

# Promoting Civility at Public Meetings

## Part I: Concepts



*Right Versus Right*

August 2003

### Question:

*We are concerned about the tone of our meetings. Discussions about important community issues degenerate into personal attacks – both between elected officials and between elected officials and the public. I'd like to raise this issue, but I don't want to be accused of engaging in the same kind of personal criticism that I am lamenting in others. It seems like a no-win situation. Could you address this issue?*

### Answer:

The issue you raise is one of civility. Like many of the issues addressed in this Guide, civility involves competing sets of “right” values: the value of free expression versus the value of respect for fellow participants in the democratic process. Critics have attributed the erosion of civility in society to the elevation of self-expression over self-control.<sup>1</sup>

However, this is a fairly easy ethical dilemma to resolve insofar as it is possible to be both expressive and civil and therefore maximize

both values. In fact, there is an argument that more people will be inclined to participate in a public deliberative process that focuses on the merits and demerits of an issue, as opposed to focusing on personal attacks.

This first piece will examine the civility issue in more conceptual terms; the second will share the more practical experiences of local officials in promoting civility at public meetings.

## What Is Civility?

Civility refers to the way people treat each other with respect – even when they disagree. Even though disagreement and confrontation play a necessary role in politics, the issue is how that disagreement is expressed. The key is to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of proposed solutions to community problems – not to engage in personal attacks against those who favor different solutions.<sup>2</sup>

## Why Should We Care About Civility?

Scholars are concerned (and the data seem to demonstrate) that public officials' incivility to one another contributes to voter alienation and antipathy toward government.<sup>3</sup> Some believe that government's inability to deal with a broad range of problems results from the destructive way in which issues are being addressed.<sup>4</sup> For example, 60 percent of poll respondents are "very concerned" that candidates attack each other instead of discussing the issues.<sup>5</sup>

### Values at Stake in This Dilemma

- Trustworthiness
- Responsibility
- ✓ **Respect**
- Loyalty
- Compassion
- Fairness

There is a "reap-what-you-sow" element to this analysis for elected officials. If public officials themselves attack their fellow officeholders, who can blame the public for: 1) believing the attacks; and 2) engaging in the same kind of attacks? Interestingly, the rules of professional conduct for one bar association recognize this dynamic by encouraging its members not to "attribute bad motives or improper conduct to other counsel," recognizing that such accusations bring the entire legal profession into disrepute.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, if personal attacks permeate the interactions of public officials, there is the significant risk that all participants will be tarred by the same brush. This phenomenon is exacerbated by media coverage that, in the words of one analysis, "stoke the fires of negativity"<sup>7</sup> by emphasizing such attacks in their coverage.

## The Case Against Civility

On the other side of the debate, researchers have theorized that, while civility is an "indispensable prerequisite to a democratic society," it can also reinforce the status quo in terms of power relationships.<sup>8</sup> One scholar, Virginia Sapiro, notes that, for much of U.S. history, women could violate the norms of civility by "simply appearing in public places or certainly, by attempting to engage in politics at all. There simply was no way for women to advance their interest through politics in a civil manner."<sup>9</sup>

Syndicated talk show host and then-presidential son Michael Reagan made a similar point when he argued that what really matters is not who is more civil, but who wins. "After all, revolutions aren't made without ruffling feathers, and revolutionaries aren't renowned for their etiquette."<sup>10</sup>

Along the same lines, political scientist Sapiro observes that "contentious acts occur when people are excluded from participating in more mainstream political processes."<sup>11</sup>

If any agency finds itself in a situation in which those with the minority view are acting increasingly contentious and uncivil, a question to ponder is whether they would have a more constructive approach if they felt their views were being listened to and taken into account. Being perceived as a force of unity in the community as opposed to a force of division can have real political benefits as well. Put another way, constant bickering among community leaders can reflect poorly on all who engage in it.

### **Incivility as an Antidote to Arrogance?**

Sociologist Charles Flynn notes that insults directed at political leaders symbolize important democratic values as well, insofar as we live in a country where “freedom to insult one’s political opponents is an indispensable democratic privilege.”<sup>12</sup> He also notes that insults “provide a check against those in power who may be tempted to think of themselves in grandiose terms, above the rest of humanity.”<sup>13</sup>

The case for incivility also brings to mind the British Parliament, where insults are bandied about in relatively good humor. Within the rigid confines of parliamentary procedure, even the prime minister exchanges slurs and barbs with members, and is able to move things forward in the spirit of wit and open debate.

### **Promoting Civility**

Ultimately, however, the quest for civility has merit for public officials. Martin Luther King Jr.’s observations are instructive:

In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words, and even hot insults; but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government.<sup>14</sup>

King’s admonition to his listeners to set their

### **Is it Possible to Legislate Civility?**

Legislating civility can be a tricky undertaking, as one Northern California city discovered when it considered adopting a code of conduct for council members that emphasized civility. The proposal garnered international attention and was (probably unfairly) characterized as an effort to stifle free expression (possibly because the policy discouraged the use of facial expressions to signal disapproval).<sup>15</sup>

Some agencies have had better success with codes of ethics that generally emphasize respect for those with divergent viewpoints.<sup>16</sup> The theory underlying such codes is not to create an enforcement mechanism so much as to create an opportunity to engage in discussion and identification of shared values. As political scientist Sapiro noted, “Civility is itself something that needs to be sought, deliberated and negotiated.”<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that virtuous behavior had to be voluntary and that civility is a form of virtuous behavior.

standards of discourse high – irrespective of how others behave – is consistent with the quote from Gandhi that “you must be the change you wish to see in the world.” Moreover, as

## An Opportunity for Self Reflection?

At the risk of being accused of blaming the victim, it may be useful for those in communities beset by extraordinarily contentious politics to engage in some self-reflection. Could the reason be that those contributing to the contentiousness feel excluded from the decision-making process? As hard as it may seem, the “solution” to the lack of civility may be greater inclusion of those who feel disenfranchised.

This presents an interesting question to ponder. Will the inclusion of those who truly care about solving the community’s problems in problem-solving processes produce better results for the community in the long run? Will those who feel excluded from the process support demagogues who will stop at nothing to force inclusion? It is undeniably risky to include those who disagree with you in the decision-making process; but perhaps it is riskier in the long run not to do so.

This also raises the question of what constitutes leadership. There is a line of thinking that the traditional autocratic and hierarchical modes of leadership are yielding to the notion of “servant-leadership,” a concept coined by management consultant Robert Greenleaf in 1970.<sup>18</sup> According to Greenleaf, “The servant-leader is servant first...He or she is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions.” Servant-leadership emphasizes a collaborative approach to problem-solving, which involves listening to others’ ideas as well as proposing solutions.

Frances Hesselbein of the Drucker Foundation makes a similar point when she observes that true leaders know that leadership has little to do with power. In her essay “*The Power of Civility*,”<sup>19</sup> Hesselbein says that civility has to do with respect for other people. She also notes that we have to demonstrate that attitude for ourselves before we can expect it of others.

Mark Twain observed: “Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.”<sup>20</sup>

## Strategies for Achieving Greater Personal Civility

So how do we achieve more civility in public discourse? In their essay *The Meaning of Civility*,<sup>21</sup> Guy and Heidi Burgess, co-directors of the University of Colorado Conflict Research Consortium, offer these suggestions:

- **Separate the people from the problem.** Recognize that other thoughtful and caring people have very different views on how best to address their community’s many complex problems. Focus on solutions that are most likely to be successful. Avoid resolving disputes on the basis of “us versus them” animosity and seek the relative merits of competing problem-solving strategies.
- **Obtain the facts.** Many public policy disputes involve factual disagreements that are amenable to resolution through some type of fact-finding process. Work

together to resolve factual disagreements wherever possible. There are, of course, many cases in which factual issues can't be resolved because of irreducible uncertainties associated with the limits of scientific inquiry. When this is true, contending parties need to publicly explain the reasoning behind their differing interpretations of the factual information that is available.

- **Limit interpersonal misunderstandings.** Make an honest and continuing effort to understand the views and reasoning of your opponents.
- **Use fair processes.** Genuinely solicit and consider public input. Make decisions on the basis of substantive arguments.
- **Keep trying to persuade and allow yourself to be persuaded.** One crucial element of civility is the recognition by conflicting parties that it is possible they are wrong and the policies advocated by their opponents are actually better. Seriously consider the persuasive arguments made by your opponents and explain your own position.

Another strategy suggested by Tom Terez in *Civility At Work: 20 Ways to Build a Kinder Workplace*<sup>22</sup> is to “identify the biggest redeeming quality of that person who’s always driving you crazy. Keep it in mind the next time the two of you interact.”

## Conclusion

A great deal more can be said on this important subject, and it would be naïve to suggest that following some of the strategies revealed by our research in this area would guarantee that others will follow your example. Regrettably, the *sine qua non* of ethical behavior is that it involves risks and possible personal costs. However, the potential reward for such risks is more respect for your leadership and a greater sense of public confidence in your agency.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Carter, “Just Be Nice,” *Yale Alumni Magazine* (May 1998) (with attribution to James Q. Wilson).
- <sup>2</sup> Guy and Heidi Burgess, *The Meaning of Civility*, Conflict Research Consortium at [www.colorado.edu/conflict/civility.htm](http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/civility.htm).
- <sup>3</sup> Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy* (1998), at 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Burgess, *The Meaning of Civility*.
- <sup>5</sup> Project on Campaign Conduct, *Poll Shows Voters Want Greater Civility, Ethics Behavior in Campaigns; Cynicism and Distrust of Politicians Remain High* at [www.campaignconduct.org](http://www.campaignconduct.org).
- <sup>6</sup> Maryland State Bar Association Code of Civility, available at [www.msba.org/departments/commpubl/publications/code.htm](http://www.msba.org/departments/commpubl/publications/code.htm).
- <sup>7</sup> The Harwood Group, *Money Politics: People Change the Equation* at <http://democracyplace.soundprint.org/polls3.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> John Kasson, “Rudeness and Civility,” 1990, discussed in a paper called “*Considering Political Civility Historically: A Case Study of the United States*,” delivered by Virginia Sapiro at the annual meeting of the International Society for Political Psychology in 1999, at 6-7.
- <sup>9</sup> Virginia Sapiro, “*Considering Political Civility Historically: A Case Study of the United States*” (1999), at 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Reagan, “Reagan: ‘Bye to the GOP,’” *USA Today*, April 17, 1997, at 15A, and discussed in Carter, *Civility*, at 22.
- <sup>11</sup> Sapiro, “*Considering Political Civility*,” at 13-14.
- <sup>12</sup> Charles P. Flynn, *Insult and Society: Patterns of Comparative Interaction* (1977), at 101, 103, 15A, and discussed in Carter, *Civility*, at 22-23.
- <sup>13</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, James Farmer and other civil rights leaders, in the purpose for the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, August 28, 1963. See Civic Renewal Movement website at [www.cpn.org/crm/essays/declaration.html](http://www.cpn.org/crm/essays/declaration.html).
- <sup>15</sup> “Rude Looks: Face-off in Palo Alto,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 18, 2003 (editorial), available at [www.enquirer.com/editions/2003/04/18/editorial\\_memo18ray.html](http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2003/04/18/editorial_memo18ray.html) (characterizing the attempt as “silly”).
- <sup>16</sup> For more information on codes of ethics and sample codes of ethics, see [www.ca-ilg.org/trust](http://www.ca-ilg.org/trust).
- <sup>17</sup> Sapiro, *Considering Political Civility*, at 18.
- <sup>18</sup> See generally The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership at [www.greenleaf.org](http://www.greenleaf.org).
- <sup>19</sup> Frances Hesselbein, “The Power of Civility,” *Leader to Leader* (Summer 1997), at 6-8, available at the Leader to Leader Institute website: <http://leadertoleader.org>.
- <sup>20</sup> Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1893).
- <sup>21</sup> Burgess, *The Meaning of Civility*.
- <sup>22</sup> [www.betterworkplacenow.com/civilityart.html](http://www.betterworkplacenow.com/civilityart.html).