

## **Rule #10: Numbers Count**

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”  
- Margaret Mead*

*“What counts is that there is a fledgling group struggling to take the return of civility one step at a time.”  
- Jane Ely, editorial columnist for the Houston Chronicle, writing about the Institute for Civility in Government.*

It is unfortunate that we must organize to promote civility, but the political climate is such that organizing those who value civility to increase the impact of their voices is necessary. The truth is that history demonstrates that within the human community, we do not automatically or necessarily receive what is right, fair, or desirable. What we may receive, however, are those things for which we are willing to organize and work together.

Senior politicians, who were active in the governing process years ago, remember that process as one characterized by vigorous debate, followed by laughter and camaraderie when the day’s work was done. People who could not agree politically about much except that democracy was valuable—meant to be appreciated, cultivated, and protected—nonetheless shared friendship and respect. Today too many people seem willing to relegate the civility inherent in those earlier dynamics to the dustbin of fond memories from yesteryear, back in the good old days.

Civility is not an anachronism, however, as the Institute’s members demonstrate by joining. The existence of the Institute demonstrates that civility is an important priority and that the way we make decisions is often as important as the decisions that result and the positions that we take. One voice can have a powerful effect, but more voices joined together can have an even *greater* impact. The issues, positions, and candidates that receive the most attention from the media, the public and our elected officials are often the ones that have the most popular support. For groups like the Institute, this means the more members an organization has, the greater the possibility of having an impact.

### *Reclaiming Civility in the Public Square: 10 Rules that Work*

Institute membership demonstrates belief in civility as a tangible goal. While individual members have their opinions and take positions on issues, the Institute does not. Nor does it support or oppose anyone running for office. What the Institute does through its members is build a presence for civility within the community dynamic. Individually a person who values civility might be discouraged and inclined to give up the effort. Together with other members organized into the Institute, however, people find the encouragement and the support necessary to continue seeking and fostering civility for everyone. There was a reason Jesus sent the disciples out in twos! Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement had an impact because of the numbers of people who were willing to participate. Cesar Chavez and the farm workers also received attention because of the numbers involved with their activities. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, massive demonstrations by immigrants in the U.S. responding to legislation proposed in Congress have focused attention on the need for comprehensive reform of U.S. immigration laws. Numbers count.

The more people who are involved in the Institute, the stronger its influence becomes. Numbers count in many ways. Obviously, numbers of votes and the numbers of people holding an opinion matter. Through our individual and collective votes we determine who will be elected. Through our individual and collective voices, we also inform those in power about issues and positions that we consider important. Each person who joins the Institute increases the likelihood of media coverage in their local community concerning civility. Each provides additional opportunities to catch the attention of elected officials. Each member strengthens the presence of the Institute and thereby improves the tone of community life. Growth in Institute membership has resulted in the Institute's greater ability to facilitate public dialogue among people who think differently, to teach respect and to increase civility in the governing process.

### **Rep. Bill Archer's Town Hall Meeting**

*The following story from Cassandra Dahnke demonstrates the powerful effect of many people responding in concert.*

For many years I have tried to attend as many town hall and community meetings as I can. These are meetings that Congressional Representatives schedule back home in their districts as a way to

*Dahnke/Spath/Bowling*

meet with their constituents. I do not go to the meetings to speak, but rather to listen to what is being said. My goal is to find out what the Representatives are hearing from concerned citizens and to listen to the tone of the meetings. Because I used to be in Representative Bill Archer's district, I went to many of his meetings. Some of these meetings were quite small, but most drew between 200 and 500 participants.

In the early spring after the Republican Party had just won the majority in Congress in the fall of 1994, I attended one of Representative Bill Archer's town hall meetings that was extremely well attended. Representative Archer had just become the new chair of the House Ways and Means committee, an important position. At one point fairly early in the meeting, a woman stood up and Representative Archer called on her. She proceeded to loudly and ferociously berate him because a few weeks earlier he had met with then President Clinton regarding some budget issues. This meeting had received quite a bit of publicity across the country as Representative Archer had gone to meet with the President alone, on his own initiative and not as a part of the Republican House Leadership's strategy. I am not even sure the House leadership knew about the meeting before it took place.

The woman angrily complained to Representative Archer, "Don't you know that the Republicans have FINALLY won the majority after all these years?" She demanded to know how he had dared to go and talk to the president--a DEMOCRAT! She insisted that now was the chance Republicans had been waiting for to do what THEY wanted to do regarding national policy. Representative Archer literally could not get a word in edgewise as this woman continued to scold him for nearly five minutes. Finally, she quit talking and he was able to respond to her specific concerns. Rather than responding to what those present perceived as a personal attack on him and his judgment, he calmly assured her he was aware of the Republican majority. He then focused on the budget issues at hand that all parties needed to address. His response, which addressed the issues rather than challenging the woman for the uncivil way in which she presented her concerns, was appropriate under the circumstances. Had Representative Archer responded by directly challenging her behavior, he would have distracted attention from the legislative issue being discussed; possibly been seen as responding by way of a personal attack—uncivil behavior of a different sort; and perhaps escalated the argument rather than fostering further dialogue. His approach was to focus on issues, not personalities. By responding calmly and not being drawn into a shouting match or name calling, he demonstrated civility by his example.

*Reclaiming Civility in the Public Square: 10 Rules that Work*

Shortly after this exchange, Rep. Archer called on another woman, and she stood up near the front of the room. Although I was sitting near the back, I could see that the second woman was shaking. Perhaps she was shaking because she was nervous, but I think it is far more likely that she was so angry she was simply trembling with indignation. She said, “Excuse me. I was under the impression this was a town hall meeting and not a Republican rally. I came here to discuss issues. I am a Democrat. That woman (pointing to the woman who had berated Representative Archer’s judgment earlier) has just called me every name in the book, and I am highly offended.” She sat down. Representative Archer responded, thanking the woman for her presence. He emphasized that this was indeed intended as a town hall meeting at which everyone was welcome to speak and he welcomed her input. He then moved on to others who had questions. After a short while, the second woman stood up and left the meeting, perhaps too upset to stay. As she left, several people in the crowd broke out in loud applause and catcalls. They yelled “Good riddance!” and “Let the door hit you on the way out!” and other similar ugly remarks.

I sat quietly for another 30 to 45 minutes through the remainder of the meeting. Near the end I raised my hand, and Representative Archer called on me. I stood up and said, “Bill, you know me, and you know I come to a lot of your town hall meetings to listen to what folks have to say. I’ve never said anything, but I cannot let this one go by. I want you to know that for every person who is angry at you for having spoken with the President about the budget, I believe many more of us are simply thankful that you are focusing on the problem and are working with others to try and get something done.” To my surprise, as I sat back down, the audience burst into loud and sustained applause.

Prior to my comments and the response of those attending the meeting, everyone in that room, including Representative Archer, would probably have left the meeting with the impression that divisive, ugly, and rude behavior is perfectly acceptable, and that those who had displayed it were probably in the majority. After all, the actions of those half dozen people who had loudly and rudely celebrated the departure of the second woman who spoke had seemingly gone unchallenged. How was anyone to know these individuals did not speak for the majority of those present? However, when I spoke up, others who shared my view expressed their feelings with their applause. Everyone came away with a very different understanding--

*Dahnke/Spath/Bowling*

a belief that the majority of those present DID want to cooperate and work through problems, and DIDN'T want to be rude or antagonistic. Others at the meeting who agreed with me left knowing many who were there valued civility and constructive action--a very different feeling than they would have had if no one had responded when I spoke up. The response from many to my comments created a powerful impression. Numbers count!

**Rev. Cassandra Dahnke**

*Knowing our own beliefs is important. So is listening with respect to the beliefs of others. When individual voices speak with civility in concert with many other such voices, the effect is powerful indeed.*