



Podcast

Creating a level playing field for collaboration

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Episode 6 – Craig Fresley: Bridging divides – Neutral facilitation in politically charged conversations

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Episode description

Craig Freshley is an expert in neutral facilitation and guiding good group decisions. He shares his experiences with Make Shift Coffee Houses, designed to bridge divides between differing political views. He gives criteria and techniques for engaging diverse perspectives and creating a welcoming and safe conversation space. He emphasises the importance of a neutral venue, welcoming live music, and providing a set of ground rules. He describes the neutral facilitator as a 'referee' who ensures equitable participation. Additionally, Craig explains how he encourages involvement from underrepresented groups and addresses power imbalances in conversations and decision-making.

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Transcript

The story of Make Shift Coffee Houses

Tonnie van der Zouwen: In this episode, we meet Craig Freshley. Craig is an expert in meeting facilitation and collaboration and also good group decisions. And he's author of a bestselling book, *Together We Decide*. Welcome, Craig. I read your newsletters on how to get along there's much wisdom in it. So I will be very happy if you could share something of your wisdom and experiences, some stories of what works in creating a playing field for collaboration.

Craig: Thanks so much for inviting me, Tonnie. I love to tell stories about levelling the playing field for collaboration. Here's one. When President Trump was elected in 2016, I became very concerned about the political divide in our country here in the United States. And as a volunteer,



I had a meeting to try and bring Republicans and Democrats together to simply understand each other's perspectives. You know, it was clear that we were not understanding each other. How could you vote for that guy? How could you not vote for that guy? I was going to try to provide a place for each side to ask the other side that question and simply understand each other. Well, these events, they were called Make Shift Coffee Houses. They became quite popular. We had lots of them and we had one, actually we had several on this topic, but on this particular topic of guns.

We had probably four Make Shift Coffee Houses and at one particular time we were scheduled to do this at Bowdoin College, which is one of our lovely New England colleges here in Brunswick, Maine. And of course, we needed to have a level playing field. I wanted to have anti-gun people in the room and pro-gun people in. If we were to truly understand each other's points of view on this topic, we needed to hear from the pro-gun people. The anti-gun people are happy to come to an event like this. They come in droves to events like this. I had to make special efforts to get the pro-gun people in the room. Okay. And how did you do that? I called the executive director of the gun owners of Maine and I tried, it took a few times to get an audience with him, but when I finally did, I made my case. We want to hear from you people. I want to give you a chance to tell your side of the story and provide a chance for you to listen to the other side. And that's all it's about. We don't need to decide who's right or who's wrong. We're not going to get angry at each other. We just want to understand each other. And after some explanation, he said, how do I know it's not a trap?

I knew it wasn't a trap. I was being a neutral facilitator. This was not a leftist contrived event to try and bait or trap him or his pro-gun people. However, there was a severe skepticism on his part. And the very first thing I had to do to level the playing field was to persuade him and other gun owners that this was not a trap. And one way I did that was I encouraged him to talk to other people that had been to my events, talk to other Republicans and gun owners who have been to Make Shift Coffee Houses events. And they will tell you that I served as a neutral facilitator. Nobody got trapped or felt defensive. Yeah, that was my main argument and my main persuasion was to try and provide for him some security that I was personally gonna make sure that he did not feel trapped. Now, as the story ends, he himself did not come to the session that I invited him to, but he did do as I suggested and promoted the event among gun owners of Maine. And we had a number of gun owners show up and we heard some fabulous stories on the pro side for gun ownership here in the state of Maine.

Facilitating Make Shift Coffee Houses

So what happened in the session? You can look this up and learn about it. The address is makeshiftcoffeehouse.com. dot com all one word Make Shift Coffee House dot com we had about 40 in-person sessions all over Maine some out of Maine all had a local sponsor each one maybe a sponsored by a church or a civic group or just a community-based group and we had them in school cafeterias and in public libraries all kinds of places, neutral places though. the underlying criteria was it has to be a place that anybody will feel safe walking into. And this is why school cafeterias and public libraries are the best. We think of them as neutral civic places, town and city halls often have public meeting spaces. These are the places we had them. Sometimes we had as little as 12 to 20. Oftentimes we had 50, 70. The largest one we had was 280 people at the University of New England. So that's another thing worth mentioning. I'm gonna say about a quarter of them were on college campuses, another neutral space for sharing



of ideas. We always had live music. We always served food and coffee to give it a coffee house environment. We encouraged people to sit with and talk to people that they don't know, strike up conversations with strangers. And I would kind of call the group together and explain some simple ground rules.

Engaging Diverse Perspectives in Discussions

And there would always be a central question. Probably with the guns one that we had, the question was something like, why do you favor or why are you opposed to gun ownership? Some very open-ended question does not elicit a yes or no answer. The question is phrased in a way that elicits a colorful variety of responses, open-ended on purpose, but yet on the topic of guns. The question is also framed in a very neutral way. Our poster did not say, come to a forum about gun control. Right? You see it immediately. The pro-gun people are not going to come to a forum about gun control. Our poster said, let's talk about guns. That was the headline. And then the next line was say, if you favor gun freedom, come tell us why. If you favor gun control, come tell us why. This is a chance to explain yourself to others and hear from your neighbors. Every sentence had a counter-sentence, very neutral. And I asked the question and a volunteer answers the question. And then another somebody else answers the question and somebody else answers the question. And I walk around the floor with a microphone, moderating the discussion and letting people tell their stories.

Tonnie: It is a group, a discussion in plenary or people sitting in smaller groups or...

Craig: They're usually sitting in rounds. We try to make it like a cafe. tables of four to six are ideal. Tables of four to six with enough space for me to walk between them with a microphone.

A welcoming environment: live music, food and coffee; and no charge

Tonnie: What do people do at the table? Craig: Well, when they arrive, We have live music playing. So as people arrive, they are greeted at the door, welcome to the Make Shift Coffee House. They can even hear the music from the hallway as they come in. And this is not an accident. I think that music helps level the playing field for collaboration. I have no doubt about that because music is a human thing that we have in common. Almost all of us love music in one form or another. We can certainly relate to it, and it gives us something to talk about. It instantly gives us something in common. So, live music, we always called for volunteers. That was typically a responsibility of the sponsor. Find a local musician who's willing to just play background music. And we've had high school bands and we've had single fiddle players and lute players and all kinds of different musicians. It's been wonderful. There's also a spread of food, right? There's like a coffee house. There's coffee, there's tea. Depending on the time of day, there might be cheese and crackers or breads or hummus and vegetables, or maybe there's pastries or bagels. No charge, never a charge to come to a Make Shift Coffee house. All are welcome. And you're greeted at the door, and you're encouraged to make yourself at home, help yourself to the food, and find a table and chat with someone.

Moderating conversations: Techniques and strategies

Sometimes we hand people a question on a piece of paper as they walk in. And we might prompt them to find somebody to start a conversation on this question. And people appreciate that structure. it gives them an opening. It gives them a reason to talk to the person that they're



sitting next to. After 10 or 15 minutes or so, then I will stop the music and do a plenary session for maybe 40 minutes and then we will break and I will ask the music to start again and I will ask people to have informal conversations while we have a break. Sometimes if it's apparent to me that maybe four or five subtopics have arisen during the plenary conversation I will very quickly make four cards. I have the card stock ready to go with a mark and I have little gadgets that hold the sign on the table. You know what I mean? It's the you might find in a restaurant or a banquet. I have those ready to go. And as some topics arrive, I make the cards. I've probably made the cards while people are talking. And then right before the break, I pull out the cards and I say, if you want to talk more specifically about the First Amendment, come to this table. If you want to talk specifically about gun legislation for criminals to rule out criminals, talk at this table. If you want to talk about gun training, safety training, come to this table and I'll physically walk over and put the card on the table. And that's another way that I provide people with a little structure during the break. If you don't know anybody there, you can wander towards the table. I also tell people if somebody said something in the previous 40 minutes in the plenary session that you want to ask them more about, this is your chance. If you are a Democrat and you want to ask a Republican a question, go ask them. This is your chance. And that's how I encourage people to spend their time during the break.

It's usually a kind of a long break and then I will call people back together again for a final plenary. What did you learn at the break? Any final thoughts? Thanks to the band. Thanks to the sponsor. Thanks everybody. And then the band starts for a third time and we don't kick people out of the room. We let them talk

Inclusivity and encouraging participation

Tonnie: How did people know who's a Republican or who is a Democrat? Did they wear badges or something? Craig: That is a great question. Some people hold events like this and they ask people to wear badges. Red or blue is very typical in our country for Democrats and Republicans. We, and I had an advisory board for the Make Shift Coffee House. I didn't make all the decisions myself. And we as a board decided not to do that. We let people self-identify, and sometimes I would ask people, it sounds like you're a Democrat or I would be very direct to tell us if you're a Democrat or Republican, why, but I would ask people to self-identify in conversation. And I don't want anybody to feel left out.

Tonnie: How did people feel free to talk? I can imagine that some of them may be a little bit aggressive or others may be a little bit shy to speak up. What was your experience?

Craig: Of course, if you have a room of 80 people, you're going to have from shy to aggressive and everything in between. So you're asking a great question. How do I moderate the aggressive and the shy and moderate is a fantastic word in this setting because, we're talking about the extremes, right? The extreme sort of personalities and and we want to literally moderate them, bring them closer to the middle and hear them both, but in a moderate way.

Advance messaging, expectation management before the meeting

Yeah, so how do we do that? It starts way before they even get in the door with the advanced messaging. With these Make Shift Coffee Houses and with all meetings that I facilitate, it's very important to me that the expectation be clear and accurate right from the get-go. I want people



in the meeting who are in the right meeting, you know, who want to be there for that reason. The purpose of a Make Shift Coffee House is to understand each other's political perspectives. That's like the stated purpose. And we tell people that on the posters and all the advance messaging. So if you're shy, come anyway. Nobody's gonna beat you up or try to persuade you of anything. You don't even have to speak up. I mean, we're very clear about this. You can come and just listen if you you're not gonna be made to talk. You're not gonna be put on the spot. We are doing all kinds of things, sending messages to that shy person that you're gonna be okay here. You're not gonna be pushed out of your comfort zone. That's what the shy person wants to know. I'm not gonna be handed the mic. So I do that. And for the aggressive person, I'm sending advanced messages that...

Neutral, professional facilitation

A, this is going to be professionally facilitated and moderated. This is not a meeting that you're going to be able to come and take over. And this is a meeting where if you want to persuade the other side that you're right, if you want to proselytize your position, this is not the meeting for you. This meeting is simply to understand each other's views. So I'm doing lots of advanced messaging to get people in the room. Sometimes I have to do special outreach to the shy. so then when we're in the room, I review a set of ground rules. At the start of the meeting, I explain, here's how it's gonna work. And one of the things I explain is I'm the moderator and I'm going to make sure that there are room for all views. I'm always looking for new hands. I want to give everybody in this room a chance to speak. How about we let everybody speak once before anybody speaks twice. and if I say it like that at the beginning, of course there's a certain logic in that and everybody agrees to it. And then I enforce it. And when I see the hands go up, I'm keeping track. I'm a skilled facilitator. I know if somebody's spoken once already, you know, when I'm at my best. And I skip over those people and I'm always looking for new hands and sometimes I have to look right at the guy who's put his hand up the third time and I have to say yeah I see your hand but we've heard from you already let me hear from some other voices and maybe we'll have a chance to get back to you just hold on a sec. I'm maintaining rapport with him I don't want to lose him I don't want to be my enemy but I want him to know that he's got to wait his turn you know.

So I go over ground rules that's not the only ground rule another ground rule is speak from your experience. There are no special experts in this room. We all have experiences. We are all experts with our own experience. You you can share something about theory or morality or even science and people can argue with each of those three things. Nobody can argue with your experience. Nobody can argue with your story. It's your story. I want to hear you tell your story in this meeting. And that levels the playing field, Tonnie, because we are all equal experts on our own stories.

And sometimes I have dignitaries join these things. the mayor will come or the legislators, you know, members of our House and Senate will come. Tonnie: Very important people. Craig: OK, they are very important people, but at a Make Shift Coffee House, they are no and more important than any other person in the room. do not introduce them. I do not call any special attention to them. I don't let them speak more than anybody else because each got an experience to draw from. So that's another ground rule that I explain at the start of the meeting. OK. you already mentioned a lot of criteria and things that you do or not do to create a level playing field. And it's a great example because I get a view of what happens in the room.



Challenges in stakeholder engagement; It takes a Republican to invite Republicans

Tonnie: Is there something else you would like to... You mentioned inclusiveness. For instance, I work with the Large Scale intervention approach and we want to invite the whole system of stakeholders, and that often the people in need you really actually work for, they are hard to get into the room. They are the most difficult. So I'm talking about the underbound people, the students, the normal citizens, the patients, the clients, the professionals, the experts, the researchers, that's no problem. So how do you get them in?

Craig: Well, that is a huge challenge and so often overlooked by people who design stakeholder input processes. We can do a really good job of facilitating the meeting expertly and writing a great report and coming to a really good conclusion based on what we heard in the room. But you know what? The people in the room were not at all representative of the people who will be impacted by the decision. So getting the right people in the room is critical. It was my biggest challenge in running the Make Shift Coffee Houses. I'm a Democrat. I know a lot of Democrats. Getting Democrats in the room was easy. Democrats wanted to have the conversation. Getting Republicans in the room was a real challenge for me. And the way I did it was I found Republican champions. I found people in the Republican party who were sympathetic to my cause, who agreed, yeah, that makes sense. Let's get in a room and talk to each other. And I encouraged those people to invite other Republicans. That's how you get Republicans to come to a meeting is you get a Republican to invite them. And substitute the word Republican for anything you want. champions, insiders inviting people is what works. and that's critical.

The importance of ground rule in decision making

You asked me what are some other things that I might consider from my experience, these meetings, Make Shift Coffee Houses, were for the purpose of understanding each other's political views. So we didn't have to agree to anything. We didn't have to decide anything. These were information sharing meetings. But most of my professional work, is facilitating meetings where they do have to make a decision, where it's a board of directors or a town council or a school board or a corporate management team or has to to make a decision. And there, too, we want to provide a a level playing field. Right. And this is what this is what Robert's Rules of Order does. The manual that we use here in the United States for a vast majority of town and city council meetings and our state legislators, many of them use a version of it. if you have a group of people that not only wanna share information, but need to actually make a decision.

A key ingredient to a level playing field is neutral facilitation. Because absent neutral facilitation, the majority party will be the facilitator, right? The majority party gets to pick the chair, the chair runs the meeting, the chair calls on whoever they want. Robert made a set of rules to at least provide some guidelines and boundaries for that chair. Robert's rules of order protect the minority. They try to give the minority a voice and a deliberate process, a dependable process, even when the majority gets to pip the chair, even when the majority is in power, that's the magic of Robert's Rules and Order. It actually levels the playing field. And I'm going to argue that all such processes level the playing field. If you're, let's say, a nonprofit board of directors



without process, without guidelines about the behavior of the chair and protocols. It's a very unlevel playing field that the chair gets to decide everything. Here's my rule of thumb. In most cases, documentation and honoring decision making processes helps create a level playing field. That's how the minority gets a voice is because there are processes put in place to limit the authority of the majority. Now oftentimes that goes so far as to have a neutral facilitator whose job it is to make sure that the field is level and stays level throughout the whole process. That's that person's job. You want to stick with the level field analogy. Let's call that person the referee. A set of rules and a referee.

Tonnie: I think you are invited as a neutral facilitator when there's trouble. Am right? Craig: Not always. I am often invited when there's trouble. You know, the town will call me when they know that there's a big controversy coming, when they know that people are passionate on both sides. I'll give you a quick example. And this may be of interest to your European and global listeners. You know, we have a love-hate relationship here in the United States with religion and separation of church and state.

And we have a community here which has for many years sponsored Christmas decorations and a Christmas event in the town center with a choir that sings religious hymns and a Christmas tree and other Christian symbolism. But there's controversy. People have said, wait a minute.

why not call it a secular holiday event, It's not right that it should be a Christian event. We have Jews in our community. We have Muslims in our community. And there became quite a large controversy. The town called me and asked me to facilitate a community meeting so that we could talk about this and so that the sides could hear each other. So that's an example of, yeah, I am often called when there's a problem, a tension, a challenge. But I'm also called, Tonnie, many times, just even when there's not a challenge, but to come up with creative solutions to a problem. You know, that's what I get asked a lot to do strategic planning. just help us make a plan for the next five years. I do that a lot. I help groups make lots of good decisions, even in the absence of a crisis or a tension. Tonnie: OK. And you wrote a book about it. Craig: my book is called Together We Decide an essential guide for making good group decisions.

Tonnie: So, thank you, Greg. As a checkout, is there anything you would like to share right now?

Craig: One thing I have learned more and more as a facilitator that levelling the playing field doesn't just mean providing equal opportunity. We've seen the diagram of the three people at the fence of different heights and we put boxes under them to help them see over the fence.

Provide extra encouragement to play to those who need it

It illustrates the difference between simply providing equal opportunity and actually providing assistance to those who need it. And sometimes in a meeting, I do more than just provide equal opportunity, right? Equal opportunity is saying, as the facilitator, is there anybody that would like to answer this question? But I find that I often go a next step and I pause and I say, is there anyone who has not yet spoken up that would like to answer this question? And I look around the room and honest to God, I look especially at the women and I am trying to encourage women to speak up because as a, trend as a, in terms of a global observation. I know that I'm being categorical here and I could get criticized for it, but I'm speaking from my experience. And we know this, there's evidence to support it. Women are less likely to speak up in meetings than



men. And I'm not talking about all women in all meetings. Of course not. But the same can be said for other minorities, people of color, people of different income, you know, I can see the power imbalance or be aware of a potential power imbalance in the room. And I think it's okay for me to take like extra steps to support those whom I suspect will be less likely to speak. I think that's how I'd like to say it. So not only am I providing equal opportunity to play on this level playing field, I'm providing extra encouragement to play on this level playing field to those who I suspect are normally not so apt to play.

Tonnie: OK, thank you. That's beautiful ending of this podcast. Thank you, Craig.

Craig: Thank you very much, Tonnie. This has been so much fun. It's an honor to be on your podcast.