

Democratizing Understanding, Respecting, And Bringing Out The Best In Others

Executive Summary

There are only two long-term possibilities for humanity. Either we solve the problem of working together for everyone's benefit, or we cooperate hesitantly, work too often at cross purposes, launch too readily into conflict, drag our feet toward compromise, and stumble along until catastrophe happens.

Five hundred years ago, most people lived their entire lives within a few miles of where they were born. They seldom saw people, or objects from more than a few miles away. Today, consumer goods, professional services, worker exploitation, pollution, tourists, diseases, weapons, lies, movies, music, text messages, financial crises, illegal trade, supply chains, and cat videos can all go around the globe with ease.

Is this the best we can do with globalization?

This document outlines a few ideas to unlock the true potential of humanity, by democratizing understanding, respecting, and bringing out the best in others. More specifically, we can inspire people to:

- Listen to and learn from others as readily as we perform any other common act of courtesy.
- Use our rich, common life experiences to see ourselves in others and to see the best in others.
- Disrupt our hidden biases.
- Expand Can Do attitudes, to Can Understand and Respect, and Can Cooperate and Bring Out the Best in Others.
- Create a revolution in human communication.
- Expand safe driving ideas into homes, workplaces, and communities, so that we can live and work with others in a manner that saves time, money, and lives.

Improving how we understand, respect, and bring out the best in others on a large scale will help us deal with discrimination, relationships, teamwork, management, and politics. It will lead to fundamental changes in society.

What Will It Take?

Say, "Please," and, "Thank you." Cooperate with others. Make peace, not war. Don't litter. Wear your seatbelt. Everyone knows we should do these things. But not everyone actually does, for various reasons.

Several years ago, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) created a slogan, "Don't Mess with Texas" for their advertising campaign aimed at reducing littering¹. They did not just lecture people, "Don't litter!" They did not just threaten people with fines. Instead, their slogan tapped into a sense of pride. It inspired people to do the right thing.

Another memorable and effective campaign was the Vince and Larry crash test dummies series of commercials by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)². The two crash test dummies came to life and discussed in humorous ways all the unsafe driving behaviors they had because they were "dummies". Again, the NHTSA did not lecture people. They did not just scare people with the consequences of not wearing seatbelts.

The key to success in globalizing super soft-skills is creating a comprehensive plan. Such a plan should address attitudes and behaviors; how people think and act. It should be easy to understand, engaging, visceral, thoughtful and inspiring, not dull and off-putting. We do not want to attack people's self-worth. We do not want to just bring people together over food, drinks, or activities, without addressing underlying issues. If our plan can leverage people's existing, rich experiences, and society's existing infrastructures, so that it gains familiarity and legitimacy, then that's even better. The benefits to individuals, corporations, and communities should be clear and immediate. It should be an effective, scalable, and cohesive framework. We want to create a sustainable culture of learning, helping, and mutual thriving, instead of a culture of distrust and conflict.

Extending Descartes

Descartes described individuals, "I think, therefore I am".

We can extend that to the interpersonal, and the global.

I listen (love), therefore you are.

We understand and respect, therefore we are.

We bring out the best in each other, therefore we thrive.

We are thinking and feeling beings. How well we understand things, solve problems, and manage our emotions at home and at work can determine how happy and successful we are in life.

Critical thinking is important for voters. We need to be able to examine our biases, reject conspiracies and extremism, and objectively evaluate the empty promises and lies from advertisers and politicians alike. We need to support media that exposes wrong-doing and dangers. We need media that not only educates but also inspires. We need civic engagement and good governance. We need to prevent technological, military, political, or other forms of power from being abused or misused by a

¹ Tim McClure and Roy Spence, Don't Mess with Texas: The Story Behind the Legend, Idea City Press, 2006. ISBN-10: 0972282513

² https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1449037

small number of people. We need awareness of the risks of any technology, so we can dedicate appropriate resources to address them.

Many of society's issues require courage and knowledge from the ground up. We need thought leaders, creating public awareness, leading to collective action, to be able to deal with the tremendous risks and opportunities humanity faces.

Next, Descartes can be extended to the interpersonal.

Listening in interpersonal relationships is as important as thinking and feeling for individuals. When we listen, we allow others to speak with candor, insight, and dignity. To listen is in a very real sense to lend our hearts and minds to the speaker, so they can think and feel outside their comfort zones, and become and grow as a result. Listening is one of the most practical and common ways we can help others think and feel. It is one of the most effective ways to extend assistance, concern, or love for others, to bind our existence with others. It is one of the most powerful ways for us to resolve problems and cooperate.

Life and work are full of experiences that are worth being heard. When I hear a good joke, I want to tell someone. When I am frustrated, I want to tell someone. At work, it is also very useful to be able to talk openly about planning and execution, different options to solve a problem, lessons learned after a project or incident, repetitive processes or inefficiencies and how they can be changed, etc. It is useful to think things out loud.

Let me share a quick listening tip. If you haven't learned anything at the end of a conversation or meeting, then you probably haven't listened. I use this at the end of the day as well. I ask myself if I've learned anything about my wife's day. If I haven't, then I go and ask her and I listen. Listening is practical, and should be much more common

Listening has to be taught in an engaging and meaningful manner. It should be treated like an art. We need to stop teaching listening like it is grammar and punctuation, or a zen mystery. Too many quick articles on the web either make listening appear mechanical and boring by listing a number of listening skills, or they make listening appear vague by talking about paying attention and being present without further details. If my wife told me, "I love you", I can't just paraphrase her or stare at her. "Ah, you are declaring your amorous feelings for me." "Uh-ah, go on..." I can't just be present with her and do nothing either. I have to care first, and use the appropriate techniques and responses to convey my feelings for her. Listening, like speech, is rich, dynamic, and human.

In some ways, we already know a lot about listening. We know if our best friend, spouse, or boss is a good listener. We know virtual assistants can hear extremely well, but we can't confess or pour our hearts out to them. We know what it's like to not be heard. What we don't typically acknowledge is the sophistication of listening.

Imagine valuing listening as highly as literacy, public speaking, intelligence quotients, and emotional quotients.

Next, let us expand Descartes to groups. If we do not strive to understand and respect others at home, at work, within our communities, and globally (and use that to build consensus, reduce discrimination and inequality, safeguard our future, innovate, etc.), we will always be at risk of conflict and existential threats.

If we do not understand and respect others, every challenge we face will be harder. If we understand and respect others, every challenge we face will be easier. If we do not learn how to consistently bring out the best in each other, we may never truly thrive.

Expand Can Do Attitudes

We admire people who make sacrifices, train, and finally complete a marathon, or learn how to play an instrument. In customer service, we appreciate people who go the extra mile and delight a customer. We hire and promote people who “take initiative”. These things all share something important. Having a Can Do attitude means putting aside our fears, doubts, job descriptions, self-imposed limitations, or concerns, doing the work, sometimes making sacrifices, and achieving unexpected results.

When we succeed at one of these “impossible” Can Do tasks, we discover we have more discipline than we realized, are stronger, more flexible, and more capable than we imagined. We were able to improve our diets and lifestyles, and found time to train, and made progress. We were able to help a colleague or a customer, and it was rewarding for all parties concerned. After these “impossible” experiences, we are more prepared to attempt new tasks that are difficult. We also gain humility because we discover how much work it takes to make things look effortless. We grow.

But “Can do” is not limited to certain tasks only:

- We can understand why others never attempt, or give up halfway through the pursuit of their “impossible” dreams. We can be compassionate.
- We can be kind and forgiving to, and learn from those who ridicule or betray us.
- We can apologize and make amends, even when we really don’t want to.
- We can learn things and change our minds even if it scares us and makes us uncomfortable.
- We can help others, often in more ways than we realize.
- We can inspire others to be their best by first offering our best with no strings attached.

I believe one way to temper fanaticism, extremism, idolatry, polarization, head-in-the-sand I don’t want to know attitudes, we can’t save the world hopelessness, etc., AND to achieve personal growth, is to show people how to succeed outside their comfort zones, in as many ways as possible. We can and should expand our empathy, perspective, forgiving, helping, cooperating, and bringing out the best in others mindsets.

These ideas are of course part of teamwork, leadership, and customer service, and of great interest to companies. Making these a standard part of corporate professional development training can help to spread these ideas. Evaluating how people have grown and made those around them better during hiring and promoting considerations will also reinforce the importance of these ideas.

Bringing out the best in others is more than the golden rule: treating others the way we, or even others, wish to be treated. It is about improving humanity itself. It is only by deliberately helping each other that humanity can push itself to be the best it can be. We certainly can’t achieve our best by accumulating money or technology alone.

Shopping For Empathy And Positive Regard

Bringing out the best in others is actually one part of a larger effort. We have to see ourselves in others (empathy), see the best in others (positive regard), and then we can bring out the best in others. This is taking psychologist Carl Rogers’ ideas outside therapeutic situations. So what are some practical ways for us to develop empathy and positive regard for others?

A few years ago I was at a department store when I overheard a teenager complain to their parent, “I’ll wear it every day, okay!?”

Clearly, the teenager wanted to buy something, and their parent didn't want to pay for it. But a slightly different situation can also happen. A person can go into a store to buy something. Their spouse might object. In frustration, they might say, "I'll use it every day, okay!?"

Why are their frustrations so similar? Why is there so much frustration, from all sides?

Awareness of our ignorance is an important first step. The truth is, we often don't understand our loved ones. We often don't appreciate or respect their complex experiences and needs, often developed over long periods of time. As a result, we naturally don't support their purchases. "You have so many widgets at home already! Why do you need another one?" "Can't you use the ones you already have?" "You keep cluttering the house with these!"

If we don't even understand our loved ones, then how can we assume we understand people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, creeds, and persuasions? If we don't understand others, how can we work together to solve problems?

Fortunately, our complex buying experiences can actually help us. We may buy different things for completely different reasons, but our coveting, browsing, impulse buying, hoarding, and other related experiences are often deeply similar. For example, not having the right shoes when you need them is just as frustrating as not having the right tools when you need them. It takes knowledge and creativity to know what shoes to wear in different situations. It takes knowledge and creativity to know what tools to use in different situations. Some shoes and tools are more general purpose. Some shoes and tools are more specialized, and may be more expensive but less frequently used. Either way, good shoes and tools are hard to find, and you keep them around because you never know when you'll need them!

Experiences with widgets allow us to understand and respect other people's experiences with doodads (without anyone having to buy more widgets or doodads, without having to change our behavior). Our rich experiences give us a personal and durable way to see ourselves in others, and to see the best in others. We do not have to build empathy from scratch. In fact, telling people to walk a mile in someone else's shoes (no pun intended), without giving them any further tools or resources, is like telling someone to buy low and sell high, or diet and exercise, without giving them any further tools and resources.

Our buying behaviors are a source of tension, but because they are sometimes gender related, they can be a great stepping stone for helping us appreciate deeper gender issues. How and why is women's fashion different from men's fashion? How would you feel if people commented on your "pretty shoes" and "pretty hair" since you were a baby? What kind of impact would that have on your buying and other habits? What are some other ways we treat people differently based on gender, and what effects do they have? What if people told you not to cry since you were a child, because they considered that a sign of weakness?

There is a lot of room for us to understand and respect others as groups. In addition, we have to appreciate individuals. You and I may buy the exact same thing at a store, but we likely have different reasons for doing so. The only way to learn about our individual concerns and reasons is to listen to people as individuals.

Using consumer behavior to build understanding and respect is also very business-friendly. It opens up many opportunities for advertising campaigns and public service announcements. Companies can even team up to show things they have in common in unexpected ways. Imagine a running shoe company and a hardware company in the same commercial talking about understanding and respecting others.

Our buying habits, political views, beliefs, values, etc., are not formed in one day. It takes a lifetime for us to become who we are. By spending more time understanding how other people become who they are, we greatly increase our ability to resolve conflicts and cooperate with others.

Disrupting Biases

Working on understanding and respecting others is not enough. We must also find ways to disrupt our biases.

What if we all had to wear certain t-shirts for a week. The t-shirts could have any one of the following messages on them:

“Police feel threatened by me.”

“People think I’m lazy.”

“People think I’m too emotional and indecisive.”

“People think I’ll always put my family ahead of my career.”

“People think I always leave work on time to pick up my kids.”

“I didn’t graduate from a top school.”

“I don’t belong to the right country club.”

“People associate me with COVID.”

“People think I want to hurt businesses.”

“People think I hate immigrants.”

“I am less worthy.”

Take the first one for example: “Police feel threatened by me.” If I were walking down the street wearing a t-shirt with that message on it, and I saw some police ahead of me, I would feel nervous. I might cross the street to avoid the police. Simply having such a label forced on me, through no fault of my own, causes me to act suspicious, as if I had already done something wrong! If the police saw my shirt and evasive behavior, they might pursue me, and I might start running. A negative label can quickly spiral into disaster.

What about the labels that seem to imply I’m not a good worker? “People think I’m too emotional and indecisive.” “People think I’ll always put my family ahead of my career.” “People think I always leave work on time to pick up my kids.” What if I were forced to wear these t-shirts at a performance review, or a client meeting? What kinds of people tend to get these labels put on them? Is it fair for them to be labeled that way? How much good can be done if we create more equality for this group of people? What should we do to give this group of people the best chance to make contributions and succeed at the work place?

What about the labels: “I didn’t graduate from a top school”, and “I don’t belong to the right country club”? Everyone can be discriminated against in some way. Discrimination harms everyone.

What if society put the following label on you: “I am less worthy” and forced you to move to a new city with nothing, and your children and their children had to inherit that label as well? What kind of effect would that have on you?

What other labels can you think of?

Again, the “same” kind of discrimination affects people differently. No individual can speak for all people affected by a certain type of discrimination. The only way to discover how discrimination affects a particular individual is to listen to that person.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will." One big problem with discrimination is we often don't understand the effects of negative stereotypes. If the negative stereotype doesn't apply to us, we tend to think the associated discrimination doesn't exist, or we tend to think the negative consequences are exaggerated.

Telling people not to use racial slurs, not to look down on others, and not to be politically incorrect can backfire. If we give people rules, and fail to adequately explain them, then we may appear to be ordering people to adhere to our seemingly arbitrary standards, and inviting them to resist. We can deepen divisions if we do not explain discrimination properly.

If effective methods for reducing discrimination exist, and organizations fail to adopt those methods, then they don't reap the benefits of reduced discrimination, but also, they may become legally liable when discrimination occurs within those organizations.

Discrimination is when we artificially make it harder for people to do their best. Unfortunately, our daily experiences do not always give us insight into the subtlety and pervasiveness of the many forms of discrimination out there. But once we find safe and eye-opening ways for people to at least briefly experience forms of discrimination they are not typically exposed to, to disrupt our hidden biases, then we have to do it as widely and regularly as we can.

Revolutionizing Human Communications

Improvements to our soft skills can have an extraordinary effect on humanity, but how does it look from a historical perspective? Consider the history of human communication. We went from speech, written language, the printing press, rising literacy, the telegraph, the telephone, to the internet and social media. Each communication revolution has brought far-reaching change to civilization.

There is a pattern with these changes though. We've become better and better at screaming, "Look at me, listen to me!" While Thoreau wrote in 1849 that, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation", today's technology allows us to live lives of loud desperation. We have democratized publishing (including deceiving, doxxing, cyber bullying, etc.), but not understanding and respecting others. Anyone can share text, photos, or videos with anyone else in the world. But we have not significantly improved our ability to "receive" others, to learn about others, and to appreciate and leverage differences to create the best solutions.

No one would tell an arguing couple to go get remedial reading and writing lessons, to get better cell phone plans, or to be more active on social media. We already know something important is missing. In fact, the next human communication revolution will happen when we improve our soft skills on a global scale.

Better understanding and communications will lead to a period of adjustment. It won't solve all problems at once. Rather, we will first need to build consensus. Enough of us (on all sides) have to calmly agree on the problems, then we can have earnest conversations about how to fix things. If we do well, we will be able to make progress on regional problems that seem intractable today. If we continue to do well, will we be able to make progress on truly global problems.

Safe Driving

It turns out we have a proven system for inspiring altruistic, cooperative behaviors and attitudes that is already used worldwide. Safe driving allows ordinary people to more safely and efficiently operate fast-moving, powerful machines in close proximity with each other. It is a great system that educates and incentivizes. It establishes norms and culture. It allows small, individual, altruistic and cooperative behaviors to accumulate into much larger benefits for all.

We can adapt safe driving to help us share our homes, work places, communities, and the planet with others. In addition to can do, can understand and respect, can help and bring out the best in

others attitudes, see ourselves in others, and see the best in others skills mentioned above, we can teach everyone to listen (instead of yield), check biases (instead of blind spots), and reject ideological rage (instead of road rage).

What is yielding? It's letting someone else go first, regardless of who's right or wrong. What happens if we all drive aggressively and insist on going first? Chaos and disaster. What is listening? Listening is putting someone else's speaking, thinking, feeling needs first. What happens if we all aggressively voice our opinions and beliefs and insist on getting heard first? Chaos and disaster. What happens if we listen to (without necessarily agreeing with) others as readily as we yield to others in traffic, or hold doors open for others? We create a more caring, helpful, and ultimately efficient culture.

Driving is frustrating and challenging. But we recognize that aggressive and destructive behavior on the roads is not helpful. And no individual has special rights above others to act out their frustrations. We use the term "Road Rage" to help us discuss and reduce this harmful behavior. Similarly, living and working with others is frustrating and challenging. But getting aggressive and destructive over the discussion of ideas is not helpful. No one has extra permission to engage in "Ideological Rage". As a society, we have to reject materials that incite and demonize. We have to constantly ask ourselves if we are being inspired to understand, compromise, and solve problems, or if we are just being told to blame and hate.

Safe driving teaches us that we need to recognize the risks and challenges involved in living and working with others, that we have to educate, incentivize, and penalize if appropriate. Safe driving also proves that government, companies, law enforcement, and citizens (yes, a single driver can make a difference) can work together for the common good. It proves that we can change behavior and attitudes. It is familiar to many. It is practical and does not depend on a person's politics, religion, or values. It can be used to inspire cooperation, understanding, and respect on a global scale.

Political Memes and More

In the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Regan asked the question, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"³ In 1992, James Carville (Bill Clinton's strategist) coined the phrase, "It's the economy, stupid."⁴ These simple and compelling quotes seems to suggest that our economic well-being is the most important election issue. Since then, many have asked the same questions during elections, often in an attempt to unseat incumbents during challenging economic times.

I wish to pose two slightly different questions. First, do you understand and respect more people than you did four years ago?

If more and more of us answer, "No", then it means we're becoming more and more polarized. It means we're headed toward more conflict. Divorces, racism, sexism, in addition to political dysfunction, and a host of other problems will likely not improve.

Understanding and respecting others, in my opinion, is more important and fundamental than the economy. If we improve the economy without changing the way we feel about and act towards others, it will simply perpetuate, or even exacerbate existing inequalities and problems. If we don't constantly develop newfound understanding and respect for others, we likely won't be able to meet new challenges forced upon us by rapid changes in society. Understanding and respecting helps us

³ Shirley, Craig (September 5, 2012). <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/09/why-are-you-better-off-now-080719>

⁴ Kelly, Michael (October 31, 1992). "THE 1992 CAMPAIGN: The Democrats -- Clinton and Bush Compete to Be Champion of Change; Democrat Fights Perceptions of Bush Gain". The New York Times.

absorb and maybe even thrive in the face of change. It enables improved economies, marriages, parenting, teamwork, sales, customer service, leadership, and politics.

Now for the second question. Are you more capable of bringing out the best in others today than you were able to four years ago (because you earn more and give more, because you spend more time doing good work directly, or because you have grown as a person and the quality of your leadership/giving/mentoring/parenting has improved)?

If too many of us answer, “No” to this second question, it means we’re not able to inspire a “personal growth via helping” mindset. It also means we’re not able to establish a “helping” culture. To me, this question is a crude but interesting measure of how decent we are as a species.

Imagine these two questions being seriously discussed in the next election, and the ones after. Imagine traditional and social media inspiring us to learn more about others and help others, in meaningful ways.

Happiness and meaning is not measured by the size of our bank accounts or how many followers we have. It is measured by how many people we have helped.

Corporate Support

I’ve already mentioned that companies are inherently interested in fostering understanding and respect amongst their staff, because of the obvious economic benefits. By using our rich consumer behavior to develop understanding and respect for others, we also open up the possibility for commercial endorsements.

But there are additional areas where companies can make a positive impact. Corporate slogans and mission statements are full of aspirational messages. Companies naturally want to imply their products and services are cool and can help you achieve higher human goals. They naturally want to create mindshare, to associate themselves with meaning beyond everyday products that solve everyday problems.

Consider the following altered slogans. Can you identify the original ones?

“Just listen.” “Just make the effort to understand and respect others.”

“15 minutes of listening can save you from 15 minutes of arguing.”

“You can understand and respect others, we can help.”

“Be all you can be, learn how to understand and respect others.” “Be all you can be, bring out the best in others.”

“Understand, Respect, and Carry On.” “Bring Out the Best in Others, and Carry On.”

In other words, we can invite companies to advertise altruistic messages just by slightly altering their slogans. Companies can gain goodwill and brand recognition by doing this, and our ideas gain exposure.

Conclusion

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

— Albert Einstein

“If we become even slightly more violent, shortsighted, ignorant, and selfish than we are now, almost certainly we will have no future.”

— Carl Sagan

We can expand Descartes. Not only must we think clearly, we must also think about others, and think of our common interests as a species.

We can expand Can Do. We can stretch ourselves, to understand and respect others, to bring out the best in others and cooperate with others, in unexpected ways.

We can extend therapeutic ideas into everyday life.

We can use our rich, non-threatening consumer experiences to understand and respect others.

We can disrupt our biases.

We can create a revolution in human communications and interactions.

We already know how to change people’s driving attitudes and behaviors. We can change people’s cooperative attitudes and behavior.

We can appreciate and learn more about listening.

We can ask better questions, create better political memes, to inspire positive change.

Individuals, companies, and societies can work together and benefit when we look at fundamental ways to improve our soft skills.

Humans have incredible creativity and resourcefulness, for good and for bad. In the face of ever-increasing change (which always carries risks), we can plod along doing the occasional good, and do our best to recover from the inevitable disasters. Or we can revolutionize the way we understand, respect, and bring out the best in others, and build the best foundation we can for problem-solving, cooperation, and synergy.

Improve our ability to discover others, and we discover ourselves. Elevate others, and we elevate our own humanity. The most profound challenge we can set for ourselves as a species is to bring out the best in each other. How far can we go?

Marc Wong volunteered at a telephone crisis center, and worked in computer security. His passion for listening and helping others is now his mission. His book "Thank you for Listening" was cited as an “invaluable self-improvement guide” by Midwest Book Review. His fresh approach makes powerful ideas come alive. He believes our biggest challenge as a species is to bring out the best in ourselves.

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