* **Welcoming Conservatives •** *Liz Joyner -* Village Square 101 – Tallahassee, FL

As a critical mass of appropriate hand wringing continues as to how to address the deep and increasingly consequential partisan divisions roiling the western world, there is a surprisingly well-developed empirically supported body of knowledge that guides solutions that seem far simpler than the enormity of the problem would suggest.

To grow empathy toward those with different worldviews, [moral psychologists tell us](http://www.civilpolitics.org/content/two-evidence-based-recommendations-for-civil-disagreement/), we need to have positive interactions with “the other” (which is referred to as “contact hypothesis”) and emphasize shared “superordinate” goals. Our decade of pushing the civility rock up this steep hill supports their science – it’s almost a secret decoder ring because it shifts entrenched negative attitudes reliably and quickly. Strangely enough, softening hatred turns out to have been the *easy* part of this big job. The hard part is getting people who disagree on politics to occupy the same space so that the magic can work.

For those of us inspired to the work of building bridges, this first step of getting people with diverse views in a room together has proven a frequently experienced circular challenge – we don’t like each other because we don’t spend time together and we don’t spend time together because we don’t like each other.

This challenge appears to be particularly thorny when it comes to drawing conservatives into civic engagement as it’s most typically practiced. After a decade of experience with the [Village Square](http://villagesquare.us/) – an organization dedicated to creating relationships across the partisan divide – we’ve developed some thinking around both causes of the problem and solutions that work. We host about 30 events a year that depend on drawing a *voluntary* diverse audience – because no one *has to* attend our events, we’ve been forced to do both sleuthing and soul searching.

As brilliant new ideas are popping up around the country to address the challenge of poisonous tribal partisanship, we think there is significant risk that too many of these good ideas will fail to achieve their goals simply because they fail to draw conservatives into their orbit. Even brilliantly conceived and potentially highly impactful initiatives may make things arguably *worse*, after all if conservatives don’t show up, aren’t we accidentally cementing structural divisions by hanging even more often with fellow liberals? And might we risk driving the contempt even deeper, when liberals who show up and want to fix “the relationship” are effectively “stood up?” Note: we’re addressing our remarks to *liberals struggling to draw conservatives into dialogue.* Further posts will address other aspects of this challenge!

Here’s what we’ve learned:

**Start with a bipartisan relationship.** Whatever you’re undertaking, your team has to include a minimum of two people with an authentic ongoing relationship who disagree on politics. If your first try at this fails, try again. If you don’t have a relationship like this, *build one.* There is no group of politically likeminded people, no matter how well meaning, who will ultimately succeed in an endeavor lacking some honest feedback from the other side. Conservatives will probably be less intrigued by your idea (for reasons we touch on, below) so you might have to be creative in how you meet this requirement as you begin. But *do* meet it. You might also have to live with the idea that they’re less “in love” with your idea or project than you are at first. That’s all worth moving past because a truth-telling conservative partner will tell you important things that you will never imagine otherwise.

**Build an expanding bipartisan network incrementally**. Depending on the durability you’re trying to achieve or the scale of your endeavor, consider growing an intermediate-sized ideologically and demographically diverse group that essentially creates the social “glue” that will ensure you draw from different tribes when you either *go big* or *go long* with the public. For us it was a bipartisan board of about 15 (the liberal partner in the original pair identified conservative friends and vice versa), then that group expanded to 75 “founders” before we did our first press release. To the extent you can, keep tapping pre-existing friendships to form the strongest base going forward. Early on, there was much vouching we had to do for each other with potential panelists, elected officials and members of the public. They were suspicious.

**Keep a conservative bench**. You’re more likely to lose conservatives along the way (again, for reasons that make perfect sense and have nothing to do with their moral compass, see below). Don’t get irritated – just get replacements. Do take the time to get feedback from conservatives you’ve lost – you might even learn something! Wash, rinse, repeat. Forever.

**Consider partnering with an ideologically diverse church congregation or a politically diverse group of churches.** Churches are institutions that have more street cred for conservatives than the average town hall does. Additionally, church partners naturally help you speak to hearts, not heads (below).

**If you’re liberal, don’t use your mother tongue**. Direct appeals to “unity” can have an unintended effect in this dysfunctional highly siloed political environment – where individual *words* even have tremendous partisan valence. Efforts to unite across division – often led by citizens who lean liberal (for reasons that have nothing to do with the worth of conservatives) – unintentionally and understandably frame their efforts using language that draws in like-minded liberal audience. In this way their framing unintentionally conveys to conservatives that the project is a liberal one, predisposing a failure to engage conservatives adequately.

Here’s a list of some hot potato words you might want to avoid in your official communications (or at the very least balance them with some words that speak to conservatives). It isn’t that conservatives don’t care about some of these things, it’s just that in this polarized environment they’ve become toxic markers of partisanship and should be used only with caution by bridge builders who truly want to build the gosh darn bridge: *sustainability, race, unity, cooperation, community, social justice, awareness, women’s health, tolerance, climate change, privilege, resources, diversity, dialogue, inclusive, identity, kindness.* (We’re sorry, we know this is hard news because we’ve been there too. When our civic space is detoxified, we can use them again.) We make a practice of checking the titles of our programs with both liberal and conservative friends.

**Speak to hearts, not heads***. Corollary: focus on relationships, not facts.* A unique quality of Western liberalism is that we perceive ourselves as operating inside a framework of rationalism where we look at the facts, weigh them and choose the course of action that is objectively supported. But if we truly value facts, we’ll realize that rationalism isn’t – well – *rational*. For human beings making our way through copious and ambiguous information, science tells us that our intuitions comes first, and *strategic reasoning* follows. We essentially – as a species – believe what we *want to* believe (liberals too).

Forums with a heavy focus on debate and fact checking put the cart squarely before the horse in terms of what has to happen first to create change. The primary focus on bridge building efforts has to be on creating conditions that make people from feuding tribes want to *like* each other. Once those positive relationships exists, we *want to* hear others out, which changes everything. Interestingly, many conservatives follow their intuition first as their factory default setting, so in a highly divided political world, they immediately sense your liberalism when your coordinates aim squarely and repeatedly at objective fact. We know, waiting is hard to do. But the cart will come along if you get the moving parts in the right order. (We have a priest friend who likes to challenge our audiences to list the guiding principles of their lives using only facts. Can’t do it can you? Big ideas incorporate wisdom and wisdom is different than fact.)

**Understand liberal and conservative “moral channels**.” Liberals and conservatives are not receiving information about our current civic crisis on the same channels and it’s a fundamentally big problem. According to Jonathan Haidt and colleagues’ body of work advanced as [Moral Foundations Theory](http://moralfoundations.org/) (entertaining 18 minute primer [here](https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind)), liberals understand moral good to be constrained primarily to whether it is caring or harmful and whether it is fair. While conservatives also believe that care and fairness are moral goods, they believe those goods must be balanced with other moral goods (loyalty, authority, liberty and sanctity – referred to as the “binding” moral foundations).

In this polarized political environment, *The Village Square* has considerable direct experiential evidence that anything that sounds like attention to care and fairness actually drives conservatives away, as they intuitively understand “this is not my tribe.” Making matters worse, liberals perceive that in many cases conservative moral values are, in fact, *amoral,* responding to this perception with *even more* care and fairness (the concept of [“virtue signaling”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue_signalling) is useful in understanding this tendency). This caring on steroids often has the unintentional effect of creating a backlash with conservatives rather than building the bridge liberals truly do seek. To conservatives this kind of an over focusing on “care” and “fair” feels immature (lacking in broad situational awareness and some critical qualities a healthy society must have to function, like authority) as well as too often weaponized by “social justice warriors.” The more conservatives hear “care more,” the more they actually seem to do the opposite; the “meaner” liberals think conservatives are, the stronger liberals catapult the “care” into the next round of hostilities. This is the cycle of equal and opposite reactions where the worst in our politics now resides.

*Believe in your soul* **that without deeply engaged conservatives, your effort will lack critical insights required to solve problems** – insights liberals are likely blind to (even *dangers* liberals may be blind to). We often encounter liberal-leaning friends and colleagues doing civic work with incredibly sincere intention, but with a little digging it’s clear that their central animating belief is that if one can create respectful conversation and do good fact checking, ultimately those intransigent conservatives will come around to a more liberal view of reality. In our era of jaw-dropping distortion of factual reality, we understand the impulse to see the problem this way (truth told, this describes many of us). But as valid as this aspect of the challenge is, you’ll have much more success if you begin with another deep truth we’ve discovered along the way: conservatives can often see dangers, risks and challenges that liberals can’t. All humans have significant blind spots in our ability to perceive reality and likeminded groups of people are even more prone to blindness (a moral tribe actually is glued together *around* those blind spots).

We like John Stuart Mill on this: *“… the besetting danger is not so much of embracing falsehood for truth, as of mistaking part of the truth for the whole. It might be plausibly maintained that in almost every one of the leading controversies… both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though in the wrong in what they denied; and that if either could have been made to take the other’s views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct.”*

The shift in your organizing premise will come through clearly to conservatives and it will draw them to you. For more, see the concept of “morality binds and blinds” in Jonathan Haidt’s [The Righteous Mind](http://therighteousmind.com/). (Think of this blindness as akin to the dark side of the “asteroid” in our [Asteroids Club](http://asteroidsclub.org/) metaphor.)

**Empathize with conservatives through a key insight that’s commonly absent in liberal circles**. In American Grace, Harvard’s Robert Putnam broadly observes that as tectonic plates moved in society beginning in the sixties – and since – *liberals have won the culture war on most all fronts*. We get it, if you’re liberal we’re still not there, but if you’re 50 years old pretty much everything has changed about our social order in the length of your life. From this vantage point, even just that level of change can be thoroughly disorienting, especially if you believe in conservative principles that follow the wisdom of the ages. That means that for over a half a century, conservatives have been living in a culture that violates their most essential guiding principles about how to maintain a functional society (don’t mistake that as being just about bias against women and minorities, it’s not).

Liberals are now less than one year into a presidency that violates their deepest held core beliefs about what constitutes a strong and healthy world. The natural (and healthy) reaction for liberals is they’re now circling their wagons and gathering in common cause to push against it. And in that short time, there’s already been [reporting on](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/liberal-fever-swamps/530736/) the rise of “fake news” on the left. Bad facts on the right are inevitable after decades of feeling outside the prevailing culture, given that human beings “reason” in order to confirm what we *want to* believe, not what’s objectively true. Imagine the left in 50 years of a Trump-styled illiberal democracy and you’ll have more empathy.

**Take a continuous meter reading on whether the environment you’ve created welcomes conservatives**. A lost liberal who stumbles into a gun show wouldn’t need to see a single firearm to know they’re not with their people. Conservatives will know too. It’s a good exercise to think of everything you do through their eyes.

**Scale up using a distributed leadership “cell” model**. *(Alternative less-advisable name: “Use the al Qaeda model”)* Whether you’re going for clicks, attendance, or some other kind of scale, look to a small key group of catalysts to become separate “hubs” to build a diverse audience. The very problem we face is that ideologically diverse groupings of people aren’t naturally occurring “in the wild” so you can’t just assume diverse people will naturally show up for you because you want them to. Creating diverse groups now requires a new intentionality.

A “cell” structure has long been powerfully deployed to create worldwide terror, or if you’d prefer something morally worth emulating, cells create the close connections that form the organizing ballast of megachurches. Point is, it works. Almost all of us can find 7 people who look and think different than we do and invite them to join us to do *something*. We’ve used this model to draw a [racially diverse audience of 500](https://tlh.villagesquare.us/event/)+ to actually *talk* about race – we only needed 20 diverse catalysts to get it done. Once the *engineered* diversity starts shaping attendance, its momentum makes a diverse audience now grow naturally. Voila, you’ve essentially begun formation of a new tribe.

**Recognize the hazard of lopsided groups**. Truth is, we’ve had plenty of politically lopsided groups, it’s even possible that all of our now hundreds of events have had lopsided attendance (our original location is in a highly liberal city). You can do everything right and it’s still likely your engagement will lean left (spending an evening immersed in dialogue across diversity can seem to conservatives like a liberal thing to do). But it is critical that you stay *highly aware of the imbalance* – it will affect every decision you make toward keeping conservatives comfortable and lead to increasing success attracting conservatives into your project over time.

**Respect that conservatives are going to be less thrilled with your forum or initiative for reasons that are truly legitimate** (and have nothing to do with being mean, overly partisan or racist). It is simply a descriptor of the essential philosophical underpinnings of conservatism that they have more *confidence in their families and faith communities* to deal with problems than government or a shared civic space. What this means is that the very nature of most civility initiatives begins with a frame that many conservatives don’t fundamentally share with their more liberal neighbors. An incredible strength of so many conservatives we know is that they’ve got their guiding principles and they’re a little too busy following them to make it to an evening forum. We’ve learned that ultimately it’s our deep embrace of what they bring that’s unique that’s made all the difference.

Challenges notwithstanding, the rewards you’ll get for your efforts to welcome conservatives are both essential to your success and will be transformational for you. They have been for us – the liberals among us will never go back to a room full of people just like us. It’s boring and lacks insights we’ve grown accustomed to hearing.

Got more ideas, models that have worked for you or do you just basically disagree with something we’re advancing here? Building bridges is a big job so we’ll need all shoulders at the wheel. ***Let’s*** [***keep talking***](mailto:liz@villagesquare.us?subject=Welcoming%20conservatives). [Tweet](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?original_referer=https%3A%2F%2Ftlh.villagesquare.us%2Fblog%2Fwelcoming-conservatives%2F&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&text=Welcoming%20Conservatives&tw_p=tweetbutton&url=http%3A%2F%2Fttvs.org%2F2yz1yav)