

Can't We All Just Get Along?

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Mutual respect, common courtesy, civility, diplomacy. These are fundamental principles that are fundamentally missing from the body politic today. Not just inside the Beltway, but in hometown America as well.

Many council chambers are being transformed into torture chambers by ax grinders who run not to serve – but to divide, obstruct, confuse, and cast suspicious doubt on the efforts and motives of colleagues and staff – not for the common good, but for their own selfish, sometimes even vengeful good.

Far too many leaders are leading by the seat of their pants as nerves fray beneath the pressure to provide more services with fewer dollars. The dollars have deflated while egos have inflated, and the slightest disagreement during the course of a council or town meeting can turn into a name-calling, finger-pointing, free-for-all whereby feelings are left bruised and the public's trust is again abused.

May I share an open secret with you? It no longer matters how good we are, how long we have been in office or our pedigree, voters have had it with elected officials who, like spoiled little brats, pitch fits when things don't go their way. They are kicking to the curb those who can't find a way to play well with others and those who fail to understand that the pursuit of the common good is paramount to the pursuit of personal gain.

Time has long passed to put aside petty bickering and as leaders it is time to start working better together to help resolve the challenging issues that continue to rattle us all. Our country is in crisis, our economy is in crisis, and our communities are in crisis. While what happens in D.C. obviously drives the national agenda, we as local leaders,

particularly in these turbulent times, owe it to our constituents to become the change they so desperately long to see in their elected and appointed leaders.

When parents consistently bicker, the children in the home lose their sense of security and their confidence plummets. As elected leaders, when we consistently bicker, the residents and business owners in our communities experience the same.

As council members, selectmen, aldermen, commissioners, town councilors and town administrators, the methods by which we chose to respond, react and interact with our colleagues will to a large degree determine our success, define our failure; or, determine if we are viewed by those we represent and by those with whom we serve as an asset or liability. The latter can be the kiss of death for any political career.

So, how does one serve and work with people whom they literally cannot stand and who cannot stand them? What is the secret for getting along with people who don't want to get along with you? How can you work for the common good with people who find little good in anything or anyone? It may not be as difficult as you think – and the answer can be found in the acronym – SIFT.

In addition to my role as Mayor Pro Tem for my city, my “real” job involves spending a lot of time working with local leaders throughout various parts of the country and, more downtime in airports than I would sometimes like. While between flights several months ago, I ran across a familiar quote I had seen dozens of times, but on that particular day, the words seemed to jump from the page. It was the quote by Gandhi, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

I instantly thought of my council back home, because like most councils, we have some interesting challenges led by some interesting personalities! I determined on the plane home that I would do just that – become the change I wanted to see on my council.

While you may never be able to change a colleague's dislike or disdain for you or the projects you promote, you can change the way you chose to respond to them. And by responding from a place of control, rather than from a place of anger, over time you will become far less stressed, much more focused, more productive; and, will develop the admirable ability to keep your head while others around you are losing theirs.

To that end, I developed the pyramid model SIFT. It is designed to foster communication that is more productive; help individuals influence group dynamics in order to move issues forward in a more positive way; and, to equip leaders to more quickly sift through emotional minutiae in order to respond in a manner that will defuse rather than further ignite heated debate. Below is an abbreviated view of the model:

1. **S Shut your mouth** – not every statement requires a response and not every question requires an answer. In fact, oftentimes, the best response is no response at all. If by responding you only add fuel to an already raging fire; or, if your response would not add value to the discussion nor change the person's mind; then keep your mouth closed. Alternatively, it is perfectly acceptable to say, "No comment," and leave it at that – no explanation necessary.
2. **I Ignore** – Ignore ignorance and innuendo. It's not what people call you; it's what you answer to. Ignore the dumb stuff.
3. **F Forgive** – Practice forgiveness or in other words, let things go. Recognize that no one is perfect, not even you. Don't harbor resentment. Resentment gives birth to twins – revenge and retaliation. If you spend your time nursing these ugly babies, they will grow to make you miserable, bitter, angry, ineffective and will eventually cause you to

become ostracized and minimized. No one will want to work with you – and lone ranger council members can do little to help those they have been elected to represent. Moreover, whatever or whomever consumes your time, controls your life. Ironically, the more time you spend talking about and trying to get back at the object of your resentment, the more of your life that person invariably controls – whatever consumes your time, controls your life. So in essence, you don't get back at the object of your resentment, it gets back at you. For your own sake and for the sake of those you represent, forgive, let go and move on. Your life and your time in office are too short to do otherwise.

4. **T Think** – Think before you speak by first seeking to understand your colleague's position. During heated discussions, be mature enough to set aside personal feelings and actively listen. If a response is warranted, before responding, take a deep breath, slowly exhale, and repeat what you understood them to say. This simple act will force you to give a calmer, more reasoned response as opposed to an emotional, off-the-cuff reaction. The deep breath will relieve your tension and repeating the question will buy you time in that it will prevent you from saying the first thing that comes to your mind, which often is a personal reaction as opposed to a professional response. Even more important, this method of responding in an argumentative situation will bring further clarity and focus to the issue rather than to the person putting forth the issue.

Argue the points rather than arguing *with* the person.

Without question, SIFT requires discipline, determination and a real desire to deviate from business as usual. But isn't this what the voting public is screaming for? It may boot you out of your comfort zone, but it will grow you in ways that will make you a more effective leader. The results can be astounding.

Be forewarned you may lose an ally or two, or be accused of nothing short of treason by some on your council. But that's okay. Accepting change and appreciating growth in others can be painful for some.

Mark Twain once quipped, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." Start annoying some people on your council by becoming the positive change you want you see.

If you want more diplomacy, be more diplomatic. If you want respect, try showing respect – even when colleagues refuse to do the same. It may take some time, but over time, you will begin to see positive change. It is an inexplicable part of life – even life in politics – we generally get back what we give out.

Change begins with one person and oftentimes from within. Sometimes we are the problem and not our colleagues. But we can never change what we won't confront, especially when it means confronting ourselves.

Become the change you would most like to see in others and who knows? Through the power of one - we may all yet learn to get along – one person at a time.

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