

Avoid These Toxic Conversations Like the Plague

Two back-to-back conversations, literally back-to-back on the same day at the same venue, convinced me that the level of emotional toxicity, particularly concerning politics is at an all-time dangerous high. While teaching leadership to a professionally diverse crowd, I used two examples of outcome-based communication. I was making the point that one way to measure the effectiveness of a speech is simply by asking, does it accomplish, in the immediate aftermath, what the speaker hoped for?

The first example I used was Barack Obama's first inaugural address. I explained that in terms of that measurement, the speech "worked." Irrespective of one's politics, in terms of the Rutland "effectiveness analysis," Obama's speech was successful.

For a second example of an even more effective speech I chose Donald Trump's speech before congress on February 28, 2017. He had to do three things: rally a rapidly splintering Republican Party, de-fang the Democrat plan to humiliate and further delegitimize him at that very speech and inspire the nation to a positive vision of the future as he saw it. He accomplished all three. Even the least enthusiastic of his Republican colleagues, albeit a bit begrudgingly, admitted that with that one speech, Trump took control of the Republican agenda in Congress. Furthermore, the nation virtually exulted in his positivism. The speech got a 78 percent positive response on a CNN poll and the stock market shot up more than 300 points to pass 21,000 for the first time. Finally, he made the silly Democrat "protests" in the chamber look petty, petulant and irrelevant. All that in one speech. "Love him or hate him," I said, "that is an effective speech."

At the break, I was accosted twice for equal and opposite reasons. The first was an older man who asked how could I use an enemy of America, a traitorous, secret Muslim as an example of anything "good." He said it was disgusting and bitterly disappointing of me to do so. Saying that I did not vote for Obama only seemed, inexplicably, to make it worse.

I walked away from that shaking my head but before I could even seek some calories-laden solace at the refreshment counter, I was thoroughly denounced by a woman for "praising an anti-Semitic racist." This person explained how she had admired me for years and now I had shattered all that and she was wounded, offended and deeply disappointed. It was obvious that arguing or even answering her would have been futile.

I was a bit discouraged to say the least and at first not even doughnuts helped; well, some, but not much. Then I realized that by my standard I had just given a very effective speech. I had managed in one lecture to challenge, upset, energize and offend people on opposite political and cultural poles. Not bad. At least, not bad if that was my goal, so I decided to tell myself that stirring up deep-seated emotional angst across the political spectrum was exactly what I had hoped to do. It was not, of course, but it seemed like an innocent and comforting self-deception.

What I had hoped to do was much simpler and had nothing whatsoever to do with politics. I was teaching on one way to measure the effectiveness of a speech. I am pretty sure neither of those two angry folks got that point, and I don't think I helped them at all. They did, however, help me. They afforded me an insight into the deep tissue bitterness, hatred rather, that now pollutes American thought and communication.

Woe to the Democrat who dares to say anything nice, no matter how limp a compliment, about President Trump. Likewise, I hate to think of the scorn heaped upon the hapless Republican who deigns to suggest that Barack Obama may, I say just may not be

the Antichrist.

This is what we have come to. By the way, this toxicity is hardly confined to politics. In contemporary religious circles, one can unleash a firestorm by even quoting the “wrong” TV preacher in circles that are certain they themselves are “right.”

What is the problem? What has happened to thought and civil discourse in this culture of ours?

I believe much of the answer lies in a noxious cocktail of under-developed emotional maturity and an over-developed sense of absolutism. We have become a people who simply “cannot bear to hear things.” We are too easily outraged, too eagerly horrified and too quickly stretched beyond our ability to deal with the pain of words that wound us. We are becoming a nation of intellectual pygmies suffering from emotional gigantism. In short, we feel far more deeply than we can think.

It is emotional self-indulgence. After all, one can hardly be expected to control one’s oh-so-sensitive inner hair trigger. We go about with our feelings strapped to us like dynamite just daring someone to push the little red button by saying the wrong thing.

Mix this with absolutism, and you have a dangerous compound indeed. Absolutism tolerates no nuance and suffers no subtlety. The absolute dictator shares power with no one, and, as we know, absolute power corrupts absolutely. The philosophical absolutist, the consecrated ideologue believes only in pure truth as he perceives it. Any shade of gray, let alone fifty shades, is a violation of the power of that perfect truth. Therefore, he lives with his antennae out and well-tuned. Just try to slice a thought too finely for his blunted taste, and you will feel his anger.

This means I cannot find good, any good, any speck of anything redeeming or even slightly admirable in the pure evil of the

enemy. Likewise, I cannot wrestle through to see that though I agree with something in principle, there are some things I cannot buy. It is absolute; all or nothing. Hearing anything that threatens that tyranny of the absolute is utterly unbearable.

In this toxic atmosphere, it can be dangerous to even say that the bad guys are at least clever bad guys. It can be just as dangerous to say the good guys may occasionally make missteps or even do wickedly.

When I look into the future, I cannot see where our relief will come from. Western culture seems determined to drink, not less, but ever more of this dangerous, mind-numbing, emotion-enraging potion. These are scary times for the exercise of free thought, and even more so for free speech.

Lead me to the doughnuts. {eoa}

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