

# **Thought Leadership in an Era of Division and Derision**

By Thomas R. Rosenfield, JD, CAE ©2021

Engaging our members, Boards, and outside stakeholders is challenging in this social media-driven, 24-hour news era. As a society all too often we're focused on the 'bad' stories and negative headlines. Our actions negatively impact our ability to influence decisions – and as association leaders one of key responsibilities is *influence*! It's no wonder that 93% of Americans polled by Pew Research Center believe civility is a problem.

We don't lack passion, but what about *compassion*? How do we focus our lens on the positive events that are motivating our teams, to increase our influence and the impact of our issues? Adding some kindness, even empathy, will help but understanding the history of Civil Discourse and logical rules of engagement continue to propel the most effective associations and their leadership.

Most associations exist to advocate (not lobby): to inspire mutual advancement or change for a common cause. Influence is part of our job; but Thought Leadership yields more extensive, far-reaching influence, and often it is the concepts of Civil Discourse that enable Leaders to become Thought Leaders – someone who is a trusted source and authority, who shares informed opinions and who's expertise is widely sought.

**The Impact of Engagement Throughout History.** Civility and Civil Discourse are not new ideas! Aristotle (d. 322 BC) is credited with creating a concept of 'civil society,' which referred to a "*community of citizens...bound together as equal participants.*" While the meaning or application has evolved, Aristotle's focus on community remains.

Cicero (d. 43 BC) expanded upon Aristotle's notions of civil society and created the idea of 'civility.' Cicero believed there were certain standards of conduct towards others we should adhere to for the good of the city (community). Alexander Hamilton (d. 1804) expounded further, writing in Federalist #1 (1787) why civil discourse was vital to productive political debate. Hamilton espoused the idea that civil discourse would benefit everyone if serious positions were examined, opposing opinions respected and considered, and debate ensued to ensure that the best ideas could rise to the top. To Hamilton, the biggest misstep would be a lack of any serious debate.

It's not just historical figures who recognized the need for Civil Discourse: retired Justice Anthony Kennedy warned in 2019 that "[c]ivility . . . has never been needed more than it is today, in crucial part because "[d]emocracy presumes that there will be a consensus based on thoughtful debate."

Clearly Civil Discourse is not new. Neither are many of the 'hot' issues today including High Crimes and Misdemeanors, Impeachment, Emoluments, and Separation of Powers. All of these were discussed by Hamilton in the Federalist Papers. Divisiveness isn't a recent phenomenon, either. While the trend in volume or amount have gyrated in the past 2,300 years many concepts have remained constant.

**Member and Stakeholder Perspectives.** While in-person member and stakeholder engagement has taken a hiatus the past 15 months, public interactions continue to be divisive. The contentious presidential election fanned flames but in spite of that many have appeared more selfish than selfless, with social media and the NEWS highlighting seemingly one negative perception or story after another.

Research and polls provide some insights. Your members are not in a vacuum when it comes to general attitudes and trends. People are not getting their information from traditional sources anymore; their trust of network and cable NEWS has plummeted. According to the Knight Foundation, over a mere two-year period trust in network NEWS has dropped from 30% to just 14%, and 26% to 12% for cable NEWS. A majority of high school and college students believe social media has had a negative impact on free expression, and a whopping 75% of those aged 16-22 believe the internet is fueling hate speech.

According to a recent Gallup poll, negative sentiments among partisans toward the members of the opposing party have deepened. CNN reports that 42% of both parties view the opposition as not just mistaken but "*downright evil.*" Worse, 73% of Americans believe that Rs and Ds cannot even agree on basic facts. Ouch.

It doesn't get any better if you analyze these groups based on age and sex: women tend to believe less use of offensive language is crucial, but the divide isn't all that significant. Older

stakeholders, especially those over 65, and those with advanced degrees, tend to be more conservative in their perspectives.

These attitudes and perceptions affect our decisions as leaders, and they impact our effectiveness, as associations, to influence a narrative and inspire mutual advancement. Yet, we cannot influence if we do not engage, and we cannot engage effectively unless we recognize and implement practices for Civil Discourse. As former Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg stated, *“[i]f our friendship encourages others to appreciate that some very good people have ideas with which we disagree, and that, despite differences, people of goodwill can pull together for the well-being of the institutions we serve and our country, I will be overjoyed, as I am confident Justice Scalia would be.”* And as her close, dear friend yet polar-opposite colleague former Supreme Court Justice Scalia previously said, *“I don’t attack people. I attack ideas.”*

**Rules of Civil Discourse That Drive Thought Leadership** are not terribly complex. However, numerous case studies as well as our own with multiple associations underscore the consequence of noncompliance. It really does make a difference.

Constituents are not as good at listening when not in-person. And yet, in just the past seven years the percentage of those texting has increased from 42% to 61%, and those on social media has more than doubled from 34% to 70%. Personal interactions have become the exception, not the rule. But Justices Scalia and Ginsburg got it right and their relationship provides a valuable lesson: *Open exchange is possible among opposites while also maintaining a separate level of friendship and respect not dependent on philosophical agreement or alignment.*

As associations and association leaders, we have the choice to positively influence and impact our communities. Successful advocacy depends on our ability to reason and work with those who hold very different convictions and beliefs than our own.

**Rule #1: Embrace Vulnerability. Eschew Preconceived Notions.** Engaging in debate, discussion, and even argument is constructive if the actual goal remains cultivating and nurturing best practices or solutions. To acknowledge the possibility that one’s own arguments could be wrong, or your ideas are simply inferior to better ones, is the mark of a Thought Leader. As

Hamilton stated, *“we, upon many occasions, see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first magnitude to society.”*

**Rule #2: Prioritize Trust. Emphasize Relationships.** Quite simply, the greater the trust between your stakeholders, the more open they’ll be to new ideas and other perspectives. Everyone’s guard diminishes as trust increases. So before starting that debate, take time to get to know everyone in the room or on the Zoom call. Learn three things about them; as writer and speaker Taiye Selasi has said, ask *“where are you local”* rather than *“where are you from?”* Name-calling, threats, and bullying promote distrust and erode your association’s influence.

**Rule #3: Show Some Respect.** Civil Discourse – and effective advocacy – demands association leaders and their stakeholders respect one other, even when that respect is hard to give or to earn. It’s not about being polite, it’s about being respectful. Long-lasting solutions require support beyond one person or group.

**Rule #4: Encourage Contrasting Perspectives.** Remember: even the most noted Thought Leaders are wrong some of the time. Strong-arm tactics will impede your leadership; evaluating and considering multiple perspectives will increase your influence on stakeholders. Think of engaging with your members as an opportunity to shop in a supermarket for ideas.

**Rule #5: Listen First. Speak Second.** 24-hour news, social media, and nonstop ‘noise’ teaches that only the loudest will be heard. Funny, even without megaphones and the internet in the 1700s, Hamilton noted that some *“hope to evince the justness of their opinions...by the loudness of their declamations.”* However, openly listening to others’ perspectives suppresses preconceived notions, promotes trust, fosters respect, and encourages vibrant discussions.

**Rule #6: Focus on Influence, Not Winning.** We’re obsessed with winning. Whether a friendly game of cards, a golf outing, or our kids’ sporting events, we focus on the final score. But success in competition or beating someone else is not an element of effective leadership. Rather, association leaders are judged by successfully driving consensus, influencing public policies, and creating Champions out of stakeholders. What’s crucial is achieving these and other goals.

**Rule #7: Collaboration is Key.** Make Space for New Ideas. Let your stakeholders feed off one another through their relationships and cooperation. Great associations use their influence to positively change the course of peoples' lives. Some of the best ideas have been produced from individuals working together.

**Advocacy is not a meeting, but an engagement opportunity.** Associations are about communities of stakeholders coming together united through a common mission. So, too, Civil Discourse is a political notion, not an Emily Post-style notion about politeness. Historically, speech was filtered through how it did or did not contribute to the good of the city or a community.

Today, there are fewer, if any, filters but through the use of Civil Discourse tactics in our engagement there remains an opportunity for associations to be the Thought Leaders of our communities; to bring together disparate stakeholders and forge consensus for the common good. As Chris Lundberg, a Professor at UNC Chapel Hill, commented, "*civility is not about politeness; it is about behaving in such a way that advances the greater good.*"

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