From the President

Skills for Disagreeing Better: A Teaching from Braver Angels

In January I talked about what I've learned from Braver Angels about my inner polarization – the ways I contribute to the polarization around me. This month, I'm continuing the theme of what I've learned from Braver Angels by talking about skills for disagreeing better with people one disagrees with politically. This is more teaching than reflection, and it's longer than usual.

There are the four depolarizing conversational skills that I teach in Braver Angels workshops. The acronym for these skills is **LAPP**: **L**isten, **A**cknowledge, **P**ivot, and **P**erspective.

Listen -

- To listen effectively, you must turn off your "arguing back" mindset. If you're preparing your next point, judging, thinking or analyzing, you're not listening.
- Instead, be ready to summarize/paraphrase what that person is saying.
- Resist the temptation to stop listening because of stereotypes you have about what this person is saying, or other people who hold a similar opinion.

Acknowledge - The key principle here is that after listening you CONNECT FIRST before you disagree. Don't start by making a counter argument – that will just lead to a back and forth disagreement that goes nowhere. Start by acknowledging that you heard what the person said and even agree with part of it. For example:

- "I can tell you have strong feelings about _____."
- "So, you're saying is _____." (repeat or paraphrase) "Did I get that right?"
- "I agree with you that the immigration system is broken, and if I'm understanding you, your solution is to _____."

I've found that when people feel heard (even briefly) they tend to listen better to what comes next. They feel taken seriously instead of just contradicted, and they don't repeat their point as much.

Pivot (and Wait): For many people Pivot is a new skill to learn; it certainly was for me. In my opinion, Pivot is the cornerstone of challenging conversations, the secret sauce, if you will. A Pivot is used to **signal** that you want to shift the conversation from listening to adding a perspective. For example:

- "I'm with you on being very concerned about what's going on. *Can I throw in another perspective?"*
- "I've been reading about this issue. *Can I share what I've learned with you*?"

After making a Pivot statement, you WAIT quietly to see if the other person is willing to listen. Look for non-verbal or verbal cues. If you get an ok, THEN offer your perspective. **However, it's important to remember that when pivoting, you do not yet offer your opinion or perspective.** Think of it as signaling that you are going to make a left or right turn in your car, but you have not yet made the turn. Stop and wait for their willingness for you to continue.

If the other person just repeats their point, ignoring your pivot, or shows wariness about you taking your turn (verbally or nonverbally), then consider backing up. This may not be the right time to share your views. You could listen and acknowledge some more to see if they are ready to listen to you, or you can leave the conversation.

Finally, after listening, acknowledging, and pivoting, it is time to offer your **Perspective.** There are a few elements to Perspective statements that are likely to make them more palatable to the person with whom you disagree.

1) **Use I-statements rather than Truth-statements:** "This is how I see it." "This is why I see it this way." As opposed to "This is how it absolutely is!"

2) **Name the sources of your views**: "I'm basing my view on data about the …" "My reading has convinced me that…"

3) **Share a life experience or personal story behind your viewpoint**: "I come at this as a child of immigrants…." "I used to live in a southern border town, and here's what I saw…."

4) **Try to mention something you agree with**: "While I agree with you that..... my solution is ....."

5) **Avoid negative labels or generalizations**: "That's a racist, or that's a socialist policy." Also, avoid "You Democrats" / "You Republicans" language. Focus on the person in this conversation rather than lumping anyone into a larger group.

Be careful not to unload an entire dissertation when offering your perspective!

If you want to learn more and practice these skills, my next ***Skills for Disagreeing Better*** workshop is **in person, March 11, 6pm-8pm, Warwick Library (600 Sandy Lane**). Note – because of the library's hours, the workshop will begin at 6pm SHARP, so please come early to get settled. Register here:
Skills for Disagreeing Better (RI - Braver Angels Rhode Island Alliance) Registration, Tue, Mar 11, 2025 at 6:00 PM | Eventbrite

Onward together,

Nancy