

LEADERSHIP



Cross the bridge

Seek common ground when trying to resolve a dispute

“True genius is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts simultaneously without losing your mind.”

— Charles Beaudelaire

SO OFTEN we find ourselves in situations with others where we create a battleground without appreciating our unconscious contribution to the conflict.

BRIDGE BUILDING

In a recent conversation with a client CEO, she described a common scenario between herself and a senior leader. As she told her story about attempting to convince the leader to support a change initiative, I began to envision the two of them on opposite sides of a bridge. The more the CEO attempted to convince with logic, the greater the gap on the bridge.

Each of them was holding a position. Neither of them was interested in learning about the other's perspective. From either end of the bridge, they attempted to coerce the other into believing that their position was the right position.

I asked the CEO to stand up and to walk to the opposite side of the room and attempt to persuade me that where she was standing on an issue was the right place to be. She made several attempts, and I reciprocated by literally moving further away.

When I called a “time out,” I asked if she saw any other alternatives to the strategy that she

was using that clearly wasn't working. As she struggled, I suggested that perhaps if she came to my side of the “bridge” with curiosity, my resistance might begin to dissipate. For her, physically moving from one side of the room to the other resulted in a shift. The light bulb went on for her, and she appreciated that if she began by seeking to understand what was driving my resistance, she had a greater opportunity to influence a change. I encouraged her to ask questions rather than to preach the benefits of the change.

Emotions drive behavior. As leaders engage in rapid-fire change, we need to slow down with genuine curiosity, in order to accelerate. We've got to learn that as tempting and familiar as it is to magnify our persuasive efforts, a change will not occur without the “other” feeling heard and understood.

BEYOND DUALITY

Jan Phillips, the author of the book “No Ordinary Time,” asks: “Can you evolve your own thinking process beyond duality, beyond ‘right and wrong,’ beyond ‘good and evil?’ Can you accept that we are all right, but only partly so? That we need to mix our thoughts up with others to come up with the greatest variety of solutions, the highest synthesis of consciousness?”

In writing this article, I was aware that none of us is immune from the temptation of staying on our own side of the bridge. I have a dear friend whose political views are diametrically opposed to mine. Often, we engage in efforts to convince one another that one or the other position is the right one; or we determine that we cannot talk about the issues. We have not yet engaged in a dialogue with curiosity. Even though we love and respect one other, we have not committed to a path that invites understanding rather than criticism and judgment. I suspect there will be new learning and new appreciation for each of us if we decide that we want to cross the bridge into understanding.

There are surprising benefits in exploring unfamiliar territory with curiosity and respect. In the end, we have the opportunity to

expand our options in decision making when we strengthen our capacity as leaders to embrace different viewing points. If we embrace the notion that “we aren't all right, only partly so,” we will be more inclined to look for common ground. When we are on common ground, we have a greater capacity for understanding. We have a greater capacity for compassion, and we have a greater capacity for forgiveness.

On common ground, we can move together into our desired future.

“We grow up in a world that keeps things separate

Science is a thousand miles from faith

The right wing and the left are far divided

Though the angel cannot fly without them both.”

— Jan Phillips ■



KAREN VERNAL

Karen Vernal is executive vice president and chief dreamer with Cavendish Vernal, a Milwaukee-based leadership and organizational firm. She can be reached at Karen@ccvernal.com.