

The Power of Civil Discourse: Creating Positive Programs and Forums in an Increasingly Uncivil World

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CIVIL DISCOURSE



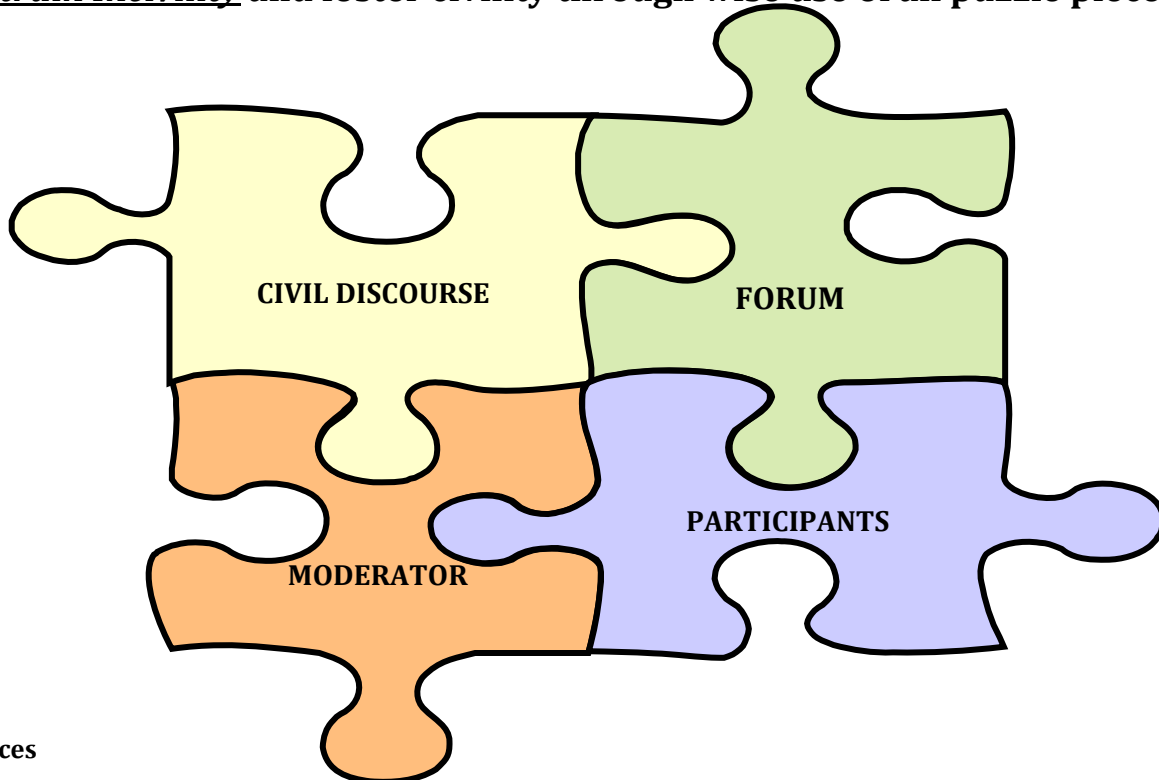
“What do all of these terms really mean anyway?”

Civil relates to interactions between different citizens or groups of citizens.

- **Civil** also means to be polite. **Uncivil** means to be impolite.

Discourse is a set of ideas that underlie and give meaning to organizations or institutions. Discourse often includes the taken-for-granted assumptions that allow us to know how to “go on” in social situations of all kinds. Linguistic in nature, discourse is both verbal and nonverbal.

Restrain Incivility and foster civility through wise use of all puzzle pieces



Sources

- Schuman, Sandy, *The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups*, Jossey-Bass, 2010
- McCorkle, Suzanne; *Passion, Protest, or Just Plain Incivility?: Responding to Bad Behaviors in Public Meetings*, A white paper prepared by Boise State University Public Policy Center, Nov. 2010 Retrieved on May 16, 2011 from: [http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=ppc_rr&sei-redir=1#search="incivility+public+meetings](http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=ppc_rr&sei-redir=1#search=)
- Weisbord and Janoff, chapter in *The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups*, Jossey-Bass, 2010

CIVIL DISCOURSE

"Why does it matter?" Democracy is at the heart.



Why foster civility?

Public participation programs and forums strive to:

- Achieve genuine participation in planning or decision making
- Provide significant information to individuals about potential public leaders
- Gather relevant information from residents to public officials that makes a difference to their actions
- Satisfy members of the public with a sense that they have been heard
- Improve decisions that public officials and agencies make
- Represent a broad spectrum of the public

What are the consequences of unrestrained incivility?

- Chilling effect on the public processes through which democracy functions
- If the general public fears that an event will “go negative” they may not participate
- Retribution for sharing ones opinion in public closes down public deliberation
- Securing leaders and moderators for public events is more difficult
- Poor public decisions

Moderator

"This above all: to thine own self be true."

William Shakespeare



Key Points to Remember

- **AVOID PERSONAL ATTACKS** by using your entire team to support the program or forum.
- The effectiveness of interventions arises not from their forcefulness but from their authenticity. Communicate a high degree of genuineness and presence.
- When what you are doing isn't working, avoid doing more of it with greater intensity.
- It is not the moderator's role to resolve conflicts that arise. It may work to ask the group, *"What is blocking this conversation?"*



Key Questions to Ask Yourself

- *Who is on my team?*
- *What is my role?*



ROLES

Each of these roles has a different impact on the program or forum. Make sure you and the group is clear about which role you are serving in. Do not try to serve multiple roles.

Moderator: Guiding the group process

Moderating a group process without making content contributions is an important role.

Leader: Directing the decision making – often the group President

Leaders should ensure the overall success of the effort(s). Avoid moderating: it's hard to manage from a neutral perspective because of your vested interest in the outcome of the group and to appear neutral.

Team: Providing management and logistical support

Managing all of the aspects to ensure the positive outcomes of a group meeting is an important role. It is important, particularly in large groups, to attend to logistical concerns such as lunch arrangements, emergencies, and other matters while someone else moderates the group process.

Experts: Providing information

Experts are those who bring information and knowledge to improve decisions made by a group. It is difficult for an expert to also manage the group process and not be biased by the information they have provided to the group.

SELF-AWARENESS IN CONFLICTUAL SITUATIONS

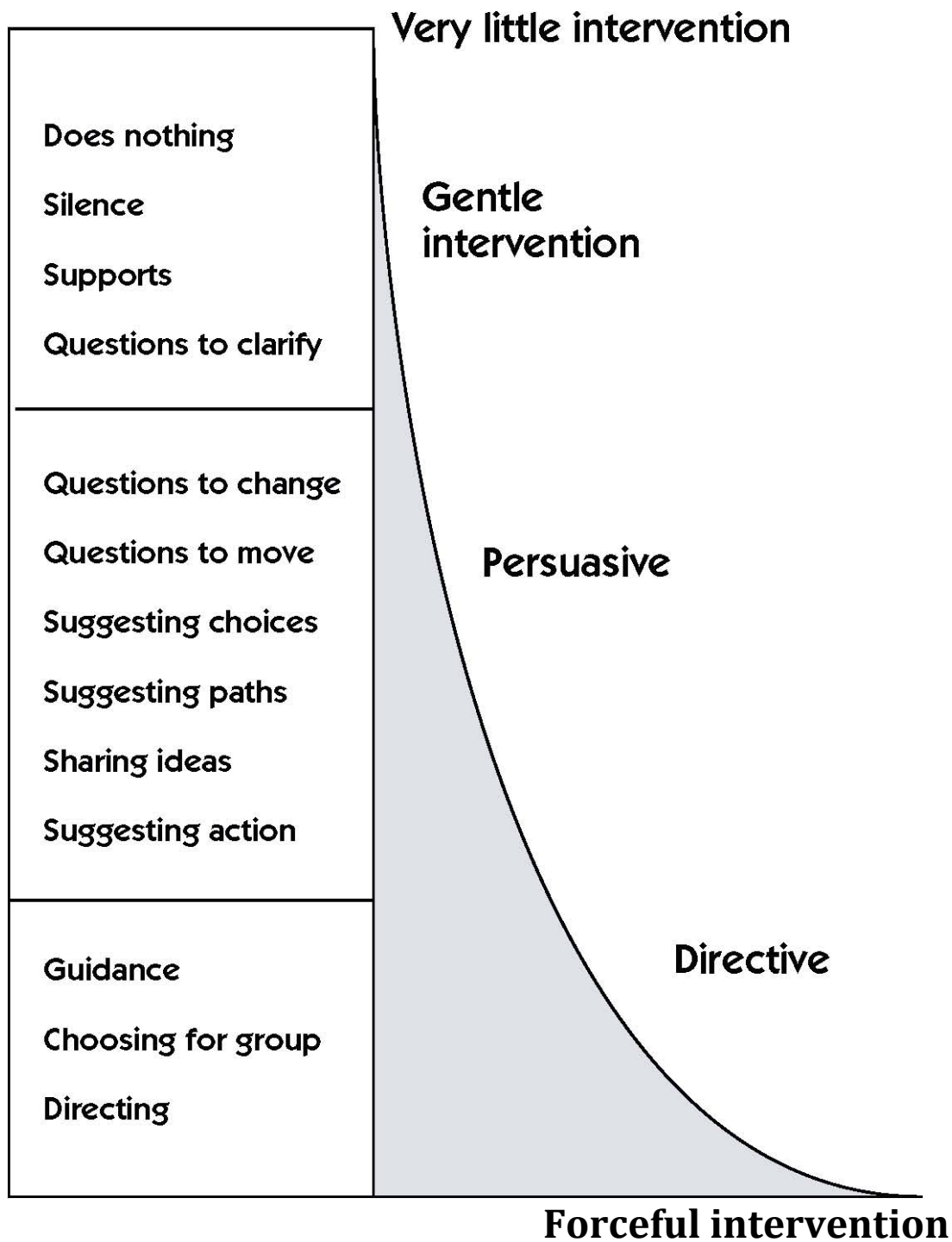
Resist the impulse to take too much personally in today's climate.

- **Group Hate** – A condition where others impulse is to attribute problems encountered to incompetence, sinister motivations, and/or flawed personality characteristics of members.
- **Hostility** – symptoms include bullying or harassment, often subtly aimed at a target's social network (for example, spreading rumors), attacking reputation, or critiquing quality of work. Social isolation is another common way to inflict harm without detection.
- **Authority Projections** – having people turn to the moderator as a savior, or turn on them as an enemy. Instead, invite people to be responsible for themselves.

“The most difficult thing any facilitative leader can do is master him/herself. Every leader experiences doubt, anxiety, cynicism, and his/her own dark side. Facilitative leaders need to restore their personal energy, maintain respect for both colleagues and themselves, find new sources of ideas and inspiration, and battle the human propensity toward self-limitation, caution, mediocrity, and dependency.” Glyn Thomas, La Trobe University of Australia

Levels of Intervention

A facilitator may interact with a group in a range of ways from doing very little intervention to giving forceful direction. **Figure 1**



Source: Adapted from Trevor Bentley. *Facilitation: Providing Opportunities for Learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill

FORUM

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Benjamin Franklin



Conditions under Which Diverse Groups Are Most Likely to Accomplish Their Tasks

1. Matching right people to the tasks
2. Making sure we have enough time to complete the task
3. Making sure everyone involved knows the group goal
4. Making sure everyone involved knows the group norms
5. **Heading off potential conflict that might result in flight from the task**

(Adapted from Weisbord & Janoff, 2010)



Key Questions to Ask Yourself

Which of the 'best practices' do you implement?

- ✓ **Format rules for speakers**-inform your speakers about your civility and time goals; share how you are going to monitor time as well as inappropriate comments
- ✓ **Manage expectations of the participants**-expectations are clear regarding the unacceptability of disrespectful and demeaning treatment; when policies or procedures are violated, consequences are followed through on by the group or moderator
- ✓ **Use microphones strategically**- the person with the microphone can control the room. Moderator always has microphone. If microphone is hooked to a sound system, it can be turned off in case of extreme incivility or time violations. If handheld microphones are used, assertive and strong people should hold the microphone and not give it to audience members.
- ✓ **Record the meeting** – announcing audio or video coverage increases accountability. Having people introduce themselves 'on record' prior to making comments is also useful.
- ✓ **Questions in writing** – If written and screened, the questions can be neutralized.

(Adapted from McCorkle, 2010)

PARTICIPANTS



1. *How do I start a session if I sense that there are different factions in the room?*

In groups of up to fifty or sixty, start with a “Go Around.” This gives all participants a chance to speak and ‘check-in’ to the group. It is typical to ask people for their name and neighborhood. Do this after the introductory comments have been made. Say something like, *“We are pleased that you have joined us today. We are going to go around the room so everyone can introduce themselves by sharing their name and neighborhood.”*

Also, use the ‘Go-Around’ if you feel stuck and need a break in the apparent log-jam. Allow people to pass. Say something like, *“We’d like to hear one sentence from each person who wants to speak. How do you feel about this situation? What would you like to do now?”*



2. *What do I do when a participant says something that visibly heightens tension?* Avoid referring to the agenda since this is an emotional question. Do not start a search for truth or begin a confrontation. Try the ‘Ask an “Anyone Else” Question’ format.

Participant: “We have been at this for two hours, and I’m frustrated that all we have done sit and listen instead of asking our questions!”

Moderator: “Anyone else feeling frustrated?”

Rules for Asking “Anyone Else?”

1. Listen for the intensity of feeling, and note what happens in the group. If anxiety rises, if you sense more tension in yourself, that could be a moment to ask an “Anyone else?” question. (Many statements require no response. The person making them is satisfied to get it out, and people accept the comment as part of the dialogue.)
2. Cite only the feeling behind the statement if the issue is potentially divisive. Find a subgroup for the emotion so that all emotions remain legitimate.

Participant: *“I’m getting impatient with the idea that _____.”*

Moderator: *“Is anybody else impatient now-for any reason?”*

Adapted from Weisbord and Janoff

3. What do I do if people appear to become deeply polarized over conflicting beliefs, problem definitions, solutions, or decisions?

Once people have developed strong, divisive feelings, the focus on the agenda is tough. Instead of trying to get people back to the agenda, manage a way for them to listen and talk about the issue.



Rules for "Listen & Talk"

1. Stop the action.
2. Ask people to identify which subgroup they belong to.
3. Encourage the A's to talk with each other while the B's listen.
4. After all the A's have had their say, ask the B's to do the same while subgroup A listens.
5. Go back to action. Generally people develop a more grounded sense of what they consider relevant. Also, they experience a continuum of opinions rather than two opposite poles.

Adapted from Weisbord and Janoff

4. How do I end a session if feelings appear strained?

Generally it is better to facilitate a session ending rather than let a session unravel. To fend off parking lot conversations, and negative gossip, having a session closing can help.

Rules for "One Word Close"

1. Ask people to stand up around the room in a circle where everyone can see everyone else. Tables can be between people. There shouldn't be too much shoulder room between people; if there is make your circle smaller.
2. Ask people who would like to share one word about the session.
3. Go around the circle allowing people to pass until you come back to the beginning.
4. Ask "Is there anyone else who would like to share a word with our group?" Wait and be sure everyone has had a chance to speak.
5. Thank people for coming and end the session.

5. **What is the relationship between the moderator and participants?** You manage a process that helps the group accomplish its work while minimizing problems within the group. A moderator explains his/her role; sets a comfortable and welcoming tone; introduces self including their main role to the group; guides the group through the agreed upon agenda varying only with leadership or group direction; does not share personal opinions or push a personal agenda; and fields questions fairly. Moderators secure a safe place for democracy in action.