McGill Hour (1/25/12): Diversity, collective intelligence, letter writing

Groupthink
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
“Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within groups of people. It is the mode of thinking that happens when the desire for harmony in a decision-making group overrides a realistic appraisal of alternatives. Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative ideas or viewpoints. Antecedent factors such as group cohesiveness, structural faults, and situational context play into the likelihood of whether or not groupthink will impact the decision-making process.”

“The primary socially negative cost of groupthink is the loss of individual creativity, uniqueness, and independent thinking.”

Rights talk: the impoverishment of political discourse
by Mary Ann Glendon
“Poor voter turnouts in the United States are, of course, mere symptoms of deeper problems, not least of which are the decline of broadly representative political parties, and the effect of the 'sound-bite' on serious and sustained political discussion. ... Across the political spectrum there is a growing realization that it has become increasingly difficult even to define critical questions, let alone debate and resolve them.”

“Though sound-bites do not permit much airing of issues, they seem tailor-made for strident language of rights. Rights talk itself is relatively impervious to the other more complex languages we still speak in less public contexts, but it seeps into them, carrying the rights mentality into spheres of American society where a sense of personal responsibility and of civic obligation traditionally have been nourished. An intemperate rhetoric of personal liberty in this way corrodes the social foundations on which individual freedom and security ultimately rests.”

by Sarah E. Igo
“Surely an awareness of these social facts altered citizens’ views of the American public and their place within it. But how? In what ways is a society changed by the very tools employed to represent it? In the modern United States, such tools were increasingly those of empirical social science: graphs, percentages, and curves professing faithfully to reveal the nation to its members.”

Polarization Dynamics and a Passion for Inclusion
by Tom Atlee - July 2004 (http://www.co-intelligence.org/PolarizationDynamics2.html)
“One of the most powerful factors is apparently our technologically empowered passion for fellowship, agreement and comfort. As we become more mobile and information becomes more available, we are increasingly moving into communities populated by others who share our lifestyle, including our political inclinations. Conservatives are increasingly surrounded by conservatives and liberals by liberals, to a point where we can easily say, for example, "I don't know anyone who is for (or against) the Iraq war." Furthermore, most of us on all sides are customizing our information sources to speak to our existing databases, ideologies and prejudices, until our views make such powerful sense to us that we end up seeing all contrary perspectives as extremely misguided if not evil or insane. ...”

“Consider this feedback loop: In a somewhat homogenous community, people hear arguments for (or against) President Bush, for example, repeated over and over, in a thousand different ways. New and different arguments get created, further strengthening people’s sense of righteous confidence. Manipulative propaganda then feeds on this sea of agreement and pumps it up emotionally. We find subtle competition beginning within groups, as people try to gain favor by being (or at least appearing) slightly more conservative (or liberal) than their ideological fellows -- which further divides the whole political culture collectively towards the extremes. As this Balkanized atmosphere of conformity grows, people with different or more moderate ideas increasingly remain silent. ...”
Dear Senator Corker: (and Alexander and Representative Cooper)

I recently attended a discussion on a pledge signed by 238 Representatives and 41 Senators to "ONE, oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rate for individuals and business; and TWO, oppose any net reduction or elimination of deductions and credits, unless matched dollar for dollar by further reducing tax rates."

I oppose the signing of such a pledge. I believe that it diminishes a legislator's ability and motivation to act in the best interests of community and country as circumstances change; I believe that it is disrespectful of a significant proportion of such a legislator's constituents. I hope that you will support colleagues who break this pledge, should they have signed it, because they conclude it was a mistake that compromised their service to our country. It is also very likely that I would be equally opposed to any pledge that unconditionally protected particular programs against cuts.

I suspect that I would agree on some important principles with many who signed the pledge, BUT this pledge smacks of legislators being in someone's pocket; media presentations of Mr. Norquist as the most powerful person in America are so very disheartening, regardless of his personal character. I applaud the decision by many who renounced this pledge and who never signed it to begin with. I believe our strength as a country is, in large part, due to our diversity, and I appreciate the many nuanced views of our citizenry and our representatives. The tax pledge, unfortunately, squelches diversity -- it significantly diminishes the advantages that stem from the nuanced opinions of those who signed it.

Breaking pledges is not something to be celebrated, but we allow, forgive and learn from divorce as one example; I support a legislator breaking this pledge for good of country. Also, please encourage your colleagues not to renew their signature on this pledge at election time, even if they have strong predispositions towards its philosophy. Surely, our representatives are capable of living by their principles without tying their own hands.

Thank you for your service to our country.

Respectfully,
Douglas H. Fisher

Dear Senator Corker (and Alexander and Representative Cooper):

Please support our President’s decision to reject TransCanada Corporation’s application for the Keystone Pipeline. There is serious doubt about the numbers of middle-class American jobs that this project would create, and there is no doubt that it would represent a long-term commitment to continued addiction to fossil fuels. These energy sources are the driver for global climate change; mountain top removal and hydraulic fracturing are tearing up our country’s natural beauty and threatening resources for its citizens.

Though I am against legislators tying their own hands by signing a tax pledge, I very much respect the impulse that our Federal government’s spending spree must be stopped, with reductions across many sectors, to include corporate bailouts, other-nation building and entitlements. Your stance against consumerism in our Federal government seems completely consistent with a stance against re-upping on oil and other fossil fuels through projects like the Keystone Pipeline.

As you consider the creative solutions that can arise from taking a firm stance against excessive government consumerism, I hope that you will advocate for firm stances against energy excess, particularly in fossil fuel use, and I hope that you will formulate, with your Congressional colleagues and the President, creative approaches to energy use that will benefit our country and its citizens.

Thank you for your service.

Respectfully,
Douglas H. Fisher

Is there interest in a custom of letter writing that respects disagreements, works to see other sides, and isn’t milquetoast?