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The Civility Project: Focus Group Summary

Introduction

From August through November of 2010, Consensus Consulting conducted 14focus groups in and around Kansas City to understand the public’s concern about civility in our political discourse and to define civility as it applies to public life. The effectiveness of our current methods of public discussion and problem-solving was another topic of these meetings. Does civility affect our ability to get things done? Do people feel their voices are being heard when they try to weigh in on a public issue? How can we improve the process we use to reach agreement or make decisions on questions that affect all of us? Is how we talk to each other as important as what we say?

The citizens who participated in these focus groups represented both ends of the political spectrum and every station in between. The groups included Tea Party and Fair Tax members, the Black Agenda group of the NAACP, a youth commission, liberals, moderates and conservatives of all stripes. Surprisingly, much of what they had to say was repeated in group after group. They agree on many of the problems and prescribe many of the same solutions. Solid themes run through all of these conversations revealing strong indications of what keeps people out of public life and what might draw them back into it.

According to these citizens, the process by which we conduct our civic discussions not only encourages incivility, but impedes our ability to solve community problems. We reward incivility by creating an adversarial environment for decision-making and then allowing the loudest voices to carry the day. People are reluctant to participate in such a process and they are intimidated by the physical setting for these discussions. While citizens loathe the individual behavior that demonizes opponents, much of what they find objectionable is within the control of governing bodies to change. As Pogo warned, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Especially troubling is the inference that communities sacrifice social capital, trust and the potential to create a reinforcing cycle of progress and problem-solving by the nature of their public engagement policies. A critical and frequent complaint of the focus group participants is that the decisions are already made by the time they are allowed to voice an opinion. This shuts them out of any effective deliberative action as citizens – and leaves them with the option of storming the requisite public hearing to make their views known.

Although these perceptions do not bode well for public participation, a strong sense of aspiration permeates the focus group results. People want to participate and be affirmed by their participation. Clearly, they want to find a better process, governed by fair and logical ground rules, that allows them the opportunity to contribute. They are eager for small group discussions where they can understand other viewpoints and share theirs with citizens who may have different perspectives. Specific changes to the public engagement process would draw them back into the fold from their now infrequent forays that only occur when it is a matter of direct and vital interest to them.

How we define civility

Focus group participants define civility in terms of respect: the ability to listen to another person and engage in a dialogue that is open to new or different points of view. Showing respect, they say, does not preclude having a frank and candid exchange. In fact, they contend that civility can be a powerful tool for being heard. If you can treat others with respect and clearly and thoughtfully articulate your position, you have a better chance of influencing a decision. Unfortunately, they also see incivility being rewarded both by undue media attention and the tendency of governing boards to acquiesce to demands presented by strident special interests.

We are missing civility today

With that definition in mind, participants were deeply concerned about a perceived lack of civility infecting public discussion. They see it at the national level and they see it at the local level. In fact, when asked about examples of civility that they have personally witnessed, they are much more likely to describe a scene at a local school board or city council meeting. Even at interfaith public meetings, some comments were described as outrageously uncivil. The degree and frequency of incivility has escalated in recent years, people believe. A distinction is often drawn between protest movements of the 1960s – a tactic to get attention for a cause – and what is seen as rudeness or bullying in today’s culture. Business owners throwing paper airplanes at a speaker during a hearing in a Kansas suburb was just one illustration of today’s incivility.

Comments from the focus groups:

* The sides are getting further apart.
* People are quicker to express opinions with emotions rather than knowledge.
* People don’t listen to each other anymore.
* The polarization of views (in the state legislature) is just alarming.
* When people feel threatened, the discussion becomes more intense and more black and white.
* As soon as people can go online and express opinions in a blog or forum, they are vicious.
* There is no chance for any response because of the lack of civility.
* “I was working to get health care reform passed. I tried to get people to accept brochures at City Market one Saturday morning. I was called a lot of names I don’t normally hear myself being called.”
* “The elected officials (at a city council meeting) were disrespectful and couldn’t manage themselves in a professional way and they poorly managed the conflict. Sitting as a citizen with my kid there, it was memorable. I thought if this is what my kid takes away as a memory of democracy, we’re sunk.”
* “I took my son to a school board meeting… Some of the issues raised and the language was fairly astounding coming from constituents. The way they personalized some of the issues didn’t make a lot of sense to me.”
* The only way to get things done is to be civil.

The themes that emerge

Across all of the groups, there are some strong perspectives and ideas that continually re-appear. These are not listed in a particular order. Each of the concepts was prevalent on multiple occasions, indicating its entrenchment in the public’s mind. The fact that these citizens were willing participants, often drawn by the lure of the civility topic, presumes they may be more likely to participate in public life than many other citizens. However, there is little reason to doubt their views are representative of many who have had experience in public engagement.

Motivation to participate

Self-interest is the greatest motivator for people to enter the public process and anger and fear are the emotional drivers that can turn out a crowd for a public meeting. A flip side to that emerged in the focus groups and even more strongly in the online survey. This view says people also will turn out to solve problems in their communities, to support a cause they believe in, and when they believe their voice will have an impact. But overall, it is personal impact that turns out the crowds. Especially when there is fear of change and it will affect the family or property. At the same time, the apparent apathy that keeps people at home is often driven by their feeling that they cannot make a difference or they won’t be heard. If they can’t see how it affects them directly, they are much less motivated to become a participant.

Comments from the focus groups:

* Fear of loss (causes participation).
* People don’t attend public meetings because they don’t think it is beneficial.
* People go to a meeting because they like to get their way.
* People don’t like change. They go because they are against change in their neighborhood.
* A passion for an issue or idea will drive people to attend a meeting.

Alienation from the public space

Even though they may want to make a difference in public life, people are alienated from active participation by several factors – most of which public officials can control. They are turned off by what they describe as incivility in the process. This picture of incivility is not just on the national scene. Our participants gave example after example of city councils, school boards and other local-level meetings that are as uncivil as anything they see in Washington, D.C. To make it worse, they often feel intimidated by the process itself or by the physical surroundings, or by their insecurity in addressing large groups. They often feel they can’t make a difference: that the decision-makers aren’t going to listen to them. The critical questions that affect their lives are not framed in a way that appeals to them or makes the impact clear – often clouding the meaning in an expert bureaucratese. The good news: public officials have the power to address each of these points of alienation. These frustrations with the way we discuss issues drive people out of the public space. Dialogue does not exist any longer, they believe, removing any opportunity to rationally explore the opinions of other people in a setting that can lead to understanding and resolution. They are intimidated by the council chambers and board rooms where officials sit above them and the speakers must turn their backs to their fellow citizens. The almost primal fear of public speaking is greatly exacerbated by the way these rooms are positioned.

Comments from the focus groups:

* A lot of people want to talk, but not to listen.
* What can be intimidating is you may not know the protocol.
* At a public hearing, regular people don’t feel comfortable debating back and forth where the elected person is completely comfortable with it.
* We are reluctant to go into areas where we may not be comfortable.
* People don’t know anything and don’t want to make fools of themselves.
* People will show up because of the way the issue is framed: if you frame it in terms of money in their pockets, they’ll show up.
* They won’t attend if they feel they can’t make a difference.
* They don’t feel as if they know enough to have an opinion or a voice.
* There is no healthy debate on facts or dealing with the issues or the merits of them.
* I don’t like to fight.
* You put me in front of a microphone and I lose my verbal skills.

Conflict can be valuable

While incivility is a turnoff that may hamper public participation, conflict is not seen as inherently bad. Conflict, in fact, can be healthy if it is acknowledged and dealt with in a professional manner. It is expected that there will be conflict between viewpoints and interests, but that does not stop forward progress if people are willing to listen and work together. People need to vent their emotions to have a healthy discussion, but arguing only with emotion and opinion pushes the facts out of the way and leads to distortion. Another block to forward progress, the participants say, is the personal demonizing that they see as common now in public life. They feel strongly that personal attacks have become the rule of the day much to the detriment of our ability to get things done that advance the common good.

Comments from the focus groups:

* People are demonizing other people and ideas.
* A lot of conflict is in bumper stickers and sound bites.
* A healthy discussion has back and forth and talking to each other. You come back with an appreciation for what the other side believes even if you don’t agree with it.
* They think they win if they can be the loudest.
* Democracy is a messy business – conflict is part of it.
* I think there is agreement around the table that it can get loud and messy. But the base is to accept new information and allow someone to share a new perspective.
* You can disagree without being disagreeable. Issues should not be personalized – they should be judged on their merits, not the people articulating the issue.

Citizenship is a lost art

We have lost the basic ideas about and training in citizenship, the focus groups say. Whether it was something that we used to learn in school or by membership in the dwindling civic clubs, we have lost the art of participation. To solve problems, we need to talk to other citizens and we don’t know how to do it. We have even lost our notion of Roberts Rules of Order as a guide for public discussion. Basic communication, listening, interacting, compromising are all lost to history and need to be taught again, they contend. A consequence of our eroded citizenship skills is the terminal damage inflicted on our public discussions. Politicians are not trained to run meetings. Structure has disappeared. Often, our meetings just don’t work anymore.

Comments from the focus groups:

* There seems to be a lack of understanding of the process of our government. It is adversarial and time-consuming. People who understand it will start organizing and working it. People who don’t will get frustrated.
* Someone will hijack the meeting and use the floor for a long speech.
* Not everyone is represented or invited.
* The issue of control of a meeting is really important.
* It’s the emotions that sabotage meetings.
* When a politician goes on a listening tour, there is no structure.
* People who have the skills (work with public) are rare.
* People don’t have a chance to express their true voice.
* Our educational institutions should offer degrees in civic engagement.
* I am not sure the people running the meetings have the skills to run them.

Let’s meet in small groups to solve problems

The public hearing model does not allow people to enter into a dialogue, which they see as crucial to solving problems. They want to work in small groups where they can have a meaningful dialogue with other citizens. Public hearings actually create more of an adversarial environment in many situations. Other styles of interacting hold more promise for the public. This failure of process leads to more citizen anger, the focus groups say. Restricting the interaction to the public hearing model encourages opposing sides to be more vociferous in their arguments and leaves little room for dialogue with other citizens or with elected officials. Two minutes at the microphone does not constitute a deep exchange of values and perspectives. There is hope to solve our community problems, they say, if they can work in smaller groups talking to people who hold different views. If people listen, progress is within our grasp, but we need a good dialogue process that is not derailed by personal attacks. Starting with our points of agreement, rather than our points of disagreement can launch us along the road forward.

Comments from the focus groups:

* Sometimes we don’t stop to hear an individual’s story about why they have the point of view that they do. We don’t get all the interests in the room.
* If it is a small meeting, it is not a problem (for people to act civil).
* Communities should have people like arbitrators who can see both sides.
* I go to Fish and Game meetings. If the commissioners would come out and sit at a table with us, the meetings would go a lot further.
* If you work in small groups, you get to know the person who is talking and I am more likely to participate.
* We have real-world problems that need to be addressed. When things are polarized, we have no capacity for solving problems.
* Smaller groups are good. When you have 200 people, you are going to have a fire.
* Small groups can do dialogue.
* I like small tables. It invites everyone in.
* Allow time for discussion and dialogue.

Don’t decide before we are heard

How decisions are made affects both the quality of the decision itself and the level of trust the public places in its public institutions. Decisions of high impact on the public should be made **after** the public has been involved. If the public is asked to weigh in after the proposal has been shaped and is on the table, they are skeptical that their input really counts. They want to help frame the options and set the values that will be used in the decision-making, even if they do not get to make the final choice. They want a reasonable process that gives the public time to absorb information, exchange views and consider alternatives. Experts should listen to the public values in applying their expertise, not assume that they control final solutions on their own: the public sees that as both arrogant and alienating. The public strongly believes that decisions are often made before they are asked to comment. Lack of debate, questioning and dialogue by elected officials convinces them that the public hearing is a sham and that the vote is pre-determined. This repeated process generates anger and frustration for citizens.

Comments from the focus groups:

* There would be education, discussion and dialogue in advance, rather than the decision is made and the public is informed and then it’s discussed.
* Invite the input. Facilitate community conversations.
* Engage people from the beginning in defining and designing and moving the initiative forward.
* I feel like many times the decision has already been pre-determined.
* There’s no dialogue. It is just stating and re-stating arguments.
* I used to go to our city council, but I stopped going because it was what I called the bobble-head convention. Most of what was going on had been discussed and agreed to before they got there.

Citizens (especially young people) want to be heard

Affirmation that their voice is actually heard is important to citizens. That can come through acknowledgement and feedback or simple actions like writing down what they say. It is even more powerful if they feel they are being counted – having an impact on the decision. Too often, they feel they are just tolerated which increases frustration. Dialogue is a much stronger method of affirmation and inclusion than stepping to the microphone for two minutes. In the latter case, they don’t know if they are really being heard. Young people, especially, feel that adults dismiss their contributions without taking them seriously. For people to come back to the process time and again requires that they feel their voice counts. If that affirmation is missing, it will be difficult to lure them back to the table and the community misses out on valuable ideas and perspectives. Young people sense they are being tolerated and patted on the head, but not taken seriously when they try to contribute to the discussion.

Comments from the focus groups:

* Young people don’t think they will be taken seriously. What you say is not accepted as feedback or constructive criticism.
* Tell them to hear me out, no matter how ridiculous they might think my thoughts are or my opinions are.
* Make it possible when I go to that meeting, I come away better informed and feeling like my voice was heard.
* The difference between being heard and being counted – if you are counted, you are effective.
* When people don’t have a chance to express their true voice, that’s where the frustration comes.
* When you go with an expectation you will have your voice heard and you don’t get an opportunity to say what you went there to share, that’s where the frustration comes in.
* You want feedback on your question – explaining why it is they don’t agree with you.
* Have someone taking notes and setting a date for a response to concerns.

Facts should drive the decisions

Facts should be the starting point for our public discussions, focus group members said. Too often people come armed only with opinions, assumptions and speculation. To engage, you need to be informed first. Seeking agreement on what is fact and what is opinion is the logical embarkation for problem-solving. However, they recognize that these agreements do not come easily because the line between fact and opinion is so blurred, that it is sometimes hard to recognize. The talking TV heads have set a model for substituting unverified opinion or hearsay for fact. Collecting data and working from the same set of facts needs to be built into our problem-solving process.

Comments from the focus groups:

* It’s a mistake for people to spew a set of facts then another person will have another set of facts. We should have some definitions of what we are going to talk about and what we already agree on.
* It’s not the facts; it’s the emotions that sabotage the meetings.
* Political ads are very negative. They throw anything out there, but what are the facts and how out of context is it.
* People should come prepared (to talk) and learn the facts.
* In the health debate, we had coverage that focused on the sensational, not the facts.
* People fight over “your truth counts and mine doesn’t.”
* If you can get to the truth, get to the truth, then you can make a determination based on intelligent information.

Ground rules make a difference

Finally, ground rules are important to having a good conversation and serious dialogue and controlling the structure of meetings, they said. Our participants talked about ground rules that would include listening, respect, making sure everyone interacts and is heard. Setting ground rules at the beginning of meetings and holding people to those rules would go a long way to creating a more civil structure that softens the dominant voices and allows everyone to participate. If leaders can facilitate conversations that adhere to these few simple rules, then at least everyone is heard and respected.

Comments from the focus groups:

* Talk to experts, look at maps, and learn the information.
* Everybody’s entitled to respect – no judgment.
* Keep the voice civil – we can’t talk together if we can’t be civil.
* Parties from both sides need to be heard.
* Every meeting should have a structure or process.
* Have clarity around the purpose of the meeting.
* Lock in how people can speak and how long.
* Have a place for emotion or passion.
* There have to be rules – in the healthcare forums, nobody stopped them.

The media share the blame

Sensationalism and misinformation are two faults that people lay at the door of the media. The lack of civility in today’s political arena, they say, is fueled in large part by the overwhelming tendency of the media, especially television, to fan the flames of controversy and conflict. Those who are uncivil, who rant and rave, who demonize opponents, are the ones who get the coverage. The media reward outlandish behavior and give little attention to serious discussion that moves the community toward solutions. Someone who subverts a reasonable dialogue by throwing a tantrum at a public hearing will draw all the media attention. This is a reward system that is copied and reinforced.

Comments from the focus groups:

* The media set the rules on debates and town hall meetings.
* In a lot of these situations there is manufactured misinformation. The media love conflict and misinformation provides the basis of conflict.
* As I listen to a 30-minute block of talk show, the speculation and the lack of factual information, there’s no news, but they’ve got ad revenue.
* There is more biased reporting by the media, taking one side and elaborating on it rather than just reporting and letting the public make of its own mind.
* We are not getting the real facts from the media – like the death panels in the healthcare debate.
* TV in particular incites rash comments because they are the ones that get publicized.
* Media encourages people to think incivility is the norm.
* The media show the dissent because that is what people want to hear. Calm meetings are not news.
* We’ve become polarized and I blame the media because they think if there is no fighting, no one will read the paper.

Aspiration still rises from the ruins

Many of the focus group discussions were colored by what is wrong with our public process. But, peeking through with every group is a clear aspiration to make things better. The participants want to make public life better. They get a sense of satisfaction from solving problems, getting things done in their communities and fulfilling their dreams of making life better. From small improvements to large-scale change, they want to be contributors, building on ideas and negotiating the compromises. Incivility is a roadblock to the kind of progress they envision – a progress that builds on itself, creating more trust to move forward. And they see solutions to what they view as our currently flawed way of interacting. O On issues that affect them and their communities, they are ready to pitch in. Young people express a desire to be engaged, if adults treat them as equals. The younger generation even can prescribe what they see as a viable way to engage using technology in a civil, productive atmosphere. Participants are clear about how meetings should be held and what will make them comfortable working on our collective challenges. They need a willing partner to change the dynamic of our current format.

Comments from the focus groups:

* It is about hopefulness. Sometimes you think you can make change.
* Finding common ground is important to moving forward.
* People need to vent and express their hopes and dreams as well as frustrations.
* We lose out on a lot of progress when we could be moving our community forward.