

Depolarization Efforts Will Inevitably Trigger Some People

Back To The Feed (/thefeed)

[in](https://www.linkedin.com/share/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstartswith.us%2F2024%2F09%2F13%2Fefforts-to-reduce-polarization-can-trigger-people%2F) (https://www.linkedin.com/share/?

%2Fefforts-to-reduce-polarization-can-trigger-people%2F) url=https%3A%2F%2Fstartswith.us%2F2024%2F09%2F13%2Fefforts-to-reduce-polarization-can-trigger-people%2F)



In our politically charged landscape, many of us feel angry, fearful, and on edge. There are clearly a lot of emotional tripwires and landmines that can be triggered by all sorts of topics – and when we hit someone’s tripwires, they pull away from us. Anger and fear present major obstacles to persuasion.

Here’s one common way this plays out for us and other organizations who work on reducing political toxicity: Someone dismisses this endeavor simply because they see someone on the “other side” supporting it. For example, a staunch progressive may think, “I see Republicans supporting this work; this shows how faulty the goals must be.” (Or vice versa, which also often happens.)

But that’s a logical fallacy known as “guilt by association (<https://study.com/academy/lesson/guilt-by-association-fallacy-definition-and-examples.html>).” *Just because a disliked adversary believes something doesn’t mean that belief is wrong.*

Another way we may accidentally drive people away is by using words associated with one “side” or the other. For example, someone writes an essay about reducing political toxicity and, in the process, uses the term “illegal immigrant.” That word choice may drive away some liberal people; they may end up thinking something like, “This cause is for conservative people; it’s not for me.”

Or a conservative may see a piece about this work that mentions the term “social justice” and think, “Obviously this is a liberal endeavor; it’s not for me.” (Isaac Saul has a great TED Talk

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=543mYKKh1EE>) about how our language choices can unintentionally amplify divides.)

It sometimes happens that when we examine polarizing behaviors in one political group, people in that group angrily respond, “Why are you focusing on this and not the many bad things on the ‘other side’? You’re equating the two groups in unfair ways.” But examining how people across the political spectrum can contribute to our divides is not saying, “Both groups are the same.” (Read more about this “both-sides” objection (<https://startswith.us/2024/09/10/liberal-unsubscribes-criticizing-us-for-bothsides-ism/>)).)

There are just so many ways we can accidentally drive people away from *any* cause these days. To live in a highly polarized society is to be surrounded by emotional land mines.

For these reasons, those of us spreading the word about these ideas should see the importance of trying to pre-emptively address those reactions.

One way to do this: **Acknowledge that disagreement on specific topics is inevitable and ask people to focus on the big picture.** We can look for opportunities to emphasize that, hopefully, even if someone disagrees with an idea or statement (or several) that we’ve put out into the world, *they can see the wisdom of the main idea of disagreeing in better, healthier ways.*

Even within organizations like ours, disagreements are common. We have disagreements about specific political and cultural issues (no surprise there) – *but we also have disagreements about the best approaches for reducing political toxicity.*

This may be surprising to some people, but it shouldn’t be: *We’re human beings and we’re going to disagree about all sorts of things* – even for some issues we’re mostly aligned on. Toxic polarization makes discord likely even within groups that are largely aligned

(<https://startswith.us/2024/02/08/toxic-polarization-fractures-relationships-even-with-political-peers/>). To avoid such discord harming our overall goals, those of us in this movement should try to be generous with each other. Just as we'd like to see from more of our fellow citizens, we should try to not be overly judgmental about disagreements on granular aspects of this work.

This leads us to another strategy: **We can be honest and vulnerable about these disagreements.** Such honesty will help people see that they can join this cause and support the “big idea” – even as they disagree with others in this movement on other things (stances on issues, optimal approaches, etc.).

We can look for opportunities to show that we understand some people's negative reactions. This is part of a being-vulnerable approach: showing skeptical people that we don't judge them for their objections and suspicions, and we understand why they're skeptical. After all, extreme polarization leads to much anger and distrust: it's inevitable that many will have questions about this work.

Here's a practical example of how we might use these ideas in the real world. Let's say you're creating a depolarization-aimed resource for the general public. You could include a prominent disclaimer in the introduction that says something like the following:

In these polarized times, it's inevitable that some people will take issue with some of the ideas and thoughts in this resource. We ourselves sometimes disagree about which ideas and resources to focus on; disagreement is inevitable. We hope that, even if you disagree with some specific ideas and resources we've included, you'll agree with the primary goals of reducing contemptuous, toxic ways of engaging and building a healthier political culture.



When we directly and transparently address the fact that our work can be triggering, we'll help people approach our work with a more open and accepting mindset. We'll help them embrace the main idea of disagreeing in healthier ways – and reduce the chances of accidentally driving away valuable members in this movement.

Want to stay in the loop about efforts to reduce toxic polarization? Sign up for our newsletter (<https://startswith.us/join>).

September 25

More Inspiration

Video

From Contempt to Connection: How Curiosity Transforms Us

Read More
(<https://startswith.us/2024-contempt-to-connection-how-curiosity-transforms-us/>)

