



Reasonable Voice

Respect and Civility is at the Core of Mutual Gains

Over the past few months I have been re-reading two books I've had on my shelf for decades. The titles "Dealing with an Angry Public" (Susskind and Field, 1996) and "Rules of Civility" (Washington, 1745... yes, that Washington) somehow seem pretty relevant now. That's not meant as a political statement, but reflects a fundamental concern I have regarding how it seems more and more people deal with one another during times of disagreement and pressure.

I often find myself working with organizations when they are precariously balanced in the crosshairs of sensitive situations involving activist groups, government, and the news media. It's usually a critical time in the life of a company that takes a toll on CEOs and boards of directors who are trying diligently to make the best decisions possible for their employees, customers, and shareholders. The ability to engage in intelligent discourse of disagreement while maintaining respect for the person on the other side of the table is a valuable skill set and admirable quality. I think we need it now more than ever.

In "Dealing with an Angry Public," Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field lay out what's called a "mutual gains approach" to dispute resolution, which they developed through a collaboration between MIT and Harvard in the 1990s. In 1996, I had the opportunity to attend an intensive workshop they put on to help participants re-think how to manage those instances when tempers are running hot and trust is in short supply. The six steps of the mutual gains approach are based on the development of mutual trust and respect. The steps are easy to articulate, but much more difficult to put into practice.

In "Rules of Civility," George Washington sets forth 110 precepts on how a gentleman should conduct himself and behave in society, which came from his own notes taken during his early education. The teachings were based on the seventeenth century book "Bien-Séance de la Conversation Entre Les Hommes" (Anonymous, n.d.), which were also tied to the Jesuits, and provided an important guide to civil behavior at the time.

While some of the maxims in "Rules of Civility" are certainly outdated for today's modern society, I believe many of them serve as a reminder on how we should treat one another with respect, tolerance and dignity, especially when we disagree. Some of my best friends, work colleagues, and clients have views very different from mine – yet when we debate vigorously with respect, good humor and an open mind, the final outcome is almost always a broader, more informed perspective. Even if we still disagree in the end.

Winston Churchill once said that tact is the ability to tell someone to go to hell in such a way that they look forward to the trip. That may sound a bit coarse, but the important point remains.

I wish more of our corporate and political leaders (in all parties) would learn, or remember, the process of civilized discourse. It may not make us care for their ideology any more than we do, but it certainly would make it easier to explain their behavior to our children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meath', with a large, sweeping initial 'M'.

Michael Meath
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