

# THE NCBA

## working creatively with prejudice and conflict

by Val Carpenter

During the past decade or so many of us have been involved in efforts to reduce and dismantle prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. What we've been discovering is that it's no easy task! Some of the difficulties we've encountered are how to help people uncover and then re-think their attitudes. How to avoid becoming immobilised by guilt, despair and hopelessness. How to avoid burn-out or opt-out. We've also noticed how much conflict plays a part in trying to create change.

The National Coalition Building Association offers a powerful model to use in bringing about changes in attitudes and to enable people of diverse backgrounds to work together toward shared goals. The model helps people reflect on current practice; increase their personal effectiveness; and it teaches concrete skills in interrupting prejudice and in conflict resolutions that are applicable to a variety of groups and institutions.

The model we use is based on the work of the United States organisation, the National Coalition Building Institute<sup>1</sup>, which works with groups throughout the world on some of the most volatile political and religious conflicts. The training methodology is upbeat and practical. The basic principles to the model are straightforward and easy to keep a hold of:

### **Guilt Is The Glue That Holds Prejudice In Place**

The first is, guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place. Some people are encouraged to think of themselves with pride, whilst others are not. It never increases personal effectiveness, neither does it make for decisive world changes, if we blame or target people for who they are. Much better, instead, to encourage people to claim their many identities with pride (for example: white, middle class, male) so they can then use their personal and group power effectively.

Additionally, it's important to teach people to overcome the feelings of guilt they feel when they uncover prejudice within themselves. None of us were born with those prejudices in place, they are the attitudes we pick up from parents, and adults adopt the views of their peers. Every piece of misinformation that we've been taught about another group is hurtful, and none of it is our fault.

1 NCBA works in association with the National Coalition Building Institute, Boston,



Similarly, we are not in control of the past, so it doesn't make sense to encourage people to get stuck in the treacherous mess of guilt because of past inaction around bigotry. However, we are in control of the future, and we can decide to act from now on. All that's needed to aid people in acting are clear strategies and, since none of us have been taught to make effective interventions, we need the opportunity to practice being effective.

Secondly, the thing that most consistently and reliably changes people's attitudes is when they hear a personal story of someone's experience of racism or anti-Semitism. We know this works from the kind of commitment to the issues people have who are personally close to, or who love someone who is a survivor of say, racism, or heterosexism.

Thirdly, the best way to help people become better advocates for others is to help them heal their own hurts. We all have experience of discrimination. It all counts! There is no such thing as a scale of prejudice and discrimination. It all hurts. This needs recognising and acknowledging, and healing before people can be ready to move on to become effective allies.

Finally, it's not enough to be sensitive around stereotypes. People need concrete skills and strategies. If all we can do in making interventions is to shut people up, or have them become defensive, we are at least doing something. However, this is not an effective way to help people think and to change. It does not treat them with respect, and it certainly doesn't make allies of them in the task of eradicating bigotry!

## **Welcome Conflict**

People need to re-think their attitude to conflict if they are to become effective in helping others sort it out. The usual reaction to the word is one of avoidance, threat and intimidation. There is very little real understanding that it can also be empowering, energising and a force for productive change.

Our work is particularly moving whenever we can reach both parties in a conflict situation. At a recent workshop in Northern Ireland a Republican and a Loyalist were taking seemingly incompatible positions in a discussion about the possibility of the withdrawal of British troops.

After mediation work it was clear to them both, and the rest of the participants, how much they had in common in terms of compatible interests underlying their positions. Both had lost dear ones in the struggles, and both recognised that a death on one side of the divide is no less pain than if it were their own loss. Both parties held each other in a warm embrace at the end of this piece of bridge building work. Having heard each other's stories, the whole workshop was in a position to move on to try and figure out how to communicate with each other.

## **Reaching Under The Rhetoric**

Many skills are required to be effective in coalition building work, and in particular being able to reach underneath the rhetoric to identify exactly what prevents groups from building lasting coalitions. I am grateful to the women's liberation movement and its constant reminder that the personal is political, that to examine the details of our relationships and understand why we fail at building them, might be the most politically significant act our generation could undertake.

Many groups come to coalition work after a history of tremendous isolation, and it frequently happens that they simply re-create that isolation within a coalition by opting out, sabotaging or leaving. We need to provide coalition forums to acquaint groups with each other in an uncharged atmosphere, and at the same time resist pressure to enlarge the coalition's agenda. This means creating an environment and using language that encourages people to think about new or controversial policies without feeling they must adopt them.

Our work is particularly moving whenever we can reach both the survivors of oppression and its perpetrators. The reason we can do this is related to the approach of NCBA. We do not blame or target people; our tone is light; we provide practical leadership skills; we believe everyone's experience of discrimination counts; and we recognise the need for emotional healing to shift attitudes and behaviour.

Our approach is most valuable and effective when it is institutionalised. That is, when a team of people from all parts of an organisation are trained to replicate the model in a range of ways. The first step is to participate in one of our workshops, call us in to your organisation to stage tailor-made training, or invite us to present a workshop at your conference.

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