

Better Angels

DEPOLARIZING WITHIN:

BECOMING A BETTER ANGEL IN YOUR OWN WORLD (9.18.2019)

Part 1: Recognizing My Inner Polarizer

You can use the following questions to think about your inner polarizer. Circle a number.

1. How often do I find myself thinking about “those people” on the other political side without much regard for the variation among them?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or
never think
that way

I think
that way
all the
time

2. How often do I find myself assigning mainly self-serving or negative motives to the other group – and mainly positive motives to my group?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or
never do it

I do it all
the time

3. How often do I find myself focusing on the most extreme or outrageous ideas and people on the other side, thereby making it hard to see how a reasonable person could remain in that group?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or
never do it

I do it all
the time

4. How often do I find myself comparing the *worst people* on the other side with the *best people* on my side?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or
never do it

I do it all
the time

5. How often do I feel a “rush” of pleasure with friends when we ridicule those crazies on the other side?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or
never feel it

I feel it all
the time

6. Which of the following is closest to my overall or most common emotional attitude towards the majority of the people who support the other side? Circle the one closest to where you are now and then the one you aspire to, if they are different.
- Hate. They are enemies out to destroy the country.
 - Disdain. They are ignorant and should know better.
 - Pity. They are well meaning but duped.
 - Respect and appreciation. They make unique and necessary contributions.

Part 2: Strategies to Counteract My Inner Polarizer

Following are ways to offset polarizing thoughts and feelings when you notice them arising in you. These are ways to “edit the story” you tell yourself about people on the other political side. You may also have other strategies that work for you.

1. Challenge your stereotypes

- Stereotypes are how outsiders over-simplify, dismiss, lump together, and disparage the Other. Based on Better Angels red/blue workshops where we ask each side to identify the most common stereotypes they run into about their own side, these are the most common stereotypes:
 - Blues tend to believe that reds are racist, anti-immigrant, uncaring about those in need, homophobic, anti-woman, anti-science, bible thumpers.
 - Reds tend to believe that blues are arrogant/elitist, favor big government for its own sake, and are fiscally irresponsible, unpatriotic, anti-religious, against speech if it’s not “politically correct”, and hypersensitive “snowflakes.”
- Ways to counter stereotypes in your own thinking
 - Tell yourself that the other side is more varied than the stereotype.
 - Acknowledge that their political views and motivations are no doubt more complicated than the rhetoric you’ve been hearing.
 - Recognize that the life experiences informing their views are likely different from your own.
 - Develop relationships with a variety of people who differ from you politically. Relationships tend to undermine stereotypes.
 - Read and listen to thought leaders on the other side who present complex arguments.
 - If you want to go all out, you can work to develop an understanding of the history and current strands of thought on the other side.

2. Make depolarizing distinctions

- Distinguish between positions and people. You can believe that a viewpoint is completely wrong without believing that everyone who holds it is stupid or ill motivated.
- Distinguish between policies and core values. Policies are means to ends, ways to support or enact values, not the values themselves. People can differ sharply on policies like the role of government and have similar ultimate goals for the country and its people.
- Distinguish between inconsistency and hypocrisy. Resist the pull towards assuming that inconsistencies on the other side always reveal hypocrisy. Inconsistencies between stated values and actual behavior can also come from blind spots and from the inevitable tensions between competing values. Be reluctant to assign the label of hypocrite to large numbers of fellow citizens who disagree with you, even when their positions seem contradictory to you. (You seem inconsistent to them.)

Part 3: How to Talk about the Other Side in a Non-polarizing Way

1. What to avoid

- Using pejorative labels: (“wingnuts,” “bible thumpers,” “libtards,” “snowflakes”)
 - Using the phrase “they all” or its equivalent “The Democrats/Republicans.” These are the classic stereotyping phrases.
 - Painting all supporters of a politician with the same brush you use for the politician. If you go on a rant about a particular politician, make it clear that you are not putting all supporters into the same box. (“I’m talking about (so and so) right, and not everyone who voted for him/her.”)
2. Criticize the idea or the policy, not the motives of everyone who holds it. (Blue example: “Climate change denial is the riskiest idea I’ve seen in my lifetime because we’re running out of time to prevent lasting damage to the planet” versus “Climate change deniers care more about the fossil fuel industry than about the planet.” Red example: “Climate science is uncertain enough that I don’t think we should start overhauling our way of life” versus “Climate change supporters have a liberal agenda to over-regulate the economy and tax us to death.”)

3. **Criticize your own side too.** (“We are losing that group because we haven’t listened to them very well.” “Sometimes our leaders talk as if they have the final answer to.... (a complex problem), and I don’t think they do.”)
4. **Say something positive about the other side.** (“I read a liberal/conservative commentator who said something interesting about this.....”) or “I think their criticism has some validity even if I don’t agree with their solution.”
5. **Try this “eavesdropper” thought experiment**
 How would a rational and well-intentioned member of the other group feel when listening to you describe their side?
 - i. Respected (even if strongly disagreed with) or disrespected
 - ii. Understood (at least partly) or grossly misrepresented

Part 4: Skills for Depolarizing Conversations with Like-minded People

Listen, Acknowledge, Pivot, offer Perspective: LAPP

Listen for the other person’s values and emotions influencing the stereotyping, ridicule or contempt—often it’s from frustration, fear, worry for the country or groups in the country, or personal experiences of being put down by people on the other side. When there are strong emotions, there’s a deeper story there.

Acknowledge what you are hearing and agree with whatever you can agree with, usually the position or concern being shared, while avoiding agreeing with the stereotyping of people on the other side.

- “I hear you and I’m also very troubled by....”
- Blue to blue example: “I agree with you about Trump and where he is taking us.”
- Red to red example: “I’m with you that we have to get control of our borders.”

Pivot: After listening and then acknowledging at least once, signal a shift in your part of the conversation. Pivoting offers a context for why you are introducing another perspective. Be personal here, with I-statements. So, after another “I’m with you on...” say something about yourself that leads you to offer another perspective.

- “I’ve been realizing that I am so angry at the other side that I’ve stopped trying to understand them.”
- “I’ve become so worried about our country’s polarization that I’ve started to try to understand people on the other side better.”
- “Since taking a Better Angel workshop, I’ve been learning more about how (reds/blues) are thinking about these issues.”

- Sometimes it can be useful to ask permission to make a shift: “Can I throw in another perspective based on what I’ve been learning recently?”

When you pivot, don’t include your perspective on the issue or on the people on the other side. Think of pivot as signaling that you are going to make a left or right turn in your car; the actual turn comes later.

Perspective: Offer a depolarizing viewpoint. Here are five kinds of perspective comments:

1. **Variation: they don’t all think the same way.** “I’ve been learning that not everyone on the other side thinks that....”
2. **It’s more complicated.** “I see more complexity in why some people support/oppose that idea. It’s not just because they are uninformed.”
3. **Different backgrounds and experiences.** “It’s easy for me to judge them for supporting () but I’m aware that I’ve not been in their shoes.”
4. **Our side not perfect.** “I don’t agree with them on this, but our side has ignored the problem for too long.”
5. **Not useful to dismiss them.** (“They put us down and we put them down—and nothing’s working in this country. I’ve come to the conclusion that we’re going to have to understand and respect each other more if we’re going to solve our country’s problems.”)

Expect a Pushback and Repeat LAPP (after a “Yes, but” or “Wait a minute. Are you defending...?”)

- You may have to go through multiple rounds of LAPP skills before the other person takes in your depolarizing perspective.
- You may have to reassure the person that you are still a conservative/liberal (if that’s the case) and that you share many common values and concerns.
- If you sense no openness to your depolarizing perspective, summarize it one more time and move on. If you escalate, you’ll start polarizing with this person and undermine your message!

Final Thoughts: A Long-Term Perspective on Being a Depolarizer

1. Being a depolarizer is not just being high-minded. It's also being pragmatic about the future.

 - Many of our differences today have been around in some form since the founding of the country—and they are not going to disappear.
 - Our current whipsaw approach to polarized policy-making leads to undoing each side's policies every 4 years. The result is paralysis and cynicism about government. Quoting a Better Angels workshop participant, "Neither side is going to vanquish the other, so we better figure out how to get along and run the country together."

2. Your depolarizing influence in your social circles is apt to occur over time, not necessarily in any individual conversation or with every individual. If you come across as genuine and use your skills, people will remember what you said and think about it.
3. A long-term goal could be to be able to explain the other side's views in such a way that they would say, "You got it." This requires reading, listening, and suspending disbelief long enough to understand the worldviews and policy views of people you differ with. (That's why it's a long-term goal for those who decide to embrace it.)
4. If you really want to take a road less traveled, practice identifying your inner conservative side if you are a liberal, or your inner liberal side if you are a conservative. Make sure you see these as positive aspects of you, for example, the committed traditionalist in some areas for a liberal or the openness-to-rapid-change for a conservative. The lesson: the "Other" resides in me as part of what I value about myself.