

Healing Prejudicial Attitudes in Intergroup Conflicts: The NCBI Controversial Issue Process

by Cherie R. Brown

Citizens are becoming more and more discouraged with negative political campaigning and partisan politics. In the last year the federal government was repeatedly shut down, because elected leaders could not agree on priorities in an operating budget. Religious, cultural, and political groups have adopted strategies for gaining power by pitting various constituencies against each other. In light of these developments, practitioners in the dispute resolution field are in a unique position to offer their skills to improve the quality of public discourse and reduce intergroup conflicts. The National Coalition Building Institute's (NCBI) Controversial Issue Process¹ provides one way to assist embattled groups, offering a structured methodology for airing and listening to entrenched positions while keeping an eye toward the goal of reframing the issues that drive intergroup conflicts.²

THE NATIONAL COALITION BUILDING INSTITUTE (NCBI)

The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), an international leadership and diversity training organization, has for over a dozen years been a pioneer in the field of prejudice reduction work and intergroup conflict resolution.³ NCBI has worked with a variety of organizations in dealing with high profile racial incidents. NCBI trained the Police Academy and command staff of the Los Angeles Police Department during the O.J. Simpson Trial; worked with the managers of Flagstar Corporation, the parent company of Denny's restaurants, following the settlement of a class action lawsuit alleging widespread violations of federal public accommodation laws; and worked with personnel at Fort Bragg, N.C., following allegations linking the brutal murder of an

African American couple in Fayetteville, N.C., to enlisted personnel at the army base.⁴

NCBI has launched nearly a hundred prejudice reduction leadership teams in cities, universities, corporations, public schools, unions, government agencies, law enforcement departments, religious organizations, and voluntary associations. With ongoing NCBI training and support, the leadership teams are able to implement effective prejudice reduction work in their organizations and communities.⁵

A number of years ago it became clear that many participants who attended NCBI training programs had a distorted, naive picture of how to implement effective prejudice reduction work. There was a widespread belief that cooperative societies would naturally arise after the elimination of bigotry. Though it is important to recognize and deal constructively with prejudicial attitudes, what was missing from the work was an understanding of how deeply entrenched prejudices affect intergroup controversies. Positions based on firmly held religious or political beliefs, or positions connected to emotionally charged experiences, do not easily give way to traditional conflict resolution efforts. At NCBI we recognized the need to develop a new methodology for integrating prejudice reduction techniques with strategies for conflict resolution. As a result, we created NCBI's Controversial Issue Process, which gives leaders a way to take on some of the most heated controversies: abortion, death penalty, assisted suicide, gay-lesbian ordination and marriage, and affirmative action. Discussing these issues remains so difficult for even the most seasoned practitioner in conflict resolution, because the questions they raise challenge core cultural and religious identities.



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THE NCBI CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE PROCESS

NCBI teaches the Controversial Issue Process in the context of a three-day or five-day training program, which provides a foundational orientation to NCBI theory and praxis.⁶ NCBI offers specific skill-training in listening for detail, understanding the role of emotional content in the formulation of a position, and the significance of personal storytelling in breaking the impasse between two parties.

In teaching the process at a seminar or in an organizational training program, we begin by having participants identify a live controversy within the group. We ask the group to propose a topic that satisfies four criteria:

- (1) the issue is highly emotional and the participants have strong advocacy positions on the issue;
- (2) the issue can be framed in two distinct positions (*e.g.*, yes, the death penalty should remain a legal punishment for capital crimes; or no, the death penalty should be abolished in all cases);
- (3) the issue is likely to generate sufficient controversy among the group members; and,
- (4) the issue is exciting or relevant to the group members.

Once the group agrees on the issue to examine, two volunteers, each holding opposite viewpoints, come forward to speak for each side of the controversy. The first volunteer (Person A) states her position in front of the group. She explains why she thinks the way she does on the issue. The second volunteer (Person B) is

coached to listen carefully. Person B is then asked to repeat back everything he heard Person A say, paying special attention to avoid paraphrasing. Person B is challenged to mirror the precise words and tone of voice Person A used. In doing this exercise, even with highly skilled professional mediators, we discovered how poorly the repeating back is actually done. Practitioners in conflict resolution should note that most listeners will tend to distort the other's position in two ways. First, they will tend to omit the points on which both parties agree. The result is that the common ground for building agreement is ignored. Second, listeners tend to blank out and fail to repeat back the points having the most emotional content for the other person. One of the most valuable skills in conflict resolution work is recognizing in a person's position the phrases that contain an "emotional ring." Ironically, these phrases, the ones containing the most importance to one party, are the very points that we have observed in years of practice that the other party has the most difficult time hearing and remembering.

After repeating back Person A's position, Person B is encouraged to ask Person A a question to elicit what we at NCBI call a *Speak-Out*.⁷ A *Speak-Out* is the telling of a personal experience of oppression. Underlying the request for a *Speak-Out* is an understanding that we do not change peoples' minds regarding entrenched beliefs; instead, we reach their hearts. What reaches someone's heart is the hearing of an emotional life-story that has formed the person's position. Eliciting a *Speak-Out* enables the listener to understand the hurt or life experience that underlies the other's strong advocacy position. Often, these stories are accompanied with an emotional release; tears and shaking are not uncommon.

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The entire listening process is then repeated. This time, Person B states his position. Person A repeats everything she has heard; then she asks Person B a question to elicit a *Speak-Out*.

Next, the group participants, who have been quietly listening to both parties, generate a list of the concerns articulated on both sides of the issue. The concerns are posted on a flipchart.

In small groups, participants attempt to reframe the issue in a way that will build bridges by answering three questions:

- (1) What do both parties share in common? What are their common concerns?
- (2) What is an umbrella question – a question that will not be another yes/no question, but instead, will rise above the two parties' positions to a broader concern that both parties might be interested in answering? An example of an umbrella question on the issue of abortion might be, "How can we prevent unwanted pregnancies?"
- (3) What is a "coalition-building question?" The new question may follow the formula, "How can we (meet one of Person A's key concerns) while at the same time (meet one of Person B's key concerns)?"

Finally, the group brainstorms possible solutions using the best reframed questions.

IMPLEMENTATION: THREE CASE STUDIES

Here are three examples of how the NCBI Controversial Issue Process has been used to resolve conflicts involving deeply

embedded prejudicial attitudes.

College Controversy: Tensions between Blacks and Jews on Campus

The first example took place on a U.S. college campus. The director of the African-American Center invited a controversial speaker to the campus. The speaker allegedly said, "The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist." An irate Jewish student stood up to refute the comment, calling out in the auditorium, "I'm proud to be a Zionist!" Students around him attacked him and the ensuing melee made the 6 o'clock and 11 o'clock evening news on local television stations.

Nervous university officials invited NCBI to the campus. We kept national television camera crews out of the room as we met with 100 Black and Jewish student leaders and faculty. We led several *Speak-Outs* with both Black and Jewish students before starting the Controversial Issue Process.⁸ We led a *Speak-Out* with the Jewish student who had been assaulted. Fighting to keep back his tears, the student said that throughout his life his father, who had escaped Germany in 1930, had tried to tell him about his fears as a Jew. The student said he had never understood his father's fears until he went to hear the controversial speaker on campus. When we asked the other participants what had touched them about the Jewish student's story, the director of the African-American Center put up his hand and with tears in his eyes looked over at the Jewish student and said, "I felt when I was listening to you that I could remove your face and put a Black face there saying the same thing." Several other Blacks and Jews did *Speak-Outs*, telling their personal experiences with racism or anti-Semitism.

We then began the Controversial Issue Process. The students chose to examine

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the issue, "Should speakers who are divisive and have a potential hate message in their speeches be welcomed onto campus?" The students were evenly divided. As the two volunteer speakers articulated each side of the controversy, the underlying group issues became clearer. For many Blacks, the Jewish students' telling them who they should or should not listen to on campus was a form of racism, and the patronizing message was that Blacks are not intelligent enough to choose for themselves and to listen critically to controversial ideas. For many Jews, the Black students' insistence on trust was a form of anti-Semitism, and the unsettling message was that Jews were to trust that others would recognize anti-Semitism despite a painful history of Jews being betrayed by group after group.

In reframing the controversy, the students came to a new question, "How do we welcome Black members on campus to have self-determination in selecting their own leaders while at the same time making sure that Jewish students and faculty do not get isolated or abandoned?" The reframed question led to a solution. The students decided that each group would invite a controversial speaker to campus, one whom the other side might fear. However, they also agreed to attend the speeches together as a joint coalition, teaching each other what was helpful and harmful in each speaker's message. By the end of the Controversial Issue Process, those who had been struggling with Black-Jewish tensions found a constructive way to deal with the issues causing the controversy.

COMPETING RELIGIOUS CLAIMS: CHRISTIAN EVANGELIZATION AND INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY

The second example took place at a NCBI Train-the-Trainers session in Toronto,

Canada. The group decided to work with the issue, "Is Jesus the only way?" The person speaking on the side of "yes" was a White male from a Southern city in the United States. When the other spokesperson asked him a *Speak-Out* question, to learn what in his personal experience led him to his position, the man started to weep. His story was that he grew up in a home in which both parents were alcoholics. His grandmother, a deeply religious Christian woman, intervened and raised him. She frequently took him with her to church. He said that he knew when he died he would be with Jesus in heaven, and he wanted everyone to have the same opportunity. He said that his grandmother and his belief in Jesus had saved his life.

A First Nations/indigenous woman spoke on the side of "no." She was born on a Canadian reservation and as a young girl had been sent to Christian schools. In a quiet voice, she said that throughout her life she had always felt that there was an inexplicable "hole in her heart." As an adult she went to a conference where she heard the rhythmic beating of Native drums. The sound offered her healing, and led her eventually to the reclaiming of the indigenous religion of her ancestors. Not until she heard the drumming did she begin to feel whole again.

The man from the Southern U.S. was wide-eyed as she continued, "I want to see my grandparents when they die, too. But according to the religion of my people, my grandparents won't be in heaven. Their spirits are part of the earth; they are part of the trees; they are part of the wind."

Each of them, as well as for the rest of us who heard their accounts, gained a deeper understanding of how religious beliefs are intimately connected with life experiences and the histories of our peoples. In reaching toward generosity with each

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other, we do not change minds, we change hearts, through hearing and understanding each other's stories.

Defining a Legislative Agenda: Seeking a Common Policy on Transracial Adoption

The last example comes from NCBI's work with several members of the United States Congress. A bill had been proposed in the U.S. Senate to eliminate race as a factor in selecting a suitable family for the adoption of a child. The bill stirred heated debate among child advocates on all sides of the transracial adoption issue. Some groups, such as the Black Social Workers, had adopted a policy to place Black children only with Black families. In light of the pervasiveness of U.S. racism, they firmly believed that Black children would only have a fighting chance if they were placed with Black families. Others with equally strong convictions believed that finding a loving family, regardless of race, is the only acceptable standard in placing children in adoptive homes.

Sponsors of the federal legislation invited NCBI to facilitate a daylong conference for national leaders in the field of adoption policy. Nearly every key advocate had a personal stake in the formulation of the national policy, not only because of a professional interest in the subject but because so many were adoptive parents — many with transracial families.

Many of the leading advocates on both sides of the issue had never met each other before. They knew each other only through literature in the field, the acrimonious articles they had published in response to each other in professional journals. After working through the NCBI Controversial Issue Process, a healing moment came at the end of the day. A leading advocate caught the eye of one of her colleagues across the room who

opposed her views. She said, "I have to tell you, I haven't changed my position on this issue by being here today. But I've discovered that I like you; and because I like you, I'm going to stay in a room with you until we can hash out a bill that we can both endorse."

PROSPECTIVE APPLICATIONS

Community leaders are currently planning to use the NCBI Controversial Issue Process in a variety of settings. National leaders of the U.S. Episcopal Church plan to use the process in discussing the ordination of openly gay and lesbian clergy. With the approaching presidential elections, California's pending 1996 statewide referendum on affirmative action is being closely watched across the United States. In preparation for the Republican convention in San Diego and the California referendum vote, the San Diego Chapter of NCBI is collaborating with the San Diego Human Relations Commission to launch "Talk San Diego," a novel program that will train hundreds of volunteers to lead the NCBI Controversial Issue Process throughout the city on the topic of affirmative action. The use of the Controversial Issue Process may enable thousands of San Diego citizens to heal their own prejudices and to formulate a policy that can reflect the concerns of all sides on the issue.

SUMMARY

Now more than ever there is a need for practitioners in the field of dispute resolution to bring prejudice reduction skills to public conversations on divisive issues. The NCBI Controversial Issue Process, which entails careful listening, personal storytelling, and conflict resolution techniques, is one approach that community leaders can use to move a contentious subject forward.

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- 1 The National Coalition Building Institute, NCBI, and the NCBI Controversial Issue Process are protected by international copyright. Use of the names and/or process requires the express permission of NCBI.
- 2 I wish to acknowledge the editorial suggestions of George J. Mazza in preparing this article.
- 3 See, e.g., Itabari Njeri, The Conquest of Hate: By Turning Conflict Inside Out, a New Breed of Mediators Finds a Way to Bring Peace to the City, Los Angeles Times Magazine (April 25, 1993).
- 4 See also Eric Johnson, Police Brutality and the Prejudice Reduction Model, Law and Order (November 1992).
- 5 For a description of NCBI's Prejudice Reduction Model, see Cherie R. Brown and George J. Mazza, Peer Training Strategies for Welcoming Diversity, Racism on Campus: Confronting Racial Bias Through Peer Interventions (New York: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1991).
- 6 See Cherie R. Brown, Healing Pain and Building Bridges, Woman of Power (Summer 1992), pp. 16-21.
- 7 Brown and Mazza, Peer Training Strategies, p. 45.
- 8 In working with a group following overt hostilities, it may be necessary to facilitate healing through preliminary Speak-Outs before using the NCBI Controversial Issue Process.