



Managing Difficult Conversations Workshop for NH State Legislators

December 15, 2022 -- Concord, New Hampshire

Background

Braver Angels (braverangels.org/) is a national citizens movement **bringing Americans together to bridge the partisan divide** and strengthen our democratic republic. Braver Politics, an initiative of Braver Angels, fosters opportunities for elected officials and their staff to develop the skills and commitment to work together in goodwill across political differences. This report summarizes Braver Politics activities to date in New Hampshire and highlights the recent workshop attended by 100 state representatives.

Braver Politics in New Hampshire

In addition to ongoing NH alliance (chapter) meetings for citizens to discuss difficult issues in a structured, respectful way, **NH has been at the forefront of Braver Politics** initiatives for elected officials and staff including:

- In June 2021, two NH state senators participated in an online town hall on NH voting procedures and election laws.
- In Dec. 2021, 12 legislative leaders (6 from each party) participated in a “red-blue” workshop to better understand the experiences/beliefs of colleagues and discovered areas of commonality.
- In response to a request by the NH Secretary of State, Braver Angels developed and delivered eight online workshops in the spring of 2022 to help election officials manage difficult conversations with voters. 275 moderators, clerks, and supervisors of the checklist attended.
- In Sept. 2022, Braver Angels NH launched its first workshop at the municipal level. Lebanon city council and staff attended managing difficult conversations with constituents.
- In Nov. 2022, Braver Angels volunteers hosted a table during the new legislator orientation.

Managing Difficult Conversations with Colleagues

At the invitation of NH House Speaker Sherman Packard, Braver Angels volunteers conducted this interactive workshop as part of legislator continuing education. It was held in Representatives Hall at the State House on Thurs. Dec. 15, 2022 from 10 am – 12 pm. **More than 100 representatives participated.**

The lead facilitator was William Doherty, a Braver Angels founder and professor of family therapy at the University of Minnesota. He was assisted by two former NH state representatives, Douglass Teschner, Republican, and Patricia Higgins, Democrat. Brian Macdonald, a Braver Angels ambassador, provided logistical support on the day of the event.

Workshop Goals

1. That you can show colleagues who disagree with you that you have accurately heard them.
2. That you can express your views in a way that colleagues can hear even if they disagree.
3. That you can find areas of agreement or shared interest whenever possible.

Four Key Principles

1. Connect first, then share your view.
2. Aim for “accurate disagreement” instead of “distorted disagreement.”
3. Focus on policy and not underlying motives (assume good intentions unless proven otherwise).
4. Strive to be consistent.



Speaker Sherman Packard @NHSpeaker · 6h (1 of 2)

House Members attended a training session today with @braverangels, an organization that works with elected officials to help bring them together to bridge the partisan divide and engage in productive communication.



Three Skills: AAP (Acknowledge, Agree, Perspective)

1. Acknowledge the other person's view and the strength of their feelings about the issue.
2. Find something to agree with, if possible.
3. Offer your perspective using "I" statements, mentioning values, and avoiding negative labels.

Positive Legislator Engagement

Workshop participants were asked to partner with someone they did not know, ideally from the other political party. Using prompts related to funding police from opposing political perspectives, each pair practiced the three skills. After each practice session, a few participants shared their experience and observations with the full group. Many of the pairs became actively engaged with each other; for example, one shared with the group how they had come to agreement on the issue and another asked for a photo to be taken of them together.

Feedback Received

An evaluation was administered and comments included:

- ***"Learning to listen for points of agreement rather than how we disagree was a very good tip."***
- "Thanks for a few new tools and great workshop."
- "The workshop re-enforced many principles I continue to work on daily and gave me some new ways to implement them."
- ***"The practical exercises with a member of the other party made it much more authentic."***
- "I am happy to have this refresher today. Well done. Thank you!"
- "I deliberately partnered with a rep. of the other party and think that made the work more valuable. It would be good to practice skills with several other representatives in a neutral environment."
- "It was very well done. Speakers and problems were excellent."
- "Makes me 'stop and think' first."
- ***"We can work together if we only will listen to the opposing view."***

Press Coverage

The workshop was open to the public, and there were observers including media. This is one press article:

<https://indepthnh.org/2022/12/15/100-nh-lawmakers-hear-lesson-in-civility/>

The full workshop can be viewed online at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivZSUHckQ3Y>.

Next Steps

More than 30 legislators expressed interest in becoming involved further, and we hope to create a legislative working group to develop further activities and explore ways to support elected officials.

Leading the Way to a Better America

Polarization, bitterness, and rancor pervade our political system, and every citizen and elected official can lead in ways that better our country. By embracing **values of respect and dignity for all**, as well as an assumption that everyone has good intentions, there can be vigorous policy debates without demonizing those on the other side. NH legislators who embrace these principles will lead the way to better our state and country!

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