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Public Focus

Effective Governance and Culture Wars: Strategies for Public Hospital Board Members

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In the four decades I have been working with public hospital governing boards, I have never seen the level of anxiety and divisiveness that we face as we enter 2024.

Wherever you turn, emotional battles are being fought over deeply felt differences on a wide range of issues.

Many of these battles are playing out in the boardrooms of hospitals and other healthcare organizations. Highly emotional “culture war” issues involving healthcare have recently been the subject of federal, state, and local laws, regulations, ordinances, and court decisions. Inevitably, these debates spill over into the board meetings of public hospitals. It is incumbent on public hospital board members to be able to address these issues effectively. Boards need to be able to acknowledge genuine differences of opinion and beliefs among board members, while making decisions that are ultimately grounded in sound science, good policies, and the best interests of patients and the community.

This can sometimes seem like an unachievable goal, so strongly are some cultural and ideological differences felt by many individuals. But I believe that for all but the most extreme viewpoints, there are strategies that can improve your ability to reach consensus with fellow board members even if you don’t share the same viewpoint. My goal with this article is not to address specific differences, but rather to help identify those strategies based on the recommendations of observers who have thought deeply about this subject.

Many Fronts in Today's Culture Wars

- Religious differences
- LGBTQ+ issues
- Abortion/reproductive rights
- Book-banning
- Climate change
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Immigration
- Voting rights
- Income disparities
- Racial and ethnic disparities
- Misinformation
- Vaccinations
- Social media impact
- Artificial intelligence

Strategies for Addressing “Culture War” Differences

New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a new book, *How to Know a Person*, which explores a range of communications techniques that can help address issues colored by cultural differences.¹ Brooks is a long-time panelist on a weekly feature of the PBS News Hour, where he articulates the more conservative perspective across the table from commentators such as the late pollster Mark Shields, who would express the more liberal viewpoint. No controversial subject or hot topic is off limits—but Brooks and his co-panelists have been able for years to consider them with an air of civility, respect, and humor.

In his book, Brooks offers the following advice: “There is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood.”

How can we accomplish this goal, especially in the boardroom where we may be considering controversial policies or decisions? In a recent interview during his book tour, Brooks said that “We happen to live in a time that is not normal. We need to make

1 David Brooks, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, Random House: New York, October 24, 2023.

connections under unfavorable circumstances.”² He believes that it is inevitable that we are going to run into hardcore viewpoints that differ from ours, across ideology, class, racial, and other boundaries. Too often there is blame, or criticism, underlying a conversation. You need to stand in another person’s place and try to truly listen to them, with civility and respect. “It is not naïve to lead with trust, with respect,” according to Brooks. “In every conversation, respect is like air. When it is present, nobody thinks about it. When it is absent, nobody thinks about anything else.”

Don’t let me leave you with the impression that I believe there are simple answers for every adversarial encounter. I’m not wearing blinders. Some people do hold extreme and intractable viewpoints on controversial issues and are likely beyond the reach of reasonable and civil discourse. (Hopefully you will have found ways to keep such people off your boards.) But there are fewer of those people than you would think from the excessive noise they are able to make and the turmoil they can cause, amplified by the social media megaphones available to them.

The Washington Post op-ed columnist Amanda Ripley recently said that too many people are inclined to “split the world into good and evil” rather than addressing emotional problems or issues with a more nuanced approach.³ Ripley maintains that this approach causes us to “lose touch with reality” and suggests that it may not be the way most people view the world even if they get caught up in the rhetoric of extreme positions. She quotes researchers who since 2008 have examined the contention when it comes to climate change, “there are only two groups—deniers and believers.” In fact, Ripley points out, for example, that research has demonstrated that there are no fewer than six groups that share different viewpoints on the issue, and each group has shifted in size over the years.

I do believe that true extremists are likely far fewer than we might think from watching the nightly news. Congress appears at first glance to be full of them, but when you look more carefully—when you take the time to “see” individuals—the superficial surface often drops away. Instead, you are able to discern what Brooks calls “the disagreement under the disagreement,” which may not be nearly as intractable as the rhetoric saved for the cameras. The fact is, Congress has for over a year been a model of bipartisanship, as it was for many years in the past. Apart from the hollow “victory” of dethroning a sitting House Speaker for the first time in history, Republicans on the far right have little or nothing to show for their extremism—no substantive legislative victories at all since the beginning of this Congress.⁴ Most of the important bills that were signed into law last year also fell short of ideal in the eyes of the most progressive Democrats. Instead,

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- 2 David Brooks, “[How to Know a Person](#),” presentation to The Commonwealth Club of California, November 18, 2023.
 - 3 Amanda Ripley, “Want to Make a Decision You’ll Regret? Split the World into Good and Evil,” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2024.
 - 4 See Marianna Sotomayor, “House GOP Fears Repeat of Last Year’s Fractiousness,” *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2024.

the legislation had the solid support of centrists in both parties who—whether their underlying philosophy was conservative or liberal—were able to reach consensus.

Guidelines to Minimize the Impact on Effective Governance

Public hospital board members should also be able to minimize the impact of the hardcore extremists. You may not be able to convert them to more reasonable ways to express their views, but by following a few simple guidelines you and your fellow board members may at least be able to surround them and minimize their impact on effective governance.

Some of the needed techniques can be drawn from the literature on international diplomacy. Contrary to popular belief, diplomacy is not simply “the art of saying ‘nice doggie’ until you can find a rock,” as Will Rogers once said. Rather, as former Secretary of State Colin Powell once put it, “Diplomacy is listening to what the other guy needs. Preserving your own position but listening to the other guy. You have to develop relationships with other people so when the tough times come, you can work together.”

At a practical level, many of us need to make changes in our own conversational style to improve our ability to work well with others. In a recent book, the British leadership consultant and dialogue coach Sarah Rozenhuler offers a number of suggestions for improving your conversational style, which she calls “simple changes in approach to create trust and openness.” Those include understanding that in many instances “it’s not what we say, it’s how we say it” and acknowledging that “beliefs can deaden dialogue.” Rozenhuler suggests, in dealing with people who do not share your viewpoint, you should “know your triggers.” By raising your “awareness of what pushes your buttons,” it will “help you create a six second pause” and “be more relaxed and less reactive.”

Steven Petrow is an award-winning journalist and book author who is best known for his *Washington Post* and *New York Times* essays on aging, health, and civility. Petrow maintains that “Silence speaks volumes...So many people have told me they don’t feel seen or heard—it’s a veritable ‘epidemic of invisibility’...so how do we begin to change these feelings of invisibility? Start listening, and I don’t mean pretending to listen. According to the U.S. Institute of Peace, ‘active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding.’”⁵

In the end, effectively addressing “culture war” differences is not just about coping with differing personal views among board members—it is one of the foundations of

**“America is fractured and living in a quiet crisis of disconnection. We’ve lost our trust in each other and in our institutions. Divided, we face uncertainty, social turmoil, and political gridlock, yet within every community lies an answer.”—
David Brooks**

5 Steven Petrow, “7 Lessons I’ll Rely on This New Year,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2024.

effective governance and implicates the legal requirements that should be followed by board members. The duty of loyalty is one of the core fiduciary duties of non-profit board members. In most cases, these duties should also extend to board members of public hospitals. The duty of loyalty is a duty of faithfulness. This means that board members must give undivided allegiance to the hospital or health system they govern when making decisions affecting them. In other words, directors cannot put personal interests above the interests of the hospital they govern.

Finally, when necessary, public hospital boards should identify and rely on calm, dispassionate internal leaders or external consultants to help guide deliberations away from the extremes. In today's healthcare industry, we are faced with the need to make decisions in dozens of hot-button areas where the cultural differences may appear at first glance to be vast. But those appearances are often deceiving. Regardless of the personal views of board members, it is both necessary and possible for you to reach consensus on many issues that will be in the best interests of the patients and communities your hospitals serve.

Key Board Takeaways

- Embrace diversity—don't vilify those with opposing opinions.
- Take time to get to know your fellow board members in circumstances that do not require immediate decisions.
- Seek diversity in board membership—including race, religion, and political ideology—while avoiding those with extreme or unyielding views on either end of the spectrum.
- Avoid appointing "single issue" board members.
- Schedule regular briefings at each board meeting on controversial issues that do not require an immediate decision, with discussion ground rules requiring respect and civility.
- If necessary, rely on calm, dispassionate leaders like counsel or external consultants to help guide your deliberations away from the extremes.
- Listen first—try to truly hear what the other person is saying without letting emotions get in the way.
- Don't personalize issues.
- Understand how technology is changing the way we communicate—try to schedule some informational sessions face to face rather than remotely, and without a lot of high-tech tools.

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