Some Suggestions for Civil Politician Communication

Recently I was watching the end of a college basketball game. All of the players and coaches walked in a line passed each other. Some merely shook hands, some shook hands with sincere congratulations, some hugged each other, and a few not only hugged but chatted as well. My immediately thought was that perhaps our political scene could learn a few lessons from the way the game of basketball is played from beginning to end.

First there is a set of rules about how the game is to be played. When a rule is violated the individual is held accountable by a foul system. There is a limit to the number of such violations and then out for the remainder of that game. There are certain violations that have a more severe consequence which also applies to coaches. While each side plays their hardest, in the majority of fouls, no one gets hurt. Afterwards they respectfully congratulate everyone which I believe would send the message of a well fought game for both the winners and the losers.

Secondly, we need to consider who are these players and coaches. There a quite a few things that they all have in common. Basketball is their game. Some of them grew up in the same school system and played ball together. Others were rivals. Some met at camps or other competitions. Some had siblings that played before them. Others had parents that had been players and now coaches. These bonds held them together. While each player wants to win the game they are playing, when it is over, those bond remain. The next game they are back on the floor, playing by the rules and playing their hearts out. With handshakes after.

Thirdly, whenever a coach is interviewed either at the end of the first half, the beginning of the second or after the game, there are no derogatory remarks made about the opposing team. Rather some sort of complement is made about the team even when one team is far superior or a fierce rivalry. Nor are there calling out specific members of the coach’s team that had made mistakes. Rather they state areas that need improvement and positive areas of play.

Then I thought of one last lesson that could be learned. James Naismith invented the games of basketball 1891, but I am not sure he would fully recognized his game today. There have been so many changes to the game. Along with new techniques for making baskets and defending, team offense and defense strategies, many rule changes and even time periods, the game evolve to be current with the present times. Further we can expect there will be some additional changes in the future

Now let’s try to apply these practices to our political world. There are constant meetings that the opposing parties attend. After each one them, let’s have the ritual of shaking hands. The more frequent this is done, the more each of them will get to know each other.

 These individuals like the basketball players have many things in common. The majority are in the field of employment that they have chosen. They have pledged themselves to work for the people that they represent. Many attended the same universities and in the same disciple. Many worked their way up from local to federal government. A portion are from the same state. This handshake may kindle a strong reminder of their likeness and not their differences as well the desire to work together to complete the tasks that they face.

Next they can all follow the example of the coaches. Chairpersons when reporting to the public and press will provide information on the positive progress made and the areas that still need to be resolved. Individual politicians can do the same. They can speak to how they feel that a problem can be solved without attacking or blaming the other party which does not address the problem to be solved. It only increases the likelihood that there be will be no resolution. Players knew when they have had some difficulties, they do not need to be named out. Degrading another’s point of view does not help.

The Fourth Estate of Government can be helpfully by establishing guidelines for their interviews. Those who revert to attack or blame can be asked to stop and address their views and could not be asked back. The Fifth Estate, the people can ask the same when they are addressed.

I am sure that if our fore fathers were given the opportunity to see the world today, they would be awed and unable to comprehend what they were seeing. Still they did leave us a lesson. As the writing of the constitution became difficult, they decided to approve what they had, knowing that they could amend later. That’s exactly what they did. Later came our first 10 amendments. Today these politicians can change the rules and guidelines to match our world.

And Civility will reign.

Orlaine I. Gabert, Door County Civility Project