

What Mediators Can Do to Strengthen Democracy (+50 Questions to Ask in Politics) by Kenneth Cloke

Kenneth Cloke is Director of the Center for Dispute Resolution, a world-recognized mediator, dialogue facilitator, conflict resolution systems designer, teacher and more. Given the political polarization, deep divisiveness and unrest rearing its head in the United States, he recently shared a detailed list of 10 actions that can help us transform autocratic, power-based political conflicts into democratic, collaborative efforts. In addition he offered up a set of 50 questions that can be used in political arguments with friends and family to help make true dialog possible, and more productive.

The following posts are sourced from Kenneth Cloke's Facebook page.

50 Questions You Can Ask Friends and Relatives in Political Arguments

In the aftermath of the election, when we will be talking with friends and relatives we may find ourselves disagreeing with, in addition to the substantive points we want to make, here are 50 questions we can ask to help make our conversations more interesting and productive.

1. What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so passionately about this issue?
2. Where do your beliefs come from? Family? Church? Work?
3. What do you think your beliefs might be if you had been born into a different family, religion, race, gender, class, or time?
4. What is at the heart of this issue, for you as an individual?
5. Why do you care so much about this issue?
6. Do you see any gray areas in the issue we are discussing, or ideas you find it difficult to define?
7. Do you have any mixed feelings, doubts, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding this issue that you would be willing to share?
8. Is there any part of this issue that you are not 100% certain of or would be willing to discuss and talk about?
9. What questions or points of curiosity do you have for people who have different views?
10. What are some of the key words or phrases that divide us?

11. What are some of the key words or phrases that unite us?
12. What are some “hot button” political words or phrases for you?
13. How would you define each of those words or phrases? What do they mean, suggest, or imply to you? Why? What experiences have you had with them?
14. What emotions do you experience, or get triggered by, with each set of words?
15. Do you think other definitions, meanings, experiences, or emotions are possible? How?
16. What do you think our conversation would be like if we decided not to use the words that divide us or trigger us emotionally? Are you willing to try, right now?
17. Even though we hold widely differing views, are there any concerns or ideas you think we may have in common?
18. What underlying values or ethical beliefs have led you to your current political beliefs?
19. Do the differences between our positions reveal any riddles, paradoxes, contradictions, or enigmas regarding this issue?
20. What facts, if proven to be true, might cause you to think differently?
21. Is it possible to view our differences as two sides of the same coin? If so, what unites them? What’s the coin?
22. Without discussing either of our preferred candidates, what principles do you believe the candidate you support stands for? Why are those principles important to you?
23. What are your goals for this election, other than to elect the candidate you support? Why are those goals important to you?
24. How might we extend those principles and goals to this conversation we are having right now?
25. What do these principles and goals require of us, in the way we treat each other, or how we talk to each other about the candidates we each support?
26. What forms of political argument or support do you feel are ineffective, counter-productive, or encourage you to resist?
27. What forms of political argument or support do you feel are effective, productive, or encourage you to think and learn from those you disagree with?
28. What ideals or principles do you think both candidates share?
29. What do you think will happen if our arguments or support become too adversarial or confrontational?
30. How might we work together to prevent that from happening?

31. Can you separate political issues from the people who hold them?
32. Is there anything positive or acknowledging you would be willing to say about the people on the other side of this issue?
33. Instead of focusing on the past, what would you like to see happen in the future? Why?
34. Do you think we are disagreeing about fundamental values, or over how to achieve them?
35. Is there any way that both of us could be right about different aspects of the issue? How?
36. What criteria could you use to decide which ideas or approaches work best?
37. What processes or ground rules could help us disagree more constructively?
38. Would it be possible to test our ideas in practice and see which work best? How might we do that?
39. What could be done to improve each of our ideas?
40. Could any of my ideas be incorporated into yours? How?
41. Is there any aspect of this issue that either of us have left out? Are there any other alternatives to what we are both saying?
42. What other information would be useful, or would you like to have in order to address some of these questions we have discussed?
43. What could we do to improve our process for disagreeing with each other in the future? For encouraging future dialogue? Would you be willing to do that together?
44. Do you think this has been a useful and constructive conversation? If so, how? If not, what could we do better?
45. What is one thing I could do that would make this conversation work better for you?
46. Would you like to know one thing you could do that would make it work better for me? Are you willing to do that next time we talk?
47. What made you willing to participate in this conversation? Why did you agree to talk with me, even though we disagree?
48. What did you learn from our conversation?
49. What would you like to do differently in the future if we disagree? How could we make our dialogue ongoing or more effective?
50. Do you think it would be useful to continue this conversation, to learn more from each other and what we each believe to be true

10 Actions We Can Take to Turn Adversarial, Autocratic, Power-Based Political Conflicts into Collaborative, Democratic, Interest-Based Social Problem Solving

We have taken democracy for granted, and allowed it to be undermined and chipped away by elected officials, for whom it is only a means of gaining status, wealth, and power. And we have come within a hair's breadth of losing it.

Imagine, for example, where we might be today if a mere handful of disciplined, heavily armed white supremacists had held Congress hostage, "arrested" a few recalcitrants, and blocked them from certifying the votes of the Electoral College; or if Trump had personally, as promised, led them into Congress; or if, as advised, he had ordered the arrest of Pence, Biden, Harris, and a few others, canceled the election as fraudulent, and declared martial law.

Because democracy is open, it is vulnerable to demagogues and autocrats; yet because it is open, it is also resilient, able to learn and improve, and responsive to popular wisdom. In order to avoid similar occurrences in the future, it now needs to evolve -- especially in its responses to conflict, and its ability to welcome diversity and dissent.

Key to doing so, is its' ability to turn adversarial, autocratic, win/lose, power- or rights-based political processes that automatically trigger political conflicts, into collaborative, democratic, win/win, interest-based ones that transform political conflicts into social problem solving.

The "whys" of doing so are now obvious; it is the "hows" we need to address. We can begin simply, and locally, with ten steps every aspiring mediator can take, starting with these:

1. Strengthen our skills and receive training in the full range of conflict resolution methods, including diverse forms of mediation, as well as dialogue and circle facilitation, consensus building, informal problem solving, collaborative negotiation, nonviolent communication, appreciative inquiry, restorative justice, and especially large group, multi-stakeholder, organizational, environmental, and public policy mediations, and conflict resolution systems design.
2. Join and become active in organizations that are working to shift political discourse, spark democratic dialogues, discuss difficult and dangerous issues, or influence political leadership -- organizations like Essential Partners, Living Room Conversations, Better Angels, National Coalition for Dialogue and Democracy, Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, Days of Dialogue, Everyday Democracy, Mediators Beyond Borders International (MBBI), and its initiative, Democracy Politics and Conflict Engagement (DPACE), and many others.
3. Email, call, or personally contact local city and county officials, including city managers, housing and planning departments, and offer to facilitate conflicted public meetings, mediate local political conflicts, or design a consensus building process, for example, to come up with solutions to homelessness.
4. Reach out to local activists and political organizations, like Black Lives Matter, Indivisible, Greenpeace, and others of all persuasions, and offer assistance in facilitating meetings and resolving internal conflicts; or make presentations, conduct trainings in

conflict resolution, or observe and mediate at demonstrations or coalition meetings with other groups.

5. Contact local law enforcement, including police and sheriffs departments, and offer to conduct quick morning briefings for officers on practical de-escalation, active listening, emotional calming, and mediation techniques; or to facilitate community meetings to discuss, for example, ways of prioritizing funding to reward efforts at de-escalation, non-violent communication, problem solving, hostage-style negotiations, mediation, and restorative justice; or to discuss community policing, review boards, and similar methods, as first responses to conflict.

6. Write articles, op-ed pieces, and letters to local and national newspapers and on social media, critiquing politically biased, adversarial, and propagandistic forms of political rhetoric from a conflict resolution perspective.

7. Start or support local school and community mediation programs; or volunteer to help train students, parents, teachers, and administrators in peer mediation; or offer to speak to leaders of civic and community organizations in conflict resolution approaches and techniques.

8. Contact local political leaders, elected officials, and political party representatives, and offer to facilitate meetings to redesign electoral processes so as to reduce opportunities for demagoguery, graft, dishonesty, and corruption; guarantee one person/one vote; reduce resort to violence and viciousness; and increase trust in election outcomes.

9. With city and county officials and community organizations, explore the local use of facilitated public planning, brainstorming, problem solving, and democratic decision-making practices, such as town hall meetings, citizen's assemblies, focus groups, community dialogues, citizen's juries, deliberative democracy, alternative forms of voting, sortition, public policy and environmental mediations, community-wide strategic planning, facilitated large group consensus building sessions, informal creative problem solving conversations, and similar processes.

10. Ask to appear before local city councils and boards of supervisors to support expanding, strengthening, institutionalizing, and increasing funding for collaborative, participative, mediative, and other interest-based processes, and encourage the sponsoring of widespread local community dialogues regarding difficult and divisive political issues, or empathy building circles, or community mediation programs, and of designing free, comprehensive, integrated conflict resolution systems at all levels of government.

None of these alone will be sufficient by themselves, yet each contains, in miniature, a core idea that can be scaled-up to higher levels, expanded, and supported in broader applications. None of these is beyond the ability of mediators, or outside our expertise, and none requires us to take sides on the substantive political issues over which people disagree, except in so far as our professional experience supports the values of diversity and equality.

Conflict resolution is an idea whose time has come, yet it is clear that implementing it will not be easy, quick, or without challenges. Shifting from adversarial, autocratic, power-based political conflicts requires a critical mass of local leaders, officials, and infrastructures with experience in collaborative, democratic, interest-based social problem solving. These, in turn, require higher order skills on our part. Developing and applying

these skills and making these ideas real is up to us, because there is no one else who can deliver them.

None of these ideas or programs presently exist, except in miniature, in small pockets, and in the hopes and hearts and minds of millions, who know it is possible. They live also in us, because we have done them countless times, over and over, and daily for decades -- with couples and families, schools and communities, litigators and adversaries, even warring parties, and we know that they work. All that is required now is for us to step up and prove it. The world is watching, hoping, and waiting.

For more check out this Awakin Call interview with Kenneth: From Conflict to Transcendence and Transformation.