



**Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020**

**Civil Discourse Workshop- Brave Listening and Passionate Speaking**

**How Leaders Facilitate Dialogue.**

This session includes suggestions for encouraging civil discourse and how leaders can facilitate dialogue on difficult topics.

**Raytheon "Raye" M. Rawls**

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**David H. Gibbs**

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Stephen Rispoli:

Civil discourse is something that is incredibly important to us at Baylor Law, and we know that it's important to law schools around the country. It feels like our country has lost the ability to engage in civil discourse. We have lost the ability to disagree without being disagreeable. So I'm really excited about this panel. I think this panel is going to help us, through that discussion, help us think about how we can help our communities engage in civil discourse [00:00:30] and try to avoid the impact of silos and social media. So I'm going to turn it over to David Gibbs in just a second, who is teaching leadership at the University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Law, but I wanted to mention a couple of things about David before I do so. David was a partner at big law for nearly 30 years. He was at Nixon Peabody and then at Bowditch & Dewey before leaving practice about 10 years ago to come to legal education.

Since he came to legal [00:01:00] education, he has been focusing his efforts on leadership development and leadership development training for law students. He's been very active in the WLS section on leadership and the sections newsletter would not be what it is today without David Gibbs.

I just wanted to introduce him and thank him for all the work that he's done. He's going to be introducing our other panelists, and so without further ado, I'll turn it over to David. Thank you.

David Gibbs: Thanks, Stephen. I'd like [00:01:30] to thank you and Leah and your amazing technical team for putting this together, and Bob and Raye for leading this panel. Since most workshops on reflective structured dialogue vary in length from a half a day to two days, I'm going to be very brief. As you can read from their bios, Bob and Raye are nationally and internationally recognized as educators who have taught [00:02:00] hundreds of people and as practitioners who have helped communities and groups tackle the most difficult issues. As part of their distinguished careers, Raye is currently at the University of Georgia Fanning Institute where she teaches, among other things, reflective structured dialogue. Bob has worked with the Harvard Negotiation Project and taught at Pepperdine and Hamline.

Due to the overwhelming [00:02:30] draw of this conference, we had to change the format to a webinar and thus cannot have breakout sessions to practice a dialogue. Please send your questions by chat to me, and I will distribute them to Raye and Bob towards the end of the program. Based on my experience taking courses from Bob and others and trying this method, including with my students who loved it, [00:03:00] I urge you to think about the method and the insights in terms of building communities and resolving conflicts, in terms of teaching leaderships and as a way that helped me improve my teaching. And so, let's begin. Bob?

Raye Rawls: Great. Thank you, David. Thank you for those kind words. I am [00:03:30] Raye Rawls. I am so pleased and excited to be with you today. As David explained, I'm at the University of Georgia. I'm faculty at the Fanning Institute. I do a lot of mediation training and training in dispute resolution, but right now my passion is dialogue. Let me give you, Bob, a chance to introduce yourself and let's get started.

Bob Stains: Sure. So I work in this country and several other countries teaching dialogue [00:04:00] and mediation, and also doing work with divided communities, whether they're organizations, geographic communities or countries. We found that the basics of reflective, structured dialogue work as well in a classroom as they do on an international stage. So we're hoping today to give you a basic introduction to some of the thinking that founded this approach, some examples of the work and some of the specific techniques that we use that are very portable, [00:04:30] that you can use as you groom leaders in your law practice.

Raye Rawls: Okay. So I would like to start out by reviewing the course objectives. I guess we're going to put up the PowerPoint. Is that right?

Bob Stains: Yep. I'm just going to share my screen here.

Raye Rawls: All right. Well, I'll start slowly. What we'll be talking about is the use of structure and agreements to [00:05:00] support speaking, listening, and emotional self-regulation. We'll talk about the impacts of perceived threat on communication, because when we're talking about difficult conversations, we're talking about perceived threat. We'll talk about the conversational patterns that perpetuate division, understanding basic social needs using the David Rock's SCARF framework, which I'm certain you'll enjoy when we talk [00:05:30] about that, the place in power of preparing people for a fresh conversation, and the importance and how to create relational questions that lead to mutual curiosity. Wanting to put this in a leadership framework as was described. I work at the Fanning Institute for leadership development. I don't consider myself a leadership expert, but I understand the context [00:06:00] of the work that we're doing. We think, at Fanning, the model that we most often talk about is adaptive leadership, and I guess servant leadership to some extent.

But adaptive leadership is a leadership framework that says individuals and organizations must be flexible and able to move and shift in order to solve wicked problems. The old days... I'm a fan of Turner Classic Movies and old movies where the leader was [00:06:30] oftentimes the strongest man in the room who was really smart and could really tell people, "Do this, do this, do this." Problem solved. Life is good. Well, we know that that no longer works anymore. We are more connected with each other. There's more technology that keeps us connected in wonderful and awful ways. We just experience that one smart person usually cannot provide the requisite [00:07:00] leadership to solve, again, where we call wicked problems. We use the adaptive leadership framework when I talk about reflective structure dialogue.

What I have noted in my experience, and I'll tell you a little bit about the work I do, is that the ability to convene, facilitate and engage people in difficult conversations is an adaptive leadership competency. If you lack [00:07:30] the ability to bring people into a space by way of Zoom or in a dark smoky room and get them to talk about staying in community in spite of their differences, then I don't know how you can really call yourself an effective leader. This is a skill that's more important now than ever. We'll just keep moving with this and now bring in how the adaptive leadership competency [00:08:00] plays into this. So we can go to the next slide, Bob.

Bob Stains: Sorry. Here we go.

Raye Rawls: No, no. Just keep clicking. All the words are there, if you don't mind. So one way of thinking, my side and, of course, the wrong side, which is your

side. Someone is right. Of course, that's me. Someone is wrong. Guess who? [00:08:30] There are objective facts, which are mine and mistaken beliefs, perceptions and ideas, which of course are yours. I imagine this is resonating with a lot of you right now. I want the weep, but I promise no weeping on this call. Okay, let's keep going.

Conceding a point is a sign of weakness, and even if I have new information, [00:09:00] facts, "I've read something that allowed me to shift," we're in a space like you're saying, "You know what I said two weeks ago or two years ago? I've changed my mind." People are looked on as being inconsistent, weak, losers. And so we stick with our ideas even if we ourselves no longer believe they hold truth. Conflict is a win-lose proposition, and of course I am here to win. [00:09:30] You're disagreeing with me means you are, number one, you are ignorant, not in possession of all the facts, mistaken, gullible, and evil. In thinking about how polarized we are now and the dangers to us, this whole idea of, "If you don't agree with me, you are evil," it permeates so much of our discourse now. I won't call it civil discourse. [00:10:00] Another way of thinking, as opposed to my side and the wrong side, that there are multiple perspectives in a conversation and that right and wrong of influenced by core values, beliefs, and worldviews.

We construct our own reality before gathering data and that is so critical. I know some of you probably have expertise in how the brain works and some of the [00:10:30] theories around this particular principle that we seek out, well, the confirmation bias. I only listen to the news or podcasts that align with my vision of the world and if they don't, it's obviously misinformation. We also talk about acknowledging the other person's point of view can be both advantageous and wise, even if I don't agree with it. It can bolster me, but it can [00:11:00] also give me a chance to reflect more on my beliefs around particularly important issues. Conflict usually involves content and relationship. I bet there's some mediators here in the room when it may have multiple meanings. We talk about that in mediation all the time. The concept of winning can be more expansive.

Our own pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, when we add them together, we share them, we get a much clearer picture. [00:11:30] I forgot to say, I'll say it now, that we're going to take some breaks where we'll check in with the chat feature and David, I guess you're going to be checking that for us. If you see something provocative or interesting, give us a few of them and we'll tackle it and they will do it again towards the end. If someone is saying, "Raye, Bob, you really have to answer this," you can get our emails and speaking only for me, I will respond. Bob's a good guy so I have [00:12:00] a feeling he will, too.

Bob Stains: That's a promise.

Raye Rawls: Okay, great. It's on you. All right.

Bob Stains: Okay. So just to frame this up in terms of, before we talk about a dialogic approach, I often think about you know how when you're at a dinner, maybe a family dinner, maybe family haven't seen for a while, maybe a holiday, somebody brings something up that's political or [00:12:30] something that's going to be controversial at the table and you can feel that tension all around the table? You can feel people start to look around and figure out who's going to say what next. Well, that happens in organizations as well, where people are so afraid of fighting that they may silence themselves, or they may have a history of over conflict that has [00:13:00] affected what Raye talked about earlier, the relational side of what's at play in conflict. So a dialogic approach can help to bring people into voice about all the things they really care about in a way that doesn't trigger other people into negative reactions and help people have the kind of conversation that they want to have about the things they really care about, whether that's in an organization or in a family.

This approach [00:13:30] that we're talking about, reflective structured dialogue, by the way, grew out of a group of family therapists who were used to dealing with multi-stressed families in years-long conflicts that seemed intractable. They found that by changing the conversation, they could actually change the relationships and the conflict. We've been at it for about 30 years now and have found that this is very adaptable in a lot of different settings that are not family settings. So in a dialogic approach, [00:14:00] I bring my ideas with an attitude of openness, that there might be other ideas out there that might actually influence me. I'm not going to be stony and impervious to the influence of other people. I'm going to be open to challenging my own assumptions.

In dialogue, we want to create a space where people are willing to do that, that they feel safe enough that they can hold their assumptions more lightly than they normally [00:14:30] would. And also, interest in learning about your perspective. I do that by really listening to you, by listening to your experience, the meaning that it has for you, by asking you good questions that invite you to speak your truth. Ultimately, I'm hoping to create a shared understanding that is broader and more complex than the one that I started with. Doesn't mean we're going to agree, but it means that we can understand [00:15:00] each other at a much deeper level than we did before we came into the dialogue room. So in this approach, dialogue is one of those words that has many meanings, from a discussion on the street with somebody to the intense and structured process that we're talking about today.

For us, dialogue is a conversational exchange that is guided by structure and agreements that enables people to speak to be understood as opposed

to speaking to win, [00:15:30] and enables people to feel safe enough to listen to understand rather than listening to gather evidence to attack the other perspective in person, and really importantly, to develop real curiosity in someone who you may be deeply in disagreement with, and then the ability to explore that through the use of artful questions. I'm going to shift here to a video clip and I'm going to ask for your patience. It's about five minutes long, [00:16:00] but it describes the beginnings of the Public Conversations Project, which is the originator of this approach. I want to show it to you because that project was born in the crucible of the abortion crisis and the model was created and refined over many years dealing with the most difficult problems. This little video gives you a little bit of a guideline to [00:16:30] those early years and to the process itself. Now we're going to see if I've mastered the technology enough to make it work.

Raye Rawls: You can do it, Bob.

Video: During '95/'96, between pro-life and pro-choice-

Bob Stains: You can all see that?

Video: [crosstalk 00:16:57] of public discourse was-

Bob Stains: Thumbs up? Good.

Video: ... people [00:17:00] pointing fingers and screaming at each other, "You're a baby killer." "Oh yeah? Well, you hate women."

Bob Stains: Oh, and it was going so well.

Video: My concern led me to say, "Wow, gosh, I wonder if we, as family therapists, have something to contribute for people who are stuck in disputes that just go on and on and on and on."

[00:17:30] After we had started working, doing these abortion dialogues, with citizens came the big event in Boston around abortion, which was the John Salvey shootings.

On December 30th, 1994, John Salvey entered two Brookline clinics that provided reproductive healthcare services, including abortion, where he shot and killed two people and injured five others.

[00:18:00] The pro-choice people were afraid there would be another attack. The pro-life people were afraid there would be a retaliatory attack against them.



In response to that, three pro-life leaders and three pro-choice leaders started meeting with PCP, and that continued until they'd been meeting for a period of about five years. The concrete result was that there was less violence, that when people proposed coming to town to [00:18:30] rally up on one side or the other, these women discouraged them and said, "That's not welcome here. We're looking to reduce polarization. We're looking to reduce violence. We're looking to reduce rhetoric."

What we did, even though we weren't intending to do it, it's what we did was to develop a really versatile methodology for engaging differences, particularly differences involving values and worldviews, that has transferred across different [00:19:00] issues and then different cultures.

For me, the revolutionary thing was the idea that you can actually shape and structure a conversation in an intentional way.

If you want to change a dysfunctional conversation, you have to create an environment in which people feel safe enough to be able to listen differently and to be able to speak [00:19:30] their strongly held views in ways that don't simply piss off or alienate or injure the other party.

What the folks from PCP did for us in all of the instances was, first of all, establish a structure that enabled us to speak fairly and openly and honestly, [00:20:00] by knowing that there were rules and expectations about how to dialogue and giving us the tools through those rules, that structure, and then by very gently and very lovingly, yet very firmly and appropriately, making sure that we all held to those rules, no matter what circumstance we were in.

So they can be profoundly opposed and yet connect [00:20:30] with respect and with genuine curiosity.

(singing).

One of the most interesting things for me in the training that courage that participants had, especially those who were victims, to build the courage to be able to share their stories with one another in [00:21:00] that open way, where we had some who were ex-combatants seated and victims were able to share their stories and we felt safe.

Part of what I think PCP has to offer to the world is a space in which it feels safe to speak about what is most important to you in a way that you can be heard. I can disagree with you and I can like you [00:21:30] and I can advocate passionately against you on that issue and still live with you as a neighbor, as a member of my community.

(singing)

Bob Stains: [00:22:00] Okay. Now we'll see if we can get back to PowerPoints. Okay. Is the PowerPoint back up on the screen? Can somebody outside give me a thumbs up? Okay, great.

David Gibbs: Yes.

Bob Stains: So [00:22:30] you've just seen a couple of examples of extreme polarization that this model was forged in. One is abortion, and the other was an example of bringing ex-combatants and victims together in Liberia after their civil war. I wanted to show this to show you how robust this [00:23:00] approach is and it's well...

Bob Stains: ... approaches, and it's well suited for engaging people who are mired in polarization, whether that's polarization writ large like we have in our country right now, or whether it's something as small as a conflict that starts in an organization and people start to take sides and interest groups. And as they do that, they start to maximize the differences across that [00:23:30] divide and minimize the differences among themselves. And pretty soon, when you get to the top of that diagram, there is no way that people can communicate with each other because every communication is suspect. Every communication is deemed fake by the other side and riddled with misinformation.

So we have to do something to bring people back down from the level of separation [00:24:00] to the level of experience, where you can see at the bottom of that diagram, people are living, and perhaps you can't see the multiple colors, with various beliefs, values, identities. They're living in their complexity, until threat comes into their world and starts to entice people to separate. And it's that situation that we have engaged in many different ways, from something as small as a house [00:24:30] of worship, to as large as a state or country. And Ray's going to tell us a story that she has been involved in, in engaging polarization out in the field.

Raye Rawls: Okay. So, actually, we'll tell maybe two or three stories, Bob, so. I'm public service faculty at the University of Georgia, so my students are primarily [00:25:00] out in communities. I do a lot of work with elected officials, chambers of commerce leaders, community leaders. Love it. I also do work at the law school, primarily supporting their mediation programs, I've been teaching mediation for quite some while. But I wanted to share a couple of stories about some dialogues that I have had in the field a couple of years back, and even more recently.

[00:25:30] This one talks about a university in the Deep South. I'm from Atlanta, I'm from the Deep South, so I'm comfortable in owning that, of



course. And I was there to actually facilitate a dialogue around guns on campus. Now, I have been a mediator and a facilitator for many, many years, and I have learned how to pack up my beliefs and put them in a box and enter [00:26:00] that space where I'm to be a neutral facilitator with the idea that everyone there has a point of view, and my role is to create a space for them to share their differences. But I do have my own opinions and I have to say, being on campus, the opinion that I packed up was that anybody who supports guns on campus is a little nutty. I won't do, "They're evil," and all that other stuff, but I just don't [00:26:30] understand that perspective. At UGA, I guess last year, we had a kid shoot himself in the leg in a chemistry class and go, "Oh, dear Lord."

In that class that I'm facilitating the dialogue around guns on campus or firearms on campus, there's a physics professor, and I always point out his expertise, because I'm always impressed by people who do physics. And he talked about [00:27:00] a gun being an extension of his arm, and he told wonderful stories about taking his gun to school in high school because on the way home he might be able to get dinner for the family. And he talked about the events that his family did to stay connected, they would go hunting and that kind of thing. And I thought, "That's kind of interesting." My family was a little different. [00:27:30] My parents met at two of the historically black colleges in Atlanta, so their idea of family fun was plays and movies, and that kind of thing.

And for the first time, I became consciously aware of, "Wait a minute, this guy thinks that a gun is the extension of the arm, but he's not a bad person, and I don't perceive him as being evil [00:28:00] or misinformed." So I felt myself shift a little. During the conversation, I saw him jump, I mean, like literally, in the chair. And after we did the dialogue, I went to him and said to him, "I saw you jump. What happened?" And he said to me, "I've always said that I think of a gun as an extension of my arm, and I can argue all [00:28:30] the amendments and everything else, but for the first time in my life, as a result of what I heard in this space, I thought about three of my colleagues, that if I saw them enter a building with a weapon, I would not enter the building, and would encourage other people not to enter the building."

And so what he described to me was a shift as well. And I tell that story because [00:29:00] it kind of underlies my belief that when you listen to other people's story, they're incredible opportunities for learning and growth and connection. Do not hear me saying, "I believe we need to have guns on campus." I don't. And I imagine he's still in a very similar situation, but the idea of hearing another perspective, leaning into another perspective, I'd say to a lot [00:29:30] of people, he and I would be the best people to go to a meeting that's developing gun policy because of that tiny shift that we both took, our learning and growing, and understanding

that our beliefs aren't absolutely correct. There are spaces around them I think that's important.

One of the things, we do a lot of work in the classroom, Bob does, I do. Classrooms now are [00:30:00] so fraught, and I'm collecting articles. The professor at Emory Law, I'm not sure what his status is now, but got in trouble. He was reading something in class and he used the N-word, and it just blew up, and all the American Bar Association is involved. This morning, I read about the communications professor in California, who was talking about [00:30:30] pausing and had done some work in China and learned that, Americans, when we need to think we go, "Hmm, uh," we make sounds. The sound that he indicated was made by the people in China was, "nèi ge, nèi ge," and some of the African American students just blew up and they were deeply offended. The word sounded like the N-word to them, and [00:31:00] he is potentially out of the job.

I was the assistant Dean at Georgia State's Law School many years ago, and I remembered some of the students coming to me deeply offended because the constitutional law professor used the word "niggerly". And I love history, I love Canterbury Tales and was familiar with it, and I told, "No, no. Before you come in here filing a complaint, find [00:31:30] out what's going on." So we do a lot of work with assisting professors and teachers, how to create the space, and when those things show up in the classroom, people are prepared to deal with it, and the first solution isn't to protest and go report but to say, "We need to have a conversation here about that that statement was problematic, and we need to do something with it."

I'm doing dialogues [00:32:00] on confederate monuments all over Georgia. What bathrooms do people use? How old does a child have to be before he or she can decide what bathroom is appropriate? The thing that I love most about this is that I don't see any place where it's not appropriate to learn these skills and use them. [00:32:30] Let me talk about, Bob, I don't know. I said I'd give you an opportunity to share some stories, I want to do that, true to my word.

Bob Stains:

Sure. Well, there's one, actually, one quickie that relates to what you just said that just came up in an academic setting that I thought I'd throw in there in terms of creating a space for conversation, and another one about an organization, quickly. So here's [00:33:00] something that was just said in an academic setting. Master narratives and hermeneutics, religious and otherwise, too easily slip into white, male, heteronormative musings, discourses, and paradigms. So this is said in a mixed group of multiple mixings in a class setting, and the question is, what do you do next? What do you do with that? How do you create a space where after [00:33:30]

that's been said, you can have a constructive conversation? And that's what you're going to be learning about in the next hour or so.

They're just a quickie organization example, I worked with a large cities' community mental health, excuse me, total care for the entire city was headquartered in a hospital, there were clinics all over, one of the poorest cities in the country, and budgetary decisions in the executive team had come to a [00:34:00] grinding halt because the people that ran the clinics felt that the hospital was hoarding all the money and the clinics were out in communities of color, and the hospital administrators were mostly white. So there was suspicions of racism around decisions having to do with money, but no way to discuss it. And so they were really at an impasse.

Through a dialogue process that lasted about three months, they were able to [00:34:30] let go of some of the stereotypes that they had about each other. And what we talked about earlier about holding your assumptions lightly, they were able to do that and to be able to see each other in a much more complex way and see a lot of the other factors that were involved in the decision making on the hospital side and also in the concerns on the clinic side. And they were able to come together in the end, cobble together a budget to get through the next year, and more importantly, heal the relationships [00:35:00] that have prevented them from having the conversations they needed to have in order to continue to get business done. I think that's it.

Raye Rawls:

Okay. So if we can keep moving, I will continue to share stories. So the goal of Reflect the Structured Dialogue, formally known rather as, RSD, is to pursue mutual understanding rather than agreements or [00:35:30] immediate solutions, which oftentimes drives people nuts. "We hired you to come up with a solution to the problem." Well, that can come after we understand perspectives that are different from our own. And we find out that the goal being mutual understanding creates a space for all kinds of wonderful things to happen. And you could hit a couple of times from me, Bob, [00:36:00] a good dialogue also gives participants a chance to listen and be listened to with care. Speak, and be spoken to with respect. I am currently engaged in dialogue with members of the Black Lives Matter movement and law enforcement in another state.

And one of the things we've heard from all sides, there's no both sides to it, that this is the first time that [00:36:30] we have had to listen to each other with care and respect, and how hard it is, and how difficult it is, and how important it is, to have a strong facilitator who will say, "You violated the rules." The clip you saw, the rabbi mentioned that having a facilitator who holds people in the container that they have voluntarily entered, how important that is. To learn about the [00:37:00] perspectives

of others, me here and about everybody who thinks that guns, firearms on campus, which was the issue that we were there to talk about, learn about the perspectives of others is critical, I'm getting distracted by the chat. I have to remember, don't do that, Raye. And even more powerful to reflect on one's own views.

And I'm going to talk about [00:37:30] that a little bit. Dave Jill's is one of the first persons you saw in the video clip, tells a story about an abortion dialogue that he did, where there was an individual woman there who said that a woman has an absolute right to decide what to do with a body, absolute, this is it in the conversation and the dialogue we asked the question that gives you the opportunity to reflect on your own [00:38:00] perspective. And it's about, we asked you, what are your gray areas? Where are you less certain about your point of view? And he tells the story of her saying, "I'm just afraid, I believe a woman has an absolute right to decide what to do with her body, but I have a fear that one day they will locate a gaging and we'll see a Holocaust of unborn gay children."

So in that space, that was a [00:38:30] little bit of almost absolutely certain the space that I hold is the right space. And if you're in a room on the Zoom call, whatever, and you see people honor their uncertainty, their gray areas, all of a sudden, you can really feel the leaning in and the idea that there may be some possibilities there. I can learn and grow, maybe [00:39:00] I can shift, maybe I won't share if you won't shift, but we can stay in community together. And the fact that you have that sign in your front yard will no longer make me feel that I don't deserve to be in this community or this community doesn't deserve to have me. So we know that significant shift happened, as people began to try to understand the views of others and more closely reevaluate and monitor their own.

Is there [00:39:30] a way I can stop looking at these chat. I'm telling you, "Oh, you all ask me such amazing questions, I cannot look." Okay, so let's talk a little bit about the structure of RSD, the sequenced questions. And we spent a lot of time on questions which I call standard questions that oftentimes lead to are used in the first dialogue. The first [00:40:00] question relates to your own life experience. Raye, what is your life experience around that informs your beliefs around guns on campus? And I love that question, experience perspective complexity. Then the second one is, what's at the heart of the matter for you? When you think about your perspective on this issue when you look into your own soul and spirit, what [00:40:30] rises up? My belief that this is the most important value that I hold. And then the complexity is what I talked about the gray area.

When you get a chance to revisit and rethink about your own point of view and the power of that is I've been doing this work for many, many years,

and I'm still amazed by the power of the structure that we create. There's [00:41:00] ordered when we're in the space, we intentionally put, for example, I would put law enforcement, black lives matter, community law enforcement so that as we go around in a circle, we start maybe getting very early on to hear different experiences in different narratives. On Zoom, it's a little more challenging, but I think we are mastering that. I don't see us spending a lot of time [00:41:30] trying to figure out what perspective someone brings to the table, but I imagine that's still equally important, and we need to figure that out. I don't know, Bob, is that something you all think about on the Zoom calls?

Bob Stains: If I know in advance, if I'm doing a dialogue project, yes, I write it down, know who's going to go when and where, and I try to alternate perspectives when I'm talking to folks, yeah.

Raye Rawls: [00:42:00] Okay, great, I'm glad I asked that because of, yeah, trying to make this real, make these connections in a virtual world, I'm finding that it can be done, but we need to talk to each other and exchange ideas. The right to pass, which is a lot of people find interesting, you enter that space and you have the absolute right to pass, which means I don't want to respond to that question, our pass, [00:42:30] for now, meaning come back to me when everyone else has focused. So I get pushback sometimes from folks that if you are going to pass, why are you here? My experience has been when people have the right to pass, a pass for now, they see the more fully engaged. And I think when Bob, you talk about how the brain works and you'll get some understanding a bit.

Bob Stains: Yeah. Can I throw two cents in on that?

Raye Rawls: Absolutely.

Bob Stains: [00:43:00] But there's a lot of suspicion sometimes about dialogue, both from the left and the right, but what is common in that suspicion is that people worry that they're going to be manipulated in some way, that they're going to be somehow inducted into saying something they don't want to say. So, sometimes one of those folks will show up and they'll just pass. And the past is a test, it's a test of us to see [00:43:30] if we're really going to stick with it. If it's really that they can really be safe from being bullied or manipulated by other people in the room. So we feel that that's a really, really important thing foundation upon which a lot of the rest of the stuff is built.

Raye Rawls: At the end of the questions, be they two or three individuals that I invited to ask each other questions of genuine interest. And [00:44:00] that may sound a little more simple than an actually is asking that question, say, for example, with the black lives matter, the one mother whose son was shot

by a police officer talked about the struggle of asking a law enforcement officer a question of genuine interest. And she struggled beautifully with it because she really wanted to engage in these conversations [00:44:30] and felt that until we come together as a community law enforcement and other community members, we were all endangered. And it can be very fun and funny, but how do you ask someone a question to really understand their perspective, which is a lot more challenging, of course, when you don't believe, they honor your humanity, that they see your value, but asking those questions and hearing [00:45:00] the response is can lead to extraordinary connection.

And I've seen that in a lot of the work I do, and a lot of coaching for some groups and helping them ask those kinds of questions, not the one where the question on a scale of one to 10, we talk about that, how racist are you, which is not a question of genuine curiosity. So we struggled [00:45:30] to give those kinds of questions. And then we asked a closing question, which is oftentimes something like, what did you do a whole back refrain from doing in order for this conversation to go as it did, Bob, do you have other closing questions? I mean, that's kind of our standard question.

Bob Stains: Yeah. I've been doing a lot of dialogue work around COVID, lately, and particularly with healthcare workers, and it's been very, very interesting, very rewarding, but the [00:46:00] closing question that we've been using there.

Bob Stains: The closing question that we've been using there is, what are you taking with you? What do you want to take with you as you leave this group experience today? And it tends to be a very, very profound... One person said, "This is the first place for healing that I found since COVID started. [00:46:30] And I want to hold on to that." Not too bad.

Raye Rawls: Not too bad at all. Other parts of the structure reflect right speed, which drives some people crazy when we request them to think before they speak. And as I said, I deal with a lot of community leaders and love them and respect them. But the pushback from people... I already know what I'm going to say. And thank you, [00:47:00] your honor, your worship, whatever your title is, did it ever dawn on you other people might appreciate the opportunity to reflect before they speak. So we asked the question, you may have two to three minutes to think about it. Take some notes and two to three minutes to speak about it.

Bob Stains: Hey Raye.

Raye Rawls: Yes?



Bob Stains: This might be a place... You talk a lot about the power pausing. And I wonder if this might [00:47:30] be a place for you to say something about that.

Raye Rawls: Okay. Now, all right. So I can move it up. Cause it's on this slide.

Bob Stains: Oh sorry, it's on there. I can't see what all is on the slides until it comes up on the slides. So,

Raye Rawls: Okay. Well I think I can do that. So reflect right speed... I'm going to talk, yeah, just keep clicking. We'll get there. [crosstalk 00:01:55] time limits and go round structure. And so everyone [00:48:00] knows when it will be your turn, how much time we'll have to talk. And we'll talk about the communication agreements as well. The power of the first speaker, a colleague of mine said she went somewhere to a faculty retreat and they did introduction and the first person talked about ultimate Frisbee. And after that, everyone's introduction involve ultimate Frisbee. So the first speaker in [00:48:30] that space became so powerful, he formed everyone's response to the question. In this approach to conversation, each and everyone is the first speaker, because you've already thought about what you were going to say, some of you took notes and you get to speak and we don't allow you to piggyback on someone else.

And we'll talk about that later, but everyone is the first speaker and the pause. [00:49:00] This for some groups feels kind of hokey, but it is so powerful, particularly when people are actually in the room. I'm still looking at it and in terms of a virtual space, because that's the kind of a pause anyway, but hopefully in a few months we can get back to our old lives to some degree and can be in spaces with people. But the pause means that after one person completes his or her [00:49:30] or their comment, we ask that you breathe. I say two breaths, after hearing different things, but that there is an intentional space between the last speaker and you. In this, the neuroscience says that this pause reduces reactivity and prepares an open space for the next speaker. And, again, Bob is going to talk a little bit about that, but [00:50:00] I've heard people say, 'Oh, that's so hokey', but then we do it and people say, 'I love this, I learned so much and the pause was so incredibly powerful'.

And 'thank you for introducing that into our conversation'. It really shifts the dynamics. And if you were in a room and there was a lot of pain and anguish, or maybe even joy, and it's just some things that need tweaking following this [00:50:30] structure, including the pause can really change the dynamics in the room. So you can talk about virtually anything. I'm handing it back to you Bob.

Bob Stains:

Oh, okay. So, speaking of reducing reactivity, I want to talk a little bit about some of the thinking that informs this approach, both from really, really basic neuroscience and also some thinking from communication [00:51:00] theory. Well, let's start with some of the brain research.

I really enjoy the work of Rick Hanson mostly because he writes in a way that I can understand as a nonscientist and a non-physician. He wrote a book, which, normally if a book has happiness in the title, I have to say, I'm not going to read it generally speaking. And this book is called *Hard-wiring Happiness*, but it's all research on interpersonal neurobiology. [00:51:30] What do we know about the brain in terms of how we interact with each other and Hanson talks about the brain being Velcro for the bad and Teflon for the good.

That is because of evolution, we've developed very fine sensitivity to danger. And we hang on to evidence of danger when it's there. And the good stuff tends to roll off and that could be with regard to ourselves or other people, [00:52:00] we're much more prone to seek and hold onto the negative. And I think that's one of the reasons why negative campaigning works so well in our elections.

The result of that is what I just referred to as negativity bias, but also reactivity. We're more likely to be reactive rather than conscious and responsive when in the space of feeling threatened. But just pause with me for a minute and think about [00:52:30] a time when somebody said something to you that you felt was really threatening to your sense of identity, of one of your identities, whatever that might be. Somebody says something and bang, you feel that sense of threat. Think about that for now.

The neuro-biological researcher, Dan Siegel says the first evidence that we have of something [00:53:00] outside of us is through our body. That the first evidence that we have of threat is how our body feels and what starts to change in our body. And then it starts to shape what comes after. It shapes our cognition, our perception, our emotion, the decisions that we can or can't make the access that we have to resources and the responses that we make to the person that's [00:53:30] a source of that threat.

And when we're in that threat space, we're less likely to be conscious of the mechanisms by which we make meaning of the environment that we're in. I'm sure that most, if not, all of you have seen this diagram, the ladder of inference, which was originally created by Chris Argyris at Harvard Graduate School of Education. And it gives a basic view of [00:54:00] how we make meaning in the situations that we find ourselves in.

I'm going to just quickly run over this with you, because it does figure prominently into this approach or the understanding does. The idea is that if you look at the bottom pool, I would say rather than available data, I would say the pool of experience that we're in with a given group, and we can't pay attention to everything. We just it's impossible for us to do that. So we have to decide what to pay attention to. [00:54:30] And once we do that, we have to figure out, well, what does that mean for us? And therefore, what conclusions do we draw? And what actions do we take with that group of people that we're involved with. Now, the invisible part of this process tends to be that left side, the left side of the ladder. What is it that influences all the things on the right? Where we come from.

I mean, people think this is an important, but I come from Buffalo. [00:55:00] That has a lot to do with the meaning that I make of the world. It really does. I'm a guy, I'm white, I'm of a certain age. All these things have to do with what I pay attention to the meaning that I make, the conclusions that I draw and the actions that I take, which is cool. We want to make that available to people for themselves and for others because when it's unconscious, we go through that loop and we just pay attention to the things that reinforce the stories that we already [00:55:30] have created about the people that we're involved with.

When that left side is invisible to us, it's so easy to just seek and gather data that reinforces the conclusions that we already have. So in dialogue, what we're trying to do, one of the things we're trying to do is to give people the opportunity to make visible that left side for themselves, to understand how it influences their process, and then to talk with each other and make it visible to one another [00:56:00] across the divide. Because in the heat of threat, when you're feeling threatened, everything gets pretty small, tunnel vision, and that blocks access to our higher brain resources.

And also our ability to have a wider perception of the people that we're involved with. When I work in organizations, I often find that a large split, [00:56:30] like the example that I gave you earlier of the healthcare organization, can start with a small conflict. And the sequence tends to go like this; somebody experiences a threat, they go into that sense of vigilance mode, where there's paying attention to stuff that might be threatening to them and they'll either do a preemptive attack or say something defensive, which then provokes and threatens the original person that was the source of the threat. [00:57:00] They get vigilant, attack and defend, and now we have a cycle that tends to repeat over and over again, and people start to take sides. And there you have the beginnings of an organization conflict.

David Rock is an organization development psychologist in Australia. Who's studied organization behavior extensively, and also married it to

this study of interpersonal neurobiology. And [00:57:30] he developed this acronym of SCARF, specifically for leaders in organizations that are assembling teams that might be under high stress and subject to conflict and division.

And it's a way for us to think about what people are looking for when they come into a group environment and what factors can help them have an approach as opposed to an avoid-response. [00:58:00] So Rock says, people scan in five social domains for evidence that they should approach or avoid. And they're represented by this acronym SCARF. So the first is Status, that is, where am I going to stand with this group? Am I going to be high or low? Am I going to be pushed out? Am I going to be talked down to? In reflective, structured dialogue, we try to address this by doing a lot of work in advance, connecting the advanced, greeting people personally, also having time to go around so that everybody has [00:58:30] an equal amount of time to speak.

People are looking for Certainty. Do I know what's going to happen when I come into this group? Am I going to be at the mercy of the group dynamic? Or is there an agenda? Is there a plan? So we want to make sure that people know that in advance. A sense of Autonomy and agency. Am I going to have input into this? Am I just going to be pushed around by the group or the facilitator? To address that we ask people to give us their input in advance. I [00:59:00] was just consulting today on a dialogue about race that somebody is putting together and they were just going to drop in and drop the question down, a horrible question, by the way, can you tell us how you've been hurt by a person in the other race? Great way to start a conversation. Don't do it. So I talked with them about stepping back, getting a lot of input from the people that are going to be involved. So that they're part of the process before the conversation happens.

[00:59:30] The last two, Relatedness, that is, am I going to be on the outs here? Is there an ingroup, or am I going to be included? And one of the ways that we address that is when Raye talked about those opening questions, we ask questions that invite people to share something that is going to spark curiosity and connection among those who listen. And lastly, Fairness. Is the facilitator going to be fair to me? Or is a facilitator going to be biased? We assess that by doing [01:00:00] our own inner work, like Raye talked about earlier and also with using structure so that it's less likely that people experience a lack of fairness of the facilitator. So...

Raye Rawls: [crosstalk 01:00:18] And David, anything you think we need to chat about?

David Gibbs: Well, we've gotten some really good questions. [01:00:30] Let me pose one to you. I think civil discourse is also critical during non-hot topic issues. With that in mind, how do you start a civil discourse with your nonprofit board or leadership within an organization?

Bob Stains: So I think [01:01:00] I'll take a whack at that. The first step is to have a conversation about what constitutes civil discourse in your organization and what that civil discourse needs to be about. So we, when we think about planning a dialogue, we think in terms of the Six P's; purpose, the people that need to be there to accomplish that purpose, what you want to prevent, that's gotten in the way in the past, [01:01:30] what you want to promote, either a resource that has been used in the past or new behavior. And then how do you help people prepare and what the plan is going to be.

And that first piece about what is the purpose of this conversation to really talk with people about what their hopes might be for conversing about this topic is the first step in doing that and a clear [01:02:00] purpose and a shared purpose are really important before you move forward. Cause you want to find out whether what the level of interest is in the kind of conversation that you're thinking about, because it may be that not everybody's on the same page and if they aren't, then you don't want to move forward. Raye, what do you have to add to that?

Raye Rawls: I'm kind of wanting to jump on civil discourse. Most of my stories, I am a drama queen and it's about [01:02:30] all the drama and stuff. But a lot of my work is about with organizations, including not-for-profits, where sometimes the civil discourse is the problem. The people are afraid that if they talk about the issues that are critical, that the organization will disintegrate.

And so where I sit, people come to me because they see a problem. And so I've been told we need to [01:03:00] have better conversations. Everything feels really glib and surface because I think we are afraid to talk about things that might push us apart. And so the fad is civil discourse, but also, why did you come here? You know this approach is for having difficult conversations, share with me your issues and concerns.

And [01:03:30] oftentimes again, we unpack it. And so it may be that the discourse is civil, but the polarization, the unresolved issues can lie beneath the civil discourse and giving people an opportunity to lift those up and put those out there so that we can figure out through the structure and the agreements. How do we help this organization [01:04:00] have the conversation they say they have wanted to have for years and years?

And we can give it back to you, David, these questions are just... I can't, look at them, they are so fascinating. I think we need an additional three hours, but I guess that won't happen. What else you got for us?

David Gibbs: Well, I don't know if you want to deal with this question now or later, but how do you incorporate this type of training into doctrinal law classes? How do [01:04:30] you recommend teaching this to law students? That might be a wrap up question, but I think that's a key question for this audience.

Raye Rawls: What I have done with faculty is teach the principal and I do have several faculty members that work with me, including one who teaches instructional design and technology. And we adapt the principles [01:05:00] and practices to the classroom, say, for example, at the beginning of the class, and this is only one example, they make agreements about what will happen if a conversation becomes difficult.

And I guess we don't have the agreements here. I thought we did. But the communication agreements, which are important, part of the dialogue and things like [01:05:30] will adhere to the rules about how much time people have. The purpose of the conversation is not to attack, but to get an understanding, how we ask questions of each other. So my experience has been, and I have I say it with great pride that a lot of classrooms at the University of Georgia and universities all over the country, as a result of the work of Essential Partners - Bob Stains, Dave Joseph, part of Essential Partners - we give them the principles and practices and then there's, they figure out how they want to incorporate them.

That's probably very broad, maybe not particularly helpful, but I've just seen so many ways of doing it. And I would be more than happy to share information with anybody who wants to email me and say, tell me more about using this in law school classes because it is being done. Absolutely. Bob, I don't know if you want to [01:06:30] look, take a whack at that question.

Bob Stains: No, no, you're the expert there. Anything else? David?

David Gibbs: There's another question. How do you use this in a political policy context, for example, whether devote or change the name of an upcoming [01:07:00] holiday, and that relates to another question that was asked. That was, how do you use this in conversation maybe, when you're just dialoguing with one person?

Raye Rawls: So I can tell my John Lewis story, Bob, very quickly, in Georgia, probably five, six years ago, an elected official referred to John Lewis as a dog. Which [01:07:30] is, not a nice thing to say and got a lot of pushback from



some of his constituents. Not all, some of them supported him. I was hired to teach in negotiation class to County commissioners, and God bless his little soul, he was in the class. So, he immediately came at me and I want to talk about this. I said, well, that's lovely, but we want to talk about... I'm here to teach [01:08:00] negotiation. Very persistent, so I said to him, I will talk to you about the issue. He wanted to talk about guns. I don't know why people want to talk to me about guns, but these are the agreements that you have to make.

And this is the structure. And anytime we have a break and I don't, I still don't know why I agreed to this. And so whenever there was a break, whenever I came out of the bathroom, when I had lunch, there he was, [01:08:30] and he followed the agreements. And again, I'll be happy to share any information if someone wants to get it from me. And at the end of that conversation, we talked about guns, but we also talked about what it means to be elected and represent a lot of different people. So we, the conversation shifted and it went on for an and I just want to say to you that at the end of it, he said, Ms. [01:09:00] Raye, I think maybe I haven't been doing some things right.

Raye Rawls:

I think maybe I haven't been doing some things right. And I did not say, "You think?" I rose to the occasion and went, "Hmm," and he said, "I wish I had another opportunity to talk to you." And my sister said, "What does that mean?" And I said, "Maybe, maybe just for a brief and shining moment, that was a little bit of a shift, and he saw an African American person as a human being who had some value." And the fact that he was [01:09:30] an elected official in a very populous County in Georgia, that was significant. So I hope that was responsive to that question. Or maybe I just wanted to tell the story and I forced it to fit, I don't know.

Bob Stains:

It's a great story and I think it really does speak very well to that. I'll take a different whack at this. I think that... so, two things here. One is an example of [01:10:00] a community that wants to make a decision but they just go at it too quickly, and they just go right at the policy and wind up splitting people. An example of this is up here in Massachusetts, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a couple of years ago. There was a wealthy person who had a sculpture. Big, beautiful outdoor kind of sculpture that they had had made, that they donated to the city.

[01:10:30] And so the city thought, "Wow, public art. We're just going to put this right out in the middle of town, and won't people love it." Well, no. A lot of people didn't love it. A lot of people were really upset. So they had a public meeting, and was just basically a similar, I'm upset about this, I'm upset about that. And the conflict didn't go away and there was no policy made. Until there [01:11:00] was a step back. And I think a lot of times what needs to happen in these situations is people need to step back

and have a different kind of conversation first. Conversation about what people care about. In Gloucester, they convene dialogues with a spinoff of the old Public Conversations Project, it's called the Gloucester Conversations Project. And they brought people together to talk about what their views are about art, what they care about in public [01:11:30] spaces.

And after a period of conversations of groups around town, they came together to craft a joint set of decision-making values that would guide them in creating a policy for where to site this public art. It was sited, and it's now really appreciated by the people of Gloucester, which can be a very contentious town. But it's an example of how stepping back and having a values conversation [01:12:00] first, a values dialogue, can inform public policy. And I just want to mention again, it's sort of like race and if you're interested, I wrote an article about public engagement in deliberation a number of years ago, that incorporates dialogue principles into these processes of policymaking. I'm happy to share that with anybody that's interested.

Raye Rawls: That's a brilliant segue into our good dialogue questions because... [01:12:30] So maybe we can review that and then go back to the art piece and the Confederate monuments or the statue... Oh Lord, what's the statue in North Carolina that came down? Silent Sam?

Bob Stains: I can't remember.

Raye Rawls: Yeah. Some statue. So, why don't we review that and then kind of talk about exactly what you said but don't... If the question [01:13:00] is, and those of you who know mediation, separate positions from interest. Remember that getting to yes, and that's what this does. So, standards for good dialogue questions. Will the question invite new information, new understanding? So if you ask the question, should we have guns on campus? I don't see anything, the answer is yes or no. What question [01:13:30] can help surface something else that would invite new information, new meaning? So that ultimately, we will create the guide that will allow us to answer the ultimate question. if we so choose. Does the question have an implicit assumption of right or wrong? That's kind of that question, Bob, on a scale of one to 10, how racist are you?

Can anyone answer [01:14:00] the question speaking from his or her or their own experience? Does it impact the relationship between those responding? Does the question that we are asking... and I will tell you, it can take a month or more to come up with the right questions. Does it encourage connection or separation? Does the question invite people to reflect on and share something about themselves, a life experience? Does it exhibit your own internal bias? I love that. [01:14:30] Yeah. Does it

invite people to think about their core values and share what's important to them? And I just want to, for a brief aside. A person who took my dialogue course, maybe three or four years ago, was part of an organization called Free Radicals. One of the founders that helps guide groups like Klans, neo-Nazis, hate groups, help get those people out. [01:15:00] And she was saying, these are the kinds of questions that we create in our model to help people who's decided, "I want to move away from this."

What are your core values? What's important to you? What kind of world do you want to leave to your children and grandchildren? Not, do you want that Confederate statue on the grounds of the courthouse? What do you want... When you think about the people who you want to come into your community, [01:15:30] what values do you want them to share? Does the question invite people to share the complexities and nuances of their positions so that they can be understood by others? And I think the clip on the abortion dialogue just said that so beautifully. My understanding is that no one changed sides after all of those conversations, but they became connected and cared about each other [01:16:00] as human beings. And that's critical.

Does the question avoid asking people to analyze, hypothesize, or try to find the right answer? And that can be really challenging in some situations where you said, "I want a question that helps people follow a logical path." I don't think I'm speaking out of turn, but this is not about the logical path. This is about connecting to another human being who may have a different worldview [01:16:30] from you, different values from you. But for whatever reason, be it in the classroom, the person across the street with that sign in their yard, the person on the board of education who represents the people on the right side of the track versus the left side of the track. Does a question avoid labeling people or putting them in the boxes? And does it invite people to discuss things that are important to them? I think Bob did a great job in [01:17:00] describing that something meaningful to them. And those are the standards for asking good dialogue questions.

So, if you think about monuments and participating in a dialogue about prayer in a public space, and I cannot get the mayor to help craft a question that does not [01:17:30] involve the word prayer. And it's a challenge. It's like, what kind of prayer would you want to have with mayor...? Let's kind of back up, and Bob, you help me with this. Why do people, why do you think people want to pray? Well, my church tells me this. Okay. One of the things you said to me was that you want this community to be welcoming [01:18:00] to all, so there are people who don't go to church. There are people who have other faiths, people who are comfortable not believing in a higher power. Again, if we think about the

purpose of prayer, perhaps we can craft the question that can begin to explore what value does prayer bring into that space, and maybe talk about other ways you can create that [01:18:30] value that involves more than prayer. Bob, do you want to say anything about that? I may have been a little less artful than I wanted to be.

Bob Stains:

I doubt that. But I'm going to take a little bit of a different slant just in terms of relating it to the context. A few years ago, I was teaching at Pepperdine Law, and when I started talking about these kinds of standards for questions, one person raised their hand and said, "You're teaching us to do exactly the opposite [01:19:00] of what we're being taught to do in the rest of our training." I mean, I don't know if that's true or not because I don't know enough about legal training. But out of that conversation, that resulted from that, we hatched up a sort of a way of distinguishing kinds of questions.

And I think of some of the questions that we traditionally use are what I would call questions of interrogation. Right. [01:19:30] And these are all questions of invitation. These are questions that invite people to say something that will help them to be more fully known by the other people in the room. So, if you don't remember any of the specifics of these things, keep in mind questions for invitation, the answers to which will help people be more fully known by the other people in the room and will spark curiosity to know [01:20:00] more about that person. So if I, for instance, I was working in Taiwan a few years ago and we started a dialogue with a typical experience question that we use here in the States, tell us about a personal experience you've had blah, blah, blah. And my host said, "You can't do that here."

That question will not work here because people can't speak for themselves. So we created this question about, can you tell us something about a wise person in your life that influenced the values [01:20:30] that you hold dear? Right. And I mentioned this to say... For the purpose of saying that the answers to those questions were my grandfather, my father, my pastor, my wife. All of these people that responded, brought other people into the room that were important to them. And then the people listening, who had a grandfather, would go to the person that talked about their grandfather and say, " [01:21:00] Yeah. My grandfather wasn't like your grandfather, but he was a grandfather and I want to know more." And all of a sudden the room is alive with connection. Where, when people came into the room, it was really dead with division.

Raye Rawls:

David, you see anything else you think we... we're kind of running out of time, which is fine.

Bob Stains:

If you're [01:21:30] speaking, David, we can't hear you.

David Gibbs: Oh. There are some really good questions. There's a question about, can you do this without a facilitator and without learning agreements and a program? As a novice, I know that without learning agreements, this isn't going to go very far. But I think the question more is for someone who's a teacher. How do they go about doing it? And what parts [01:22:00] are really necessary for a teacher to bring this into their classes?

Raye Rawls: Should I start?

David Gibbs: Yeah, you should.

Raye Rawls: Okay. So, I think with learning agreements, communication agreement... I would say a standard dialogue is a hour, an hour up to two hours. You can't do that when you have [01:22:30] 90 minutes of content for your class, but you can overlay in a classroom. What we will do if we hit a wall and have a difficult conversation, that's one thing, based on communication agreements and structure. But sometimes I've known faculty members that have just kind of moved that whole class in a dialogic model. Where they spend time crafting the right questions [01:23:00] and getting students to use the structure and agreements to respond to the question, to ask each other questions of genuine curiosity, social work. The folk I know who are doing it in law school are using it when they think that there's an issue or a concern.

But they are, as I said before, lots of ways that you can use [01:23:30] the structure, the communication agreements, the questions of curiosity, to reframe the learning, teaching experience. What I'm hearing is it changes things so much. One of the things I'm hearing at the University of Georgia, and I believe it's happening everywhere, that students are becoming more polarized and more influenced by their parents. And I've heard from the housing here [01:24:00] and student affairs that they never seen anything like that. And so even in those spaces and in the classroom, just saying when this happens, this is how we will share so that we can have the conversation we need to have. Also, I have a person who teaches teachers and in her classroom, they focus on [01:24:30] difficult conversations in the educational field.

And she talks about the power of having, in her class, people with very different experience. People from wealthy backgrounds versus people who were first generation college from poor backgrounds, and helping uncover the assumptions by asking the right questions. Oftentimes in the first day of class so that they kind of set up a framework. So people [01:25:00] know that in this classroom, we have an approach and a way of talking about things where people feel safe and safe enough, because I think anyone guarantees a safe space, is a feeling a little grandiose. But safe enough.

And if we hit a bad spot, we know we can pause, or as my friend says, sometimes we have to state, "We're going to do a Zoom call, [01:25:30] it's extracurricular, but we need to talk about this." The issue of microaggressions keeps popping up. To me, that's a very difficult conversation. I've had, I can say without exaggerating, eight calls in the past two weeks when faculty members want to talk. How do we teach a class when we are worried about what we say and how we frame things? And we don't understand this or one black person will say, "This makes sense to me," another one says, "This doesn't make sense to me." [01:26:00] How do we create a space that all perspectives and points of view can be heard and we can continue, we can connect to one another, learn and grow?

Bob Stains:

Let me throw two cents in on that. A way that I like to think of this is, you often just can't take this whole process and plop it down in a classroom. You don't have time. So you have to think in terms of... I think a lot in metaphor, I think of islands of dialogue. [01:26:30] So, can you mark out a space and say we're going to step on the island right now, metaphorically. We're going to have a dialogic moment here and we're going to use questions, presumably you've done some teaching about those questions, that can draw people out. And I do think you have to have some agreements. And I think that this really can work even just in a little mini conversation. Give you a quick example, I was driving my daughter to Chicago [01:27:00] couple of weeks ago, and I said something that really offended her. And I think we rode in silence from Cleveland to Toledo, until she asked a wonderful question.

She stepped back and she said, "I wondered what the meaning of that was for you, dad." It was a little interaction. [01:27:30] It only involved one question, but it totally unlocked this difficult situation that I created. And I think that can happen in the classroom too when people are taught how to ask those questions. And then you step into the point where you say, "Here we're going to have this dialogic moment about this particular issue for the next 10 minutes." And I think we're getting close to our time, so I want to make sure we maybe get another question in there.

David Gibbs:

I'd like to combine two questions. [01:28:00] One person wrote me, "Tell them that learning often involves being uncomfortable with the conversation," and I think that goes to the title of the program, brave listening. And that also relates to another questions, if I can push them together, of how does this apply in a family? Survey show that families have more trouble talking and problems around the dinner table. I don't know if you can combine [01:28:30] those two, but I think brave listening is something maybe you both want to comment on as part of this.



Bob Stains: I think in the topics that are hot, people come with plenty of discomfort. The topics that we deal with, people are already having a very difficult time and we can use some of the... The techniques that we're talking with you about, are all techniques that have been drawn from family therapy. [01:29:00] They're interrupting dysfunctional patterns by trying something new and structured to stop the old and invite something new to take root. So, because this comes from family therapy, it works really well in families.

Raye Rawls: Yeah. I can't add anything to that. I think we're there. 5:29, right?

Stephen Rispoli: That's right. If I can jump in and ask one question, [01:29:30] and I hope that this will be a brief one. But, given the trend in the country, how do we encourage civil discourse conversations in scale? In other words, how do we maybe reverse the trend that we're seeing with polarization and people unable to have conversations about these topics? What are your thoughts there?

Raye Rawls: Teach reflective, structured dialogue and learn reflective, structured dialogue. Because we [01:30:00] really have to, from my perspective, create a space so that people can unlearn. And the only way you can unlearn something is with structure. And this model, this approach, provides that structure. We got a lot of unlearning to do.

Bob Stains: I'm not sure what the solution to that is. It's one of those really wicked and big problems. What I will say is [01:30:30] that until we see the cost, the relational cost and the consequence to community life of the kind of polarization that we've been experiencing, I don't have a whole lot of hope for change. The cost needs to be really seen and felt.

David Gibbs: One final thought, several participants have asked for your emails, Bob and Rae. I don't know if you could send [01:31:00] them out by chat, but people want to follow up, get references, get the PowerPoints. So if you could put those out by chat to all the participants and if you can't, I probably can.

Bob Stains: Doing it right now.

Stephen Rispoli: Well, thank you. This has been an incredible conversation. Really appreciate y'all taking on this task of helping us learn how to engage [01:31:30] civilly with each other. I certainly enjoyed it and I know the panelists did based on the conversation that was going on in chat. So thank you. [crosstalk 01:31:38] Sorry.

Bob Stains: Thanks so much for having us. Appreciate it.

Stephen Rispoli: Thank you, Raye. Thank you, David. Thank you.

Raye Rawls: Take care.

David Gibbs: And thank the audience too.