

John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

Session 20: Commitment to Respectful Dialogue

When I started this series of podcasts, I did not anticipate reaching the number 20, which is what this podcast actually represents.

For the last in this series, I am turning to something for which I was largely responsible back in 2014 at the time of the Scottish independence referendum. A number of us were concerned about the quality of public discourse and wanted to identify and promote a different way of talking about difficult issues. Thus, we conceived the Commitment to Respectful Dialogue. It found expression as part of an initiative called Collaborative Scotland.

It's hard to believe, six years later as we approach a US Presidential election (at least when I am recording this!), the UK's departure from the European Union and Scottish Parliament elections with the prospect of a further independence referendum, that the state of civic dialogue has become as polarised as it now seems to be. So, it feels timely to reinforce the Commitment and its eight principles or suggestions, a number of which we have covered in this podcast series.

As I do so, I invite you to consider a difficult situation which you presently face or of which you are aware. How could these principles help?

The Commitment has actually had several iterations but here I am referring to the [Collaborative Scotland](#) website version.

The overall proposition is that it is a privilege to be able to engage in discussions about serious matters. And that *how* we engage with each other may be just as important as any outcome. It is, as the Commitment preamble notes, in the interests of a flourishing community or organisation that discussions are conducted with civility and dignity.

Therefore, those who subscribe to the Commitment have undertaken to do their best and to encourage others to do their best, to do the following eight things:

Firstly,

- **Show respect and courtesy** towards all those who are engaged in discussions, whatever views they hold;
 - this is a basic application of the idea that we need to build and maintain good relationships if we are to achieve meaningful progress; separating people from the problem as we discussed in an earlier podcast;

the Commitment then goes on, secondly, to recommend that we:

- **Acknowledge that there are many differing, deeply held and valid points of view;**
 - there are invariably two or more sides to a story, different perspectives depending upon one's vantage point and experiences, knowledge, prejudices, biases and assumptions – we need to work with all of these realities;

thirdly, we must:

- **Use language carefully and avoid personal or other remarks which might cause unnecessary offence;**
 - it takes discipline to choose our words with thought, so that we don't inflame or polarise a situation or cause others to become defensive or aggressive or both; but, if we do take care, it can make a real difference;

fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, we need to:

- **Listen carefully to all points of view and seek fully to understand what concerns and motivates those with differing views from our own;**
 - we cannot overemphasise the importance of listening so that others feel heard and valued - and to enable us to really get under the surface and find out what is really going on; often that is quite different from what you might think or imagine;

moving on and connected to listening, the fifth point is to remember to:

- **Ask questions for clarification when we may not understand what others are saying or proposing;**
 - really good questions help us to explore the underlying issues, concerns, hopes, fears, values, objectives and priorities of others; again, getting under the surface and find out why things are happening or being said;

we should also be prepared, number six, to:

- **Express our own views clearly and honestly, with transparency about our motives and our interests;**
 - this is not easy sometimes but being trustworthy and specific about our own objectives, points of view and what concerns or drives us is critical, especially if we have first listened to and tried to understand others;

which leads us, seventhly, to being encouraged to:

- **Respond to questions asked of us with clarity and openness and, whenever we can, with credible information;**



- backing up what we are saying with good support, objective material, evidence, data, research, and what we might call legitimate criteria will add to our own credibility and authority;

and, finally in all of this, and number eight in our list, we must always

- ***Look for common ground and shared interests at all times.***
 - we have so much more in common than ever separates us. Knowing this and demonstrating it to others feels essential. Indeed, I believe that our future depends on it.

And that is as good a point as any on which to finish. I encourage you to make use of the Commitment in all of your difficult conversations. I hope they will become better conversations as a result, with better outcomes!