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America Talks: How not to let fear isolate you from people with different opinions

Thousands of Americans this weekend will begin to reverse political sectarianism by speaking directly with people who don't share their viewpoints.

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The late comedian Joan Rivers often quipped, “Can we talk?” If her catchphrase was asked today, it might be met with a resounding “No,” as 62% of Americans fear expressing deep opinions with people – even family, friends and colleagues – who hold opposing ideological or political perspectives.

According to a 2020 report by the Cato Institute, such fears lead Americans to self-censor. A third of us believe our views would offend listeners enough to jeopardize our relationships or jobs, playing into “cancel culture” worries.

During a career spanning more than 30 years, including six as a presidential appointee running an agency with partisan-charged support and opposition, I experienced many anxious moments anticipating a discussion with someone who I knew opposed my views or criticized my decisions.

Eventually, I learned that my fear of those conversations was worse than the conversations themselves. I also found a profound level of fulfillment in identifying deeper common ground with people toward whom I assumed I’d feel enmity.

Today, in leading national dialogues among leaders across our deep political and ideological divides, I lean on those anxious experiences to understand: first, the strong reticence most people feel as they consider engaging in bridging conversations; second, the near universal experience of surprise and fulfillment of participants in a well-designed bridging encounter.

We need to start talking

America's leading academic researchers say we are experiencing "political sectarianism," a disastrously toxic breed of polarization where we can't help but exaggerate and moralize our differences.

We feel certain the people with differing political perspectives are more ideologically extreme, contemptuous and uncooperative than is, in fact, the case. As Mark Twain spelled out: "What gets us into trouble is not what we don't know. It's what we know for sure that just ain't so."

Which is why it's exciting to imagine the outcome from America Talks, in which thousands of Americans this weekend will begin to reverse that political sectarianism simply by speaking directly with people they tend to perceive as alien, distasteful and morally deficient.

America Talks builds on the emergence of a field of nonprofit organizations dedicated to bringing Americans together across our differences so we can solve our challenges, bolster our democracy and live together peaceably.

What we've learned about 'bridging'

Strong bridging organizations leverage evidence and experience generated by domestic and international programming, and they have built many exceptionally well-designed programs that Americans will not only benefit from – but also will enjoy. Bridging organizations share certain principles:

► **Start with a safe, neutral venue.** Frame the conversation clearly, using neutral, non biased language. And reassure people there's no expectation that they will be conciliatory toward ideas or principles they reject, or that they will compromise their positions on issues.

► **Listening is the key.** Help those who are speaking with each other to stay present in the moment and to stay curious about the new or different perspectives they encounter. They can share and hear personal stories about their commitment to an issue and the change they wish to see in the world. This fosters empathy, trust and strong interpersonal relationships as people connect on a human level.

► **Avoid point-scoring or persuasion.** It takes a bit of coaching to help people listen to and understand each other's perspectives, without automatically needing to express why their own perspective is right.

However, by shifting the conversation away from defending points of view and toward discussions about values, fears and interests, we allow people to engage in shared learning and

to uncover inevitable surprises of common ground, mutual principles and even shared goals for our nation, our neighborhoods and our families.

► **Do something together.** Although not incorporated in America Talks, many of the most effective bridging organizations and initiatives bring people together across divides to accomplish a third objective – say, building a sports team, forging solutions to a policy or addressing a common need in their community. Bridging through collaboration can drive particularly strong and resilient relationships between “unlikely allies.”

Successful bridging can happen one conversation at a time or through multiparty collaborative dialogue. In all cases, effective bridgers will emphasize, upfront, important truths that can be easily overlooked or misconstrued by those anxious about conversing with opponents: Bridging across differences does NOT mean sacrificing one’s values, compromising one’s position or being conciliatory toward a position you oppose.

Neither does bridging waste time in fatuous, Kumbaya-style sessions that whitewash fundamental disagreements. What’s required is to trust the process, listen closely and share authentically – you’ll come away with a new understanding of the perspective that you previously “simply can’t fathom,” without compromising your own perspectives and principles.

America Talks, taking place Saturday and Sunday, offers a watershed opportunity for Americans to get to know someone with opposing political perspectives one on one and face to face.

Driven by the hundreds of organizations that make up America's community of bridge builders and peacemakers, America Talks will support conversations with a proven methodology and an innovative technology platform that has already engaged 120,000 participants around the world.

The national security community says that division represents America’s No. 1 security risk; businesses see their bottom lines suffering from divisiveness among employees and customers; many leaders and citizens see polarization as our most serious impediment to sustaining our democracy and solving our nation’s crises.

Call it bridge-building, anti-polarization, peacemaking or violence prevention – the work of bringing Americans together will be disruptive and uncomfortable, but it is effective, and urgently needed.

Yes, jumping into a conversation with someone who opposes what you care about will likely stir anxiety – but it is not as difficult as we imagine and is exceptionally worthwhile. We need to talk, and we have to begin, now.

David Eisner, CEO of Convergence, previously led the National Constitution Center. He served as CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps) under President George W. Bush and founded Network for Good as an executive with America Online.