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The Compost of Disagreement: Creating Safe Spaces for Engagement and Action

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The Compost of Disagreement: Creating Safe Spaces for Engagement and Action

Abstract

The experiences gained in almost two decades of supporting community-based deliberative processes highlight the importance of balancing participants' desire for civility and safety with the passionate expression of deeply held values and beliefs. Effective deliberations may surface highly contested positions in which intimidation or bullying can occur. At times, even the deliberative process itself may become the object of ideological objections. This has the potential to create a climate of fear on the part of participants and public officials seeking solutions to complex issues related to public investments, long-term planning, or improved governance. We apply the metaphor of "community compost" to emphasize the value of eliciting diverse points of view on hot topics that have divided residents as well as public officials. By turning the fertile soil of passion, values, and disagreement, we have been able to find common ground useful to decision-makers. Balancing the need for safety and the benefits of strong disagreement, shared understanding and agreement may be achieved.

Keywords

Public deliberation, conflict, disagreement, safety

In the mid-1990s, school boards in many New Hampshire communities were the site of highly contested elections in which school curricula, pedagogy, and financing were the subject of passionate disagreements. Well-organized factions affiliated with conservative religious political groups were achieving majorities on local boards and then leading efforts to ban the teaching of evolution, reproductive health, and literature that referenced gays and lesbians. Proponents and opponents of these efforts engaged in hostile, threatening behavior toward each other, sometimes necessitating police presence to maintain order at public meetings. School board votes were often split. School officials and teachers felt besieged and blamed. Educational leaders expressed the need to “create a safe space where residents and school leaders can talk about these difficult issues outside of the heated climate of school board meetings.” These early encounters with highly contested, divisive community issues were a catalyst for the creation of New Hampshire Listens.

Since then, we have encountered increasing challenges to the principles of safety and civility that those educational leaders were calling for. We have often heard from local and state leaders who are grappling with what they describe as a climate of fear, in which people are increasingly less willing to serve in volunteer public roles or to simply come to a public meeting to discuss critical issues. One consequence of the trends that we have observed has been that many communities find themselves increasingly “stuck.” Difficult but necessary decisions involving public investments (such as replacing deteriorating public facilities, making plans to adapt to a changing climate, or balancing development with conservation) too often just don’t get made. It seems easier (even wiser) to defer decisions to the next elected board or council than to wade into the high volume shouting matches and *ad hominem* attacks that can characterize public discourse. That is, safety is found in non-action. Serving the public becomes an exercise in maintaining the status quo in communities that vote close to 50/50 on key investment and policy issues. Individual officials can feel safer in this case, and there is less overt public hostility when such actions are deferred, but in the meantime buildings fall deeper into disrepair, growth is unplanned and unmanaged, and long-term debts accumulate.

An explicit purpose of New Hampshire Listens has been to serve as an antidote to these trends. Drawing on the words of those who have come to us over the years—elected officials, citizen volunteers, community leaders—we understand that one of the most important contributions we can make to public life is to create safe spaces where diverse points of view can be expressed, deeply held differences can be explored, and the potential for discovering common ground amidst the cacophony can be nourished. The work runs counter to the natural tendency to want to “manage difference” or find “consensus” or help everyone to “just get along.” Paradoxically, we use the tools of deliberation to uncover those things that divide in order to find a shared path forward.

We could think about this uncovering and exploration as working the community compost. Taking the raw ingredients of values, beliefs, attitudes, cultural norms, local history, municipal policies and practices, traditional and social media, and the multifaceted personalities of local actors, we strive to create a space that allows for heat, conflict, and the transformation of old patterns and approaches to new kinds of rich, nuanced, adaptive solutions. Believing that knowledge and action are co-constructed in the milieu of community, it is logical that listening to and considering a range of perspectives can give rise to feasible, practical approaches. We turn

the soil, as it were, to bring air and light into what has been hidden, stuck, thought to be intractable or immutable. Using the processes of deliberation, focusing on talk-to-action methods, and assuring that local or state decision-makers are part of both planning the process and receiving findings, we work to get all points of view, all ideas about what *should* happen, into the light and treated as worthy of consideration. Our metaphor emphasizes the intellectual and social fertility of the community, and the idea that new ideas can be borne out of proximal, available resources. We might say that the work is part of creating a sustainable civic ecosystem, in which the practices of converting diverse resources into fertile public knowledge and action increase the long-term capacity of communities to solve problems, build social capital, and advance shared goals.

But turning over the compost of disagreement can be messy work. Individuals as well as communities typically function in a state of equilibrium. We don't like it when the boat gets rocked, when our taken-for-granted notions of how things should be get challenged, especially if the basis for those challenges comes from a very different value or ideological stance than our own. In this sense, the process of dialogue (as we use it) itself creates a paradox. How can we assure a sense of safety and simultaneously assure that the most deeply held views, mainstream or heretical, can be expressed even when that produces strong counter-reactions?

It is this paradox related to process that has attracted sharp criticism from some sectors in our state. There are those who believe that this kind of deliberative, collective approach to problem-solving runs counter to their understanding of how government and communities should work. We have found that this view is most likely to be expressed by those who describe themselves as especially concerned about individual liberties, the size and role of government (especially federal government), and trends perceived to threaten personal freedoms (such as gun control, regional planning, or the common education core). In New Hampshire, famous for its "free-state" reputation, those who identify with the Tea Party and other liberty groups have been most vocal. One leader of a regional Tea Party group in the state has referred to us as "domestic enemies" and written that,

"There is a movement afoot that I'm deeply concerned about. We need to put a stop to it ASAP. As if we don't have enough to do!! But this is REALLY important. I need peoplewho are NOT afraid to speak out and speak up. We need to intimidate these people and not let them brainwash others."

Another leader of liberty groups has written,

The 'Listens' sessions uses [*sic*] a process called 'deliberative democracy.' It would take a long time to explain it all. But over the past few decades it has been used by many on the far left to bring about what they call 'the next form of democracy.' The OWS [Occupy Wall Street] movement employed deliberative democracy in their nightly meetings. The only thing you do need to know is 'deliberative democracy' is NOT the type of democracy practiced in a constitutional republic. The 'NH Listens' process relegates the attendees into small groups where over a period of 2-3 hours a 'consensus' can be built. Unfortunately, some have found that it is very easy to use this consensus

building process to steer a group to preplanned conclusions. I can tell you in personal experience in attending a NH Listens session a few months ago, I felt the entire evening was one of manipulation. I recalled a course I took in college on the Soviet Union political system in which ‘consensus’ circles known as ‘Soviets’ enabled the people in power in a Soviet Committee to manipulate people **to preplanned outcomes** [*emphasis in the original*].

These kinds of concerns have been expressed in letters to newspaper editors and in social media supported by Tea Party and liberty group interests. In addition, we have witnessed explicit attempts to shut down deliberation and essentially block action by elected and appointed officials. Using audio and video recording devices in ways that are felt as intimidating or harassing, and occasionally displaying side-arms, these vocal few make it hard for others to feel that their views will be heard or respected. We are not suggesting this has become the norm, but the frequency has increased since we began this work. Our response has been to engage these voices as much as possible, both in focused conversations to hear directly their concerns and by welcoming them as participates in public deliberations. With some exceptions, we have found that the use of clear, agreed-upon ground rules; facilitators capable of fostering a respectful, honest, safe conversation; surfacing and recording the disagreements as well as common ground; and close scrutiny of participant evaluations regarding their experiences are all necessary for creating safe spaces for disagreements.

In the end, welcoming the most skeptical voices into the conversation is fundamental to the integrity of the process, creates a richer mix of perspectives and ideas, and helps us learn how to create conditions that maximize both safety and disagreement. The challenges described here have made us better. Balancing the sometimes competing constructs of safety and strong disagreement, we are able to be more transparent, we are clearer about digging into disagreements, and we are more skilled at setting boundaries that are legal and effective. Over many years, we have learned from those who have taken issue with the fundamental tenets of deliberative democracy, from the everyday citizens who want to make their communities better in some way, and from the various public and private stakeholders who are directly affected by engaged deliberations. The most important lesson, perhaps, has been that the richer the compost mix, the better the result. The complementary lesson is that strong disagreement requires a safe space if shared understanding and action are to be achieved.

References and Suggested Readings

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Author Information

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The co-authors share equal responsibility for the ideas expressed in this essay.