

10 Political Pointers for Politicians

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AUTHOR'S NOTE 2017: I have been writing about how we (the people of the United States of America) might find our way to some degree of political sanity for years. To

say this aloud usually evokes rolling eyes, chuckles and sometimes a literal LOL. For the record, I have no problem understanding how ridiculous I sound when talking about political sanity. I am glad to join in the laughter. What I am not willing to do is stop there. Just because something sounds ridiculous does not mean it is impossible.

After trying my hand at partisan commentary, I discovered that a better voice for me was from my perspective as a psychotherapist. I have written a series of articles under the heading of *Same Page: Challenging Political Discourse from the Inside Out*, focusing not on content of political communication but on process. *Same Page* is about the HOW of communication, not the WHAT. I even pitched it to a couple of television producers as an idea for a reality show. Think about it: politicians in therapy with each other, having their ineffective and destructive ways of communicating confronted and being challenged to change how they talk with each other. How entertaining might it be to watch politicians in a therapeutic setting where dishonesty, double standards and verbal abuse are not acceptable.

My intention with *Same Page* is to apply the same principles of respectful and healthy communication that I teach my clients to the dysfunctional relationships of our political representatives. Think of it this way: we have an incredibly high tolerance for our elected representatives acting in ways that we would have no tolerance for in our personal relationships. If we acted in our marriages the way our representatives act in Congress, for instance... well, our marriages would not survive. We Americans have become so habituated to the transparent manipulation, dishonesty and selfishness of our representatives that we do not even expect them to be otherwise. "All politicians lie," we remind each other, with not the slightest sign of outrage. I am not sure we can lower the bar much more.

With all this in mind, the following is one of the articles from my *Same Page* series. Wherever possible, I have written each of these articles to stand alone without reference to current events of the day. I have done my best to stay away from the WHAT and focus on the HOW of communication.

So much for prologue; let's talk about healthy communication.

What follows is not so much naive as it is desperate. If we are serious about saving ourselves from careening over the cliff with the political train wreck we are currently witnessing (and participating in, whether we want to or not) we must understand that no small changes, no slight adjustments, no one party emerging victorious over the other, will bring about the drastic and lasting change we need. The problems begin with us and so must the solutions.

10 Communication Pointers for Politicians

A sign on my office wall reads, “It is useless to be judgmental of judgmental people.” This one, like all of my therapeutic one-liners, is not there just to enlighten my clients. It is there first to remind me of my own tendency toward arrogance. I frequently need to be reminded that fundamentalism is not just a word to describe people who don’t think like I do. Any of us can fall into the trap of fundamentalist thinking. In fact, I have a good friend who is a fundamentalist hippie. You know, “peace and love, you idiot.”

This kind of “I’ve got the answers and you don’t” arrogance is troubling enough at the level of personal relationships, but becomes treacherous for us all in the bigger context of national politics and even global relationships. And a fundamentalist hippie is no more helpful than a fundamentalist war monger.

Whether the context is a personal relationship or something much bigger like the dysfunctional relationship between our two primary political parties or global relationships between nations, the dynamics are the same. The same psychological principles that apply to you and me apply to the world at large. This is an excellent time for us all to be reminded of this. It is always an excellent time for us all to be reminded of this.

Let’s consider a few sound principles of healthy relationship that we tend to believe at the level of personal relationship, but tend to forget or deny in the larger context of national politics and global relationships.

1. Seldom, if ever, is one person always right about everything.
2. It is as important, if not more so, to listen to what others are saying than it is to insist that you be heard.
3. Black and white, all or none thinking is restrictive to problem solving and is often dangerous to the point of destroying potentially healthy relationships.
4. Violence begets violence. Aggression beget aggression. (This does not refer only to physical violence.)
5. Diversity is positive and energizing to relationships. Insistence on conformity is controlling and damaging to relationships.

6. Rigidity or fundamentalism creates breaks in relationships. Tolerance and flexibility facilitate healing.
7. Focusing on whom to blame does not lead to solutions. Focusing on what each of us is responsible for does lead to solutions. Accepting responsibility is much more effective than assigning blame.
8. An attitude of reciprocity is pivotal to establishing and maintaining healthy relationships.
9. Battles can be won, but problems will not be solved from adversarial positions.
10. Without genuine empathy there will be no healthy relationship.

I don't claim to have risen beyond my own fundamentalist and arrogant thinking, but I am making progress, and I am committed to working toward that very worthy goal, because I believe that the changes that are needed in our nation and in our world must begin with the basic building block of community: the individual. Change begins with you and me.

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