

Restoring Trust in Political Conversations

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In this new combative political climate we've lost the valuable commodity of trust. Historically, trust in politics has allowed people to have strong debates regarding diverse subjects while still sitting down together at day's end to share a meal. This sort of trust acknowledges that despite political differences, we enjoy a shared humanity that transcends political arguments.

Distrust, however, breeds wariness, doubt and cynicism, which means important conversations end before they get very far. Distrust draws opponents as "other," separate from our own basic desires and needs.



Whether your goal is being a successful citizen lobbyist, or having more meaningful political conversations, or just working to help elevate the political climate, the efforts toward building trust are the same.

First, find common ground regarding topics. Don't lead out with incendiary issues. Talk first about ideas on which you agree. Keep in mind that most of us are closer to middle of the bell curve on any subject than the fringe. Work to find the common ground.

"In a lot of different contexts we do all agree," says Marina Lowe, a lobbyist for the ACLU of Utah. Her success in lobbying the largely conservative Utah legislature comes from her efforts to find commonality. "When we start talking about these politically charged issues, we diverge. But if we can focus first on building trust and relationships on the issues we do care about, and do have commonality, then it is easier to step into the harder areas." Acknowledging commonality and discussing issues where you both agree lends legitimacy to both parties. Next, try to connect with the human side of people. If you believe the person you are talking with is doing her best, but is simply reaching different conclusions based on her background, experience and bias, then it is easier to connect on the human level.

"Sometimes it's not even legislative issues," Lowe says. "Sometimes it's finding out about somebody's background, what they did over the weekend, or their kids. Starting at those basic human levels [works] because at the end of the day we are all people."

Finally, listen and respond respectfully. Though initially you might be frustrated when someone thinks differently than you do, if you communicate your thinking clearly and then listen to how others came to their conclusions, you will begin to understand each other. Understanding does not necessitate agreement. But when you understand another's point of view, you deepen the trust in your relationship.

Be fair in your thinking. Don't try to "win" by any means necessary. Be prepared to change your mind based on respectful and trustworthy conversations. Tell the truth and be willing to admit when someone is swaying you. People don't want to be tricked, lied to, or manipulated. If they feel you are using unscrupulous tactics in the conversation or in your behavior, you give them reason to distrust you

Restoring trust to our political discussions and decisions is an important step in repairing a divisive political climate.