Bias Corrodes Civility

As you may have noticed I have tried to focus on the tools of civility and then other positive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that can enhance these tools and thus civility. Yet we know that there are also negative actions that can hinder civility. It is as important that we can recognize and understand these interferences to help keep us on the civility track.

One of those actions is bias. To fully understand bias and its affects, we need to step back and look at our human behavior. All of us have an array of opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about thousands of subjects based on our upbringing, our environment, our interests, our skills and talents, and our experiences. Of these we put different amounts of enthusiasm in them. Some we have a slight preference while others we have very strong feelings for them. Using myself as an example I do like the colors blue and green together, but my wardrobe has most of the colors of the rainbow. On the other hand I am an avid bridge player and Badger sports fan. While I know a lot of people who share my strong interests, I have others who do not play cards and are Ohio State fans. We accept each other’s differences.

But bias is “a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another usually in a way that is considered unfair” or “is treating someone negatively because of their actual or perceived age, creed, disability, ethnic or national origin, marital status, political or social affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation”. Some of the suggested reasons for bias is fear, misunderstanding, mis, inaccurate, or incomplete information, hatred, or stereotypes. Some of the following tactics may be used by someone with a bias: Extreme language that include the words “all or nothing”. The arguments used are emotional versus logical. The view of the topic is limited. Descriptions seem oversimplified and overgeneralized.

I suspect that most of us really have a few biases. We often are fully aware of some and may not really recognize others. In most of our conversations one of those biases does not show up. We can use our civility tools and have meaningful conversations. Even when we recognize our emotions rising as a bias shows, we can move away from the conversation and subject and calm ourselves down. Sometimes our emotions get the best of us and our voices rise and we find ourselves saying negative things to anyone present to demonstrate how wrong they are in their thinking to convince them that our belief(bias) is the correct one. Of course this conversation ends poorly.

Unfortunately there are some who have extremely strong bias with broad bases. They are unable to not let their bias show in every conversation that they have. Now their bias is beginning to corrode their ability to be civil. Corrosion is a process of eating something away. On the tools that are not tended to or not used, a coat of rust begins to appear. Over time more of the rust appears. Eventually that tool is no longer able to be used for the purpose it was intended. Some may be able to be cleaned and useable once again while others are simply thrown away.

Now let look at the corrosion of the civility tools. With a strong bias one is now entirely focused on their beliefs or exclusive with no room for inclusion. There is only one way, your way. You are unable to pay attention or listen to someone who has a different view. You are continually telling other of the wrong and terrible beliefs of those who do not share yours. You do this in any way possible to get them on your side. There is no room for being agreeable, treating others with respect or using constructive statements. As the saying goes, “you are out for blood”. What matters is that the rest of world will take on your view and forget the rest. Eventually you are so possessed that this is your only form of communication no matter what the subject and you are not to be blamed for that. You just must proceed. As for others around you trying to be civil, they too find themselves corroded by acting in kind. Civility in our world could die if each of us does not address our own biases and keep our civility tools in working order.

Orlaine I. Gabert

Door County Civility Project