

The Democracy Grid

By: Marcy Westerling

We rolled out sleeping bags on the carpet that covered the main space of Janice's bungalow in McMinnville, Oregon. Lori and Michelle had driven in from John Day, five hours east. I had driven south 90 minutes from Scappoose. We would head out in one car the next morning at 6 am, four women and one dog, heading three hours southwest to the final destination, a small coastal hamlet, Florence, Oregon. There we would hook up with rest of the ROP board and supporters, all driving in from their separate directions across Oregon, for a full day of discussions in a member's home.

Janice, our slumber party host, was also the board chair. She had started a local Human Dignity Group in the early nineties called Neighbors Talking to Neighbors. Janice taught middle school science. Someone once told me if you can communicate with middle school kids, you could communicate with anyone. Every organization can benefit from a middle school teacher helping develop their communication tools. Janice approached her organizing and her life with great deliberateness.

That Friday night our conversations revolved around how to communicate without being marginalized. It happened differently to each of us but we knew the dynamic well. Some negative descriptor was imposed on us to encourage our message to be rejected. We were "too new" to the community, "too young", "too suspect", and just "too different". Was there a way to frame our arguments to bypass automatic rejection?

In the car to the coast the next morning Janice laid out a very preliminary notion of a grid with key questions that could be used to evaluate issues, especially as Human Dignity Groups were increasingly being confronted with issues beyond their initial focus on gay and lesbian rights. There was enough interest in the car that brainstorming about this grid approach got added to the agenda of the Saturday board meeting. Someone asked: "What about Democracy? Could that be a common value we could use as a starting point?"

Janice, our middle school teacher was given the go ahead from the board to keep working on what came to be called the democracy grid. The daughter of a librarian, the McMinnville Public Library was Janice's first stop. As a seventh grade teacher, she checked out the World Book Encyclopedia (this was truly back in the day.) The World Book did not attempt to define democracy; rather it described key practices and features, such as a priority on public education, typically found in democratic countries. Another critical resource that Janice used was the four freedoms speech of President Franklin Roosevelt, particularly freedom from want. She also reviewed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the U.S. Constitution and used key quotes that illustrated the principles gleaned from the World Book Encyclopedia discussion of democracy.

There was a lot of tweaking of Janice's draft grid, mainly with staff. The grid was further fine-tuned at a board meeting in central Oregon that fall – we used it to evaluate some anticipated ballot measures from Bill Sizemore. The final result was a simple one-page

chart using democracy as a vehicle to break down the issues of the day. We had a Democracy Grid!

DEMOCRACY WORKSHEET				
Principles	#1 Inclusion of All	#2 Majority rule, minority rights	#3 Well-informed and educated	#4 Reasonable standard of living
Issues				

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1) Inclusion of all; equality for all.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” US Declaration of Independence.

2) Majority rule and minority rights.

“No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” 14th Amendment to the US Constitution.

3) Democracy requires well-educated and well-informed people who participate in the democratic process.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” 1st Amendment, US Constitution.

4) A reasonable standard of living – economic justice.

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age and other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by UN General Assembly (US included) 1948.

We blew it up poster size for large settings. While we imagined a Rotary Club as an ideal audience, it functioned just as well to ground ROP leadership or any gathering of strangers. It allowed us to lift hot-button issues off the front pages of the newspapers and reframe the tone to actual problem solving on the debate.

The Democracy Grid removed the focus from the messenger by providing a worksheet for analyzing politics in a way comfortable to most people. Gay Rights, Immigration, Taxes, Food Stamps, Abortion, Voting Rights, Campaign Finance Reform – the question became how does this hot-button issue fit in to the four points of the Democracy frame? Did the suggested policy enhance equality for all? Did it improve majority rule while protecting minority rights? Did the proposal allow for a well-informed public debate? Or did it make a reasonable standard of living for all more likely, so that everyone might participate in democratic decision-making?

There were (and always are) lots of contested issues fueling divisive debate nationally and locally. People often opt to side step these issues to maintain the ‘peace’. Or one side just stays quieter. The grid provided simple magic; the divisive threads were set aside and the apple-pie values we held in common took center stage. It was a framing, or reframing tool, that foiled the strategy of the right to divide and conquer.

Were people comfortable with gays and lesbians? Not the topic. The Democracy Grid presumed a range of discomforts existed and that these discomforts were not the challenge to democracy. Instead, the grid took the actual policy and had people discuss whether it would damage or improve democracy. The core question became, “Are you willing to weaken democracy because of your discomfort?”

The end point was to remind people of a shared compass oriented towards democracy. The grid often raised reasonable doubt -- a first -- in those polarized debates where the immediate response was to take a side or stay silent. The left, the right, the muddled middle were momentarily united around a neutral tool. Would they mull the range of perspectives prior to making policy decisions? Would they prioritize democracy over discomfort? All we knew is that tensions were defused as conversation happened. No concrete resolution was asked for in the public use of the grid. A new level of trust in discussion took place. Community leaders had a new tool to refer to.

The Grid worked best as a concept. Everyone loved hearing about it but no one relished facilitating its use. You never inserted a policy in and neatly walked your way through the four columns. The facilitator, the audience, we all got stuck at some point but that is a truism: these issues are not black and white and require such discussions, confusions,

laughter and space to be figured out, none of which happens well when people are screeching at each other. Tense, insulting debates engage the extremes while the muddled middle disappears to the sidelines.

In 1996 the ROP base and its opposition were mainly white people living in small town communities who saw everything through a white (Christian, heterosexual) lens. Our friends in the farm-worker movement said of the grid, "This is not a tool for us. We don't qualify for democracy, just like we don't qualify for drivers' licenses." Democracy was not language that they rallied around or even found relevant. Their response was a more bemused, "Say what?" Justice and human dignity were terms that crossed the race and cultural lines with ease. But our friends understood our mission to defuse and expose tense issues, to start deeper discussions, and to keep the door open long enough to build relationships for the long haul. They cheered our grid and us on.

The Democracy Grid sees intermittent use at the ROP but it stays a point of pride that sums us up, often mentioned when we describe ourselves. It is packed in our materials as we travel the state. Every election cycle we bring it out as board, members and staff draft positions on the current slate of ballot measures heading to a vote. Every voter guide we publish uses the grid frame to present our recommendations.

In the winter of 2012 the leadership of Columbia County Citizens for Human Dignity was struggling to deal with the issue of coal trains and climate change. As individuals CCCHD leaders and members were heavily involved in blocking proposed coal trains from traveling through the county en route to export but the CCCHD board as a group failed to see it as a Human Dignity Group issue until ROP staff showed up with a Democracy Grid in hand. They walked the Human Dignity Group through this new issue and the grid until the group had an 'aha' moment that allowed them to see that, of course, this was a human dignity issue. Like any good tool, it should be kept in easy reach.