

Reaching across the divide: Can we?

Obama's call to listen, heal, unite requires people to build skills

WATERTOWN, MA, Nov. 24—On November 4, President-elect Barack Obama emphasized uniting the country, bridging divides, and helping people see past their differences. To achieve this, both he and his supporters must carry out his promise to “listen to you, especially when we disagree.”

But, how many citizens have the specific skills required to have a constructive conversation with someone with whom they disagree?

People's ability to have constructive dialogue can be threatened by the intense emotions they feel when discussing issues related to identity, values, and worldviews, such as politics. After this extraordinarily intense campaign season, **can** people communicate in ways that unite, rather than further divide them? As holiday gatherings draw near, **can** families discuss politics without limiting themselves to superficial conversation or risking relationships by sharing opposing viewpoints?

Already, the desire is evident. From the Web site “from 52 to 48 with love,” to the social change organization Grow the Hope, people are reaching across the Red-Blue divide.

Yet, without specific skills, these conversations may turn to bitter debate, superficial meaningless chat, or awkward silence. Conversations that build relationships and trust—and truly shift the dynamic in this country—require tools and preparation.

The Public Conversations Project (PCP) has been using its simple and rigorous dialogue approach to teach these skills for the last twenty years. Its free guide, *Reaching Out Across the Red Blue Divide, One Person at a Time*, by Senior Associate Maggie Herzig, offers a step-by-step approach to inviting someone whose political perspectives differ from your own into a conversation. Such conversations support stronger relationships, and help citizens reflect upon their own thinking and engage with each other about social and political issues in a fresh way.

About the Public Conversations Project

The Public Conversations Project is an award-winning, Boston-based nonprofit that uses dialogue to improve relationships and understanding among groups and individuals on opposing sides of divisive public issues. These conversations often result in diminished polarization and hostility, increased trust and respect, and can lead to collaborative action. Since 1989, PCP has worked in the U.S. and around the world, providing workshops, customized trainings, consultations, and conference design, and facilitating dialogues on a wide range of contentious issues.

Contact:

Susan Countryman, Communications Manager
Public Conversations Project
scountryman@publicconversations.org
617.923.1216 X23
www.publicconversations.org