to search beneath the formal, factual veneer of arguments and rationalizations to reveal the underlying interests and emotions, stories and experiences, that expose a deeper, less adversarial, ultimately common set of concerns.

To succeed in political dialogue, as in all of conflict resolution, it is necessary for us to surrender the idea that there is a single all-encompassing political truth, which is ours, and recognize instead that *every* political argument is an effort to establish the truth and validity, even the value and importance, of a particular personal or social experience, and at a deep level, it is not necessary to deny one in order to affirm the other.

Politics, despite its linguistic assumptions and orientation to power, need not be a zero-sum game in which one side is completely right and all the others are completely wrong, but can instead become an effort to acknowledge, investigate and integrate multiple, diverse, contradictory interests and truths in the course of formulating a common policy and direction.

Conflict resolution, at its core, represents a way of resolving disputes based on equal, yet diverse interests. Mediation is *inherently* democratic, egalitarian and

collaborative because it bypasses power- and rights-based conversations, and invites diverse interests, feelings, experiences and truths to contend and search for consensus and synergistic combination.

In power- and rights-based political language, there are loud protestations and harsh denunciations of moral transgressions by others, simplistic claims of uncompromising toughness, and unyielding stands regarding complex, subtle, multilayered problems. Each of these undermines political discourse and makes dialogue and agreement more difficult.

The language, syntax, metaphors, and narrative assumptions common to power- and rights-based political speech make it difficult to avoid or de-escalate violence, transform debates into dialogues, or come to grips with the difficult, often painful issues that inform our most important political choices. Power- and rights-based conversations are fundamentally competitive, win/lose, and adversarial, and assume that any gain by one side must entail a loss by the others. For this reason, power-based conflicts turn into power contests, and rights-based disputes lead to efforts to manipulate, dominate, and control decision-making.

Interest-based approaches, on the other hand, do not require win/lose outcomes and are able to encourage social equality, economic equity, and political

democracy for multiple constituencies simultaneously. They dismantle domination and control in both large and small ways, aiming at their sources in fear and caring, and for this reason, make it possible to *redesign* political dialogues, by altering their language, processes and relationships.

It is possible, for example, even with hardened political adversaries, to identify ground rules, agree on forms of communication, and reach process agreements that will allow them to constructively address their problems. It is possible to break up highly adversarial groups, put them in small diverse teams, and ask them to discuss their problems and brainstorm solutions; or to meet as a group to identify the kind of relationship they would *like* to have with the other side, then list the obstacles that prevent them from achieving it, plus the behaviors *their* side engaged in that have made trust more difficult, then present these to their opponents to see how accurate they are and discuss how to shift their communications in a more constructive direction.

Mediation has demonstrated in countless ways in disputes between feuding neighbors, divorcing couples, entrenched litigants, and political constituencies that people can stop accusing and start listening to each other -- not using adversarial political arguments, which are nearly always experienced as confrontational and disrespectful, but *authenticity* and interpersonal dialogue.

These dialogues may take the form of stories, empathetic questions, open-minded discussions, emotionally vulnerable revelations, admissions, acknowledgements, apologies, and confessions. These, in turn, lead to listening, informal problem-solving, collaborative negotiations, personal requests, sincere promises, honest disagreements, and heartfelt declarations.

The shift from single to multiple truths happens *automatically* when we ask questions that do not require a single correct answer -- questions such as these:

- What life experiences have led you to feel so passionately about this issue?

- What is at the heart of this issue, for you as an individual?

- Why did you decide to participate in this dialogue?

- Why do you care so deeply about this issue?

- Do you see any gray areas in the issue we are discussing, or ideas you find it difficult to define?

- Do you have any mixed feelings, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding this issue that you would be willing to share?

- Is there any part of this issue that you are not 100% certain of or would be willing to discuss and talk about?

- Even though you hold widely differing views, are there any concerns or ideas you think you may have in common?

- What underlying values or ethical beliefs have led you to your current political beliefs?

- Do the differences between your positions reveal any riddles, paradoxes, contradictions, or enigmas regarding this issue?

- Is it possible to view your differences as two sides of the same coin? If so, what unites them?

- Can you separate the issue from the person you disagree with?

- Is there anything positive or acknowledging you would be willing to say about the person on the other side of this issue?

- What processes or ground rules would help you disagree more constructively?

- Instead of focusing on the past, what would you like to see happen in the future? Why?

- Are you disagreeing over fundamental values, or over how to achieve them?

- Are there any facts or arguments that could convince you that the other side has a valid point, or that there is more than one way to address this issue?

- Is there a way that both of you might be right? How?

- What criteria could you use to decide what works best?

- Would it be possible to test your ideas in practice and see which work best? How might you do that?

- What could be done to improve the other person's ideas?

- Could any of the other side's ideas be incorporated into yours? How?

- Is there any perspective or aspect of this issue that either or both of you have left out?

- Are there any other alternatives to what you are both saying?

- Do you think it would be useful to continue this conversation, to learn more about each other and what you each believe to be true?

- How could you make your dialogue ongoing or more effective?

- What could you do to improve your process for disagreeing with each other in the future? For encouraging future dialogue?

- Would you be willing to do that together?

Dialogue, collaborative negotiation and mediation techniques make it possible for people to discuss difficult, complex issues and reach consensus on common approaches, in spite of significant differences in political beliefs, values, cultures and diversity. They make it possible to bridge the gap between ordinary language and political discourse by shifting communication from debates over *who* is right, to dialogues over *what* needs to be done, and how we might work

together to solve our common problems, or at least not destroy each other in the process.

As Abraham Lincoln reminded us, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Nor can a nation or a species. There are thousands of ways we can listen and learn from each other. It's time we gave them a try.