What will it take to rebuild the respectful tone once common in state capitols?

BY ANGELA ANDREWS

There’s an epidemic of incivility in America. It’s everywhere. Just read the comments on almost any blog, news story or social media post. Watch the commuter traffic on any weekday morning. Better yet, try discussing the presidential election with a coworker or an in-law.

It’s practically impossible to avoid anonymous offensive language, dangerous road rage or rude conversation. Incivility seems to have permeated all aspects of daily life—including life at the state capitol.

The Institute for Civility in Government defines civility as “more than just politeness, though politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking (and finding) common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements.”

A record high 69 percent of Americans believe that the U.S. has a major civility problem, with 75 percent of them saying incivility has increased to crisis levels and 56 percent expecting it to rise further in the next few years, according to the seventh annual Civility in America poll conducted by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate with KRC Research. The poll also found that 79 percent of Americans believe the 2016 U.S. presidential election was uncivil, and 97 percent believe it is important for the U.S. president to behave civilly.

A Necessary Element

Incivility, however, is no newcomer to the political arena. And not everyone views it as a bad thing. “A dislike of political rancor is at heart a dislike of democracy,” Bruce S. Thornton, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, writes in “Three Cheers for Political Incivility.”

“Given the wide variety of conflicting interests, ideologies and character among the citizenry,” he says, “the public deliberation that lies at the heart of democratic policymaking has always been rough, vulgar and insulting, often at a level far beyond what we today call the ‘politics of personal destruction.’”

Ronald Reagan biographer Craig Shirley agrees. “The last thing we need in American politics is more civility,” he writes in an essay titled “In Defense of Incivility.” “What we need is more focused anger. Anger begets debate and debate begets change. … Liberty is often messy and, yes, uncivil. Freedom is supposed to be disorderly.”

“Every decade of American history has been filled with political speech of the sort we now decry,” Thornton points out. In 1800, for example, Founding Fathers John Adams and...
Civility Must Be Taught

In his classic book “Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct,” P.M. Forni, director of The Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, describes what he believes are the most important elements to building respectful connections with others and bringing civility back to legislative debates and deliberations. Here are 10 of his best tips.

**Acknowledge Others.** A greeting is a minimal yet meaningful confirmation of a person’s value for just being a person.

**Think the Best.** Assume others are good, honest and sensitive before proven otherwise; doing so often encourages them to be just that.

**Listen.** Listening lets others know we value their message, their viewpoint.

**Be Inclusive.** Show respect and consideration to everyone, do not pick and choose.

**Respect Others’ Opinions.** The most civil question of all time is simple, humble and smart: “What do you think?”

**Apologize Earnestly.** Apologies should be thoughtfully conceived, clearly stated and heartfelt.

**Respect Other People’s Time.** Give others the amount of time they can expect from you.

**Accept and Give Constructive Criticism.** Criticism helps us learn what we are unable or unwilling to learn by ourselves.

**Refrain from Idle Complaints.** We complain about the world because we are unhappy about ourselves.

**Assert Yourself.** To a large extent, this means learning to say “no.”

Thomas Jefferson duked it out in the one and only contest between a president and his vice president. The campaign quickly got dirty, writes Kerwin Swint, professor of political science at Kennesaw State University and the author of “Mudslingers: The 25 Dirtiest Political Campaigns of All Time”:

Jefferson’s camp accused President Adams of having a “hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.” In return, Adams’ men called Vice President Jefferson a “mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.” As the slurs piled on, Adams was labeled a fool, a hypocrite, a criminal, and a tyrant, while Jefferson was branded a weakling, an atheist, a libertine, and a coward.

A Hindrance to Democracy

Despite our mudslinging history, many have denounced the current and growing level of incivility in government as a hindrance to democracy. They argue that uncivil behavior erodes trust, stifles respectful debate over controversial issues, and narrows the viewpoints and possible solutions heard. They believe the level of incivility in our statehouses threatens the effectiveness of our legislative bodies.

The concern predates our recent presidential election. During his inaugural address in 2001, President George W. Bush spoke of his commitment “to live out our nation’s promise through civility, courage, compassion and character.” Civility, he said, is not just a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determination to choose “trust over cynicism … community over chaos.”

Ohio Senator Frank LaRose (R), co-chair of the National Network of State Legislators Committed to Civil Governance, was elected to the legislature after serving 10 years in the military, where people from all walks of life come together to accomplish a mission.

“During basic training, I remember the drill sergeants said, ‘I don’t want to hear any of you arguing about who’s black or white, city or country, etc. You’re all green now.’ Later, when I entered the legislature, I was really—‘surprised’ isn’t exactly the right word—I was disappointed by the level of partisanship I encountered. It rose to the level of tribalism, with a strong sense of us versus them, the elephant tribe fighting the donkey tribe. I rejected that. I’m a loyal Republican, a loyal conservative, and I believe in accomplishing the goals of my party because I think that’s the better way to go about solving problems. But I’m not willing to dismiss my colleagues who disagree.”

Congress has become the quintessential example of incivility in government, with numerous incidents of name-calling, unsubstantiated accusations, character attacks and the growing use of such biting words as “liar,” “stupid,” “immature” and “idiot.”

But what about America’s state legislatures? Are they just as bad?

More than a decade ago, the late Alan Rosenthal, a leading scholar of state legislatures, observed that internal and external politics and never-ending campaigns were contributing to the growing incivility. “Given battlefield conditions,” he said, “it is the exception rather than the rule to maintain civil relationships, let alone friendships, with people who are shooting at you.”

Rosenthal’s assessment holds true today. Long-term legislative observers and participants—legislators and staff alike—say civility continues to decline in state legislatures.

What’s Changed?

Why so much discord now? Experts cite several possible causes but tend to agree that no one person, group or political party is to blame. Some point out that lawmakers
have less time for social interactions that might let them develop trustful relationships with colleagues and staff. Term limits, strict gift laws and increased demands on legislators’ time don’t help.

The sometimes unforgiving gotcha-news environment is peppered with sensational stories, and the anonymity of online and social media interactions opens the door to insensitivity and rudeness. The entertainment culture offers viewers a “reality”-heavy diet of rejection and vulgarity. And, of course, there’s the ever-widening partisan gap on policy issues, fostering an us-against-them battle mentality among lawmakers.

So, how do members of a deliberative body—where conflict and tension are inherent—maintain decorum and civil discourse with all these forces working against them? For starters, legislatures might try to increase opportunities for lawmakers to build better relationships with one another.

“People need to get to know each other as colleagues, not just red or blue, Republican or Democrat,” says LaRose.

Idaho Representative Melissa Wintrow (D), LaRose’s cochair for the national network, agrees with him. “Civility is seeing people as people and not objects that get in our way,” she says.

“Civility is about looking for the best in others instead of the worst, listening deeply to each other to better understand and empathize. Choosing civility requires humility and the willingness to be wrong. It requires time, patience and a commitment to build honest, respectful relationships.”

There is plenty of proof that positive interactions improve the odds of achieving greater cooperation and less animosity across groups. After all, it’s tough to demonize someone you know personally—and may even like.

**Finding Common Ground**

Since its founding in 2011 after the shooting of U.S. Representative Gabby Giffords, the National Institute for Civil Discourse, based at the University of Arizona, has led civility seminars in several state legislatures. Carolyn Lukensmeyer, the institute’s executive director, begins her seminars by getting lawmakers to talk to one another.

Keeping the tone of statehouse debates civil is important, Lukensmeyer says, because it encourages lawmakers who disagree strongly about policy to find common ground. Her training sessions ask lawmakers to discuss a “value question” (What do you value most about our state?) to foster better understanding among rival factions.

Idaho Representative Maxine Bell (R) approached the institute’s seminar a couple of years ago with skepticism. Members of the Idaho House, she said, didn’t need more training; they were already respectful of one another. “We are very cautious about how we address each other on the floor due to the strict rules of decorum,” she says.

But Bell is glad she attended. The workshop gave her and others an “opportunity to see each other as people by giving us an in-depth look at the person we’re debating against,” she says.

Wintrow attended as well and says “participating in the Idaho workshop gives us a common experience to reference when we see uncivil behavior and ... increases the chances that we will buy into a common way of treating each other and working civilly through problems for the betterment of our state.”

“Compromise” is not a dirty word, LaRose reminds us: “It’s the way statesmen and -women solve problems in a democracy. When there is civility, there is space for people to get to know each other and work together, to compromise and govern effectively.

“You can be a strong conservative or strong liberal and still interact with each other in a civil way. It’s not about political correctness or about being polite.

“This is about so much more than just being nice to each other.”

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**NCSL Civility Accord**

The National Conference of State Legislatures passed an accord in 2011 giving legislators and legislative staff the opportunity to pledge their commitment to a set of civility principles designed to foster bipartisanship.

As a member of the National Conference of State Legislatures, we, as state legislators and legislative staff, in order to embrace civility and bipartisanship in our states and through them our nation, pledge our commitment to the following principles for civility:

- Respect the right of all Americans to hold different opinions;
- Avoid rhetoric intended to humiliate, delegitimize or question the patriotism of those whose opinions are different from ours;
- Strive to understand differing perspectives;
- Choose words carefully;
- Speak truthfully without accusation, and avoid distortion;
- Speak out against violence, prejudice and incivility in all their forms, whenever and wherever they occur.

We further pledge to exhibit and encourage the kind of personal qualities that are emblematic of a civil society: gratitude, humility, openness, passion for service to others, propriety, kindness, caring, faith, sense of duty and a commitment to doing what is right.