

Santa Barbara Community Public Forum

Falkner Gallery: February 2017

Topic: “Can We Talk ... and Listen to One Another?”

“Best Practices of Civil Discourse Studied, Defined, and Promoted”

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Introduction

Thank you Bev and the League of Women Voters of Santa Barbara for inviting Deb Humphreys and me to participate in today’s forum on the topic “Can we talk ... and listen to one another?” We would also like to extend a special thank you to everyone in the audience for taking time out of their busy schedules to participate in today’s forum. We are so honored to be here and so excited to tell you about the League of Women Voters of San Luis Obispo County’s ongoing efforts to promote and sustain the Best Practices of Civility and Civil Discourse in San Luis Obispo County.

Let me begin by saying that Deb and I are more than hopeful and optimistic about Santa Barbara’s future. We are confident that, by working together, using the Best Practices of Civil Discourse, elected officials, staff, and residents of Santa Barbara can achieve their shared vision. Both Santa Barbara County and San Luis Obispo County are built from the same strong foundation: the strength of a vibrant Democracy that has survived tough challenges for more than 200 years and the strength of the League of Women Voters who have been making Democracy work better for everyone locally and nationally for almost 100 years.

We believe that the elected officials, League members, and citizens present here today already share common ground – in spite of party differences or differences in ideologies -- because all of you collectively believe in the Mission of Santa Barbara “... to provide quality public services to the people of Santa Barbara County in response to Santa Barbara’s need for a **healthy, safe, and prosperous environment** ... and to establish and maintain a workforce which reflects the diversity of the Santa Barbara community.”

LWV of San Luis Obispo County: Setting the Groundwork for Civil Discourse

For the past 4 years, the League of Women Voters of San Luis Obispo County has worked tirelessly to add another layer of strength to the foundation of our own local county Democracy. We asked our local San Luis Obispo County elected officials, staff, and citizens to commit to the Best Practices of Civility and Civil Discourse in all their public meetings and interactions with each other. **“Can we talk ... and listen to one another?” Yes, if each of us is willing to commit to the Best Practices of Civil**

Discourse by understanding how it works, what it looks like, and how to practice it every day at home, at work, and in our volunteer and advocacy efforts.

Civil Discourse is not only beneficial to our personal health, but to the health of our relationships, and to the health of our Democracy.

Key Civil Discourse Concepts

The League of Women Voters of San Luis Obispo County believes that putting the Best Practices of Civil Discourse into action insures that everyone feels safe, comfortable, and valued while expressing their views -- regardless of power, status, or money -- and, after all, isn't that the higher standard of shared communication at the heart of the concept of a truly inclusive and healthy democracy? Genuine Civil Discourse allows open vigorous reasoned dialogue on the issues themselves, based on evidence and argument, coupled with the willingness to learn from others. The League of Women Voters of San Luis Obispo County believes that in order to arrive at the best public policy and solutions to critical challenges facing our communities, we need to strive to understand different points of view by truly trying to see where the other person is coming from based on their experiences and contexts and by allowing ourselves to be open to the possibility that the other person may offer us some new and valuable insight to the issues under discussion.

Civil Discourse is not focused on a result to which everyone necessarily has to agree, but on the mutual understanding of all the views and perspectives that shape people's positions as an open and ongoing process. Sincere, reliable, competent, and caring Civil Discourse is the open-minded, mutually respectful, engaged and yet non-dogmatic public dialogue in which everyone wins because all have reached a better understanding of everyone's convictions. It is neither a competitive debate nor a shallow polite conversation about the inconsequential, but a serious thoughtful reasoned exchange about public matters of common concern, which affect all of us. To raise the level of public conversation in our culture, to reach the level of Civil Discourse, is thus essential for a vibrant living and thriving Democracy.

Civil Discourse Study

These are the critical concepts we discovered when we conducted our formal yearlong League-directed Civil Discourse Study in pursuit of a definition and Best Practices of Civil Discourse. We could not promote the Best Practices of Civil Discourse without a formal study that was accepted and approved by our League's Board of Directors and our League's membership. From the beginning of our CD Study, we reached out to elected officials, League members, and the public to help us in our pursuit of a definition and Best Practices of Civil Discourse. Our definition and primary objective for promoting civil discourse is now part of our Government Position. We have been formally advocating civil discourse to local elected officials, their staff, and the public

ever since. By publishing our CD Study on the League's Clearinghouse web site, we enabled other Leagues in California and other states to adopt our CD Study by **concurrence** and promote civil discourse in their own locations as well. To view the LWV of San Luis Obispo County's published CD Study in its entirety along with supporting documents, PowerPoint's, our Civility and Civil Discourse Resolution, Civil Discourse Brochure, resources, and more, just **click here** www.lwvslo.org to go to the **Civil Discourse** section on the **LWV of San Luis Obispo County's web site**.

Overall Objectives

Following is a brief outline of the overall objectives of the LWV of San Luis Obispo County's Civil Discourse Action Team that highlight what civil discourse is, what civil discourse is not, and how to put it into action both on an individual basis and on an organizational level. Putting the Best Practices of Civil Discourse into action is an ongoing process that takes commitment, practice, and accountability. Because we are all human and subject to unexpected triggers that may derail our best intentions to be civil, we must learn how to not only forgive ourselves when this happens but learn how to forgive others when this happens to them. We also need to learn how to support others as they try to move toward being more civil and more skilled in the implementation of the Best Practices of Civil Discourse in all their communications. We must not only believe in our own ability to embrace this change and shift in our thinking, speaking, and responses to others but we also need to believe in the potential for others to also change and shift their own thinking, speaking, and responses.

As we become more familiar with our own triggers and hot buttons and those of others, we will become more adept as facilitators and practitioners of the Best Practices of Civil Discourse. When we finally achieve this higher standard of behavior and communication, we will no longer fear or dread conversations with others whose perspective, point of view, philosophy, or ideology is different from ours. Although there may be times when we may have to agree to disagree, we don't have to be disagreeable. By increasing our ability to open our hearts and minds, empathize with others, seek common ground, and acknowledge what is working, we open the door to more effective collaboration with an increased opportunity for consensus which makes Democracy work better for everyone.

Outreach and Next Steps

As newly elected officials and staff were preparing to take their places in their new positions after the November elections, the LWV of San Luis Obispo County once again reached out to San Luis Obispo County government bodies to follow-up and find out how the adoption of our League's Civility and Civil Discourse Resolution impacted the level of civility and civil discourse among their elected officials, staff, and the public this past year. We also reached out to the first government body to participate in our ½ day

workshop entitled, “Beyond the Law: Values and Civil Discourse.” **“Can we talk ... and Listen to One Another?”** Here are some comments from participants in this workshop:

“From my perspective, the key outcomes were getting highly polarized individuals to get to know each other better personally through the paired discussions and small group discussions, which seemed to take the edge off all that followed; getting them to talk openly with each other and to share their personal vision, values and priorities for the agency; and actually developing a list of Board norms of behavior that were later refined and adopted by the Board.”

“In the 3 Board meetings that have occurred since the March workshop, Board members have been respectful of each other, there has been no rancor or negative personal comments directed at anyone, and there has even been some levity introduced at a few meetings that got people laughing and acting in a more cohesive way.”

Because of the success of our initial workshop and the even greater need for more civility and civil discourse after the outcome of the recent November election, we decided to add several more workshops and training tools in support of our incumbent and newly elected officials, their staff, and the public with the hope of ensuring a smooth transition and path to even more effective government in San Luis Obispo County:

- Beyond the Law: Finding Your Own Governing Ethical Guidelines
- Team Development: Strengthening Working Relationships
- New Leader Transition Support: Building Rapport Quickly
- Collaboration and Consensus Building: Working Efficiently in spite of Differences
- Civil Discourse PowerPoint Presentation: Civility and Civil Discourse in Action
- Civility and Civil Discourse Resolution: Pledging to follow the Best Practices

At our League’s Program Planning Meeting in January, League members of San Luis Obispo County agreed that we should make civic education a priority this year by expanding out outreach to schools and the community. Voter Services received a Grant to go into the classroom and educate students not only on the importance of registering to vote and how to register but also on the importance of becoming a well-informed voter who actually shows up to vote on every Election Day. Our Civil Discourse Action team wants to make civic education a priority as well by teaching the importance of civility and civil discourse as the foundation and glue for civic education and a thriving Democracy. We want to continue the World Café Model as a key model for facilitating conversations that matter using the Best Practices of Civility and Civil Discourse. Our

Civil Discourse Action Team successfully implemented this model with a local HOA event whose participants included management, board members, and residents. We successfully used this model with our own January League Program Planning Meeting. Here are some comments from participants in the World Café Model:

Subject line in email: “Walking on air!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“My biggest hope was that all the participants would depart with smiles – and that happened.

***“The seeds of trust were sown. We have important HOA decisions ahead but I think we established a sense of community, which will enable us to have support with our future action plans and serve us well with the ‘hard stuff.’
“I learned things, and best of all I think those in attendance felt heard, acknowledged, and left happier than when they arrived.”***

Civil Discourse – Best Practices

Overall Objective of Civil Discourse:

- Demonstrate an understanding of diverse perspectives.
- Be willing to come to a shared or common meaning.
- Make an effort to find common ground.

What Civil Discourse is NOT:

- A win-lose environment.
- Someone else’s responsibility.

What do Best Practices Look Like in Action?

1. Take Personal Responsibility – Model Civil Discourse

- *Check your Attitude* – demonstrate an interest in engaging others.
- *Own your triggers.*
- *Listen to understand others’ perspectives.*
- *Choose words carefully* – avoid rhetoric intended to humiliate, malign, or question the motivation of those whose opinions are different from yours in all your meetings.
- *Speak truthfully without accusation, and avoid distortion in all your meetings.*
- *Respect the right of all people to hold different opinions and perspectives by keeping a bi-partisan mindset.*
- *Ask others for feedback on how you come across to others.*

2. Develop your Organization's Own Code of Conduct (Guiding Principles)

- *What do you need from each other to exercise open, respectful communication?*
- *Commit yourself to building a civil political community in which each person is respected and spirited public and political debate is aimed at the betterment of your City or County and its people.*
- *Check examples of other organizations' guiding principles.*
- *Use language that your organization can understand and own.*

3. Make and Keep the Guiding Principles Visible

- *Do something with the agreed upon Code of Conduct: post it, put it on meeting agendas, and reinforce it.*
- *Take shared responsibility for following it.*
- *Introduce it to new members.*
- *Revisit Principles each year to make adjustments.*

4. Reinforce Guiding Principles

- *Invite feedback on how Principles are working.*
- *Use examples of what each Principle looks like in action.*
- *Give each other permission to change.*
- *Use humor to make adjustments.*
- *Have League Civil Discourse Observers available during meeting to provide feedback.*

5. Prevent Uncivil Behavior

- *Educate young people on civil discourse principles and personal responsibility for finding common ground.*
- *Make Guidelines/Principles visible – refer to them in meetings.*
- *Consider specialized workshops on conflict dynamics, team building, and trust building.*
- *Consider Leadership Development coaching if needed: build self-awareness of impact of behavior on others.*

We hope these quotes will inspire you to model civility and civil discourse ...

- ***“Civility is claiming and caring for one’s own identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process.” Cassandra Dahnke and Tomas Spath***
- ***“Wisdom is made up of ten parts, nine of which are silence.” Author unknown***

- “Go and speak to your enemies. [But know that] you cannot change someone else unless you first change yourself.” **Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa**
- “Tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy.” **Sir Isaac Newton**
- “Unexpected kindness is the most powerful, least costly and most underrated agent of human change.” **Bob Kerrey, former U.S. Senator from Nebraska**
- “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” **Margaret Mead**
- “Remember that you are needed. There is at least one important work to be done that will not be done unless you do it.” **Charles Allen**
- “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” **Mohandes Gandhi**