

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



Ideal Negotiations Through Pragmatism (Social Contract, Part 8)

Season 6, Episode 8)– originally released 1 June 2021

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

So in the previous three episodes, I've come up with 12 principles that would guide our efforts to renegotiate social contracts. These are principles focused in four directions: from the collective perspective to the individual, from the individual to the collective, from the collective to the environment and among individuals within or outside collectives.

And these principles are of two characters. There's a binary good, bad nature in which we say that 'more is better.' But then there's an associated spectrum of choices on how you enact the principle. For this final episode, I now turn to a different problem. How do we actually navigate all of these tensions and maximize the opportunity for solutions when we get people to come to the table?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

So now we're talking about how to involve people coming to the table for what is potentially going to be a persistent or a constant or recurring type of a negotiation. And that's because there's no possible policy, regulation, or solution that's going to be permanent. I showed that in the previous episode where I brought dialectic change into the fore. And we're talking about that even along a single dimension where you have a strong difference of opinion between one side or another, you have to come to a synthesis. That synthesis isn't going to be permanent because conditions will change and the synthesis is going to break. And in a similar way, when we're talking about 12 principles and each principle has its own tensions associated with it? [They] could be applied in any particular social issue, whether it's what one considers to be just what one considers to be fair [or] what considers to be appropriate responsibilities. They're going to not only be a point of tension between multiple parties, they're also going to be dynamic. They're going to change over time. A negotiated solution that works well for now, a couple of years down the road may have to be revisited and we have to do this all over again.

I mean, basically, we have to once again bring people to the table who already probably we're not happy about having to conduct a negotiation with people that they strongly disagree with. And to do this on a recurring basis, that's going to be difficult. I think the the wrong answer is what we tend to resort to sometimes, I think, which is where the parties who are going to be involved in this negotiation look to try to take what is a complicated or very, very complex issue and nail it down to a single dimensional issue. Where it's basically one point of tension that's going to more or less define the boundary between the "us" and the "them." What we end up finding out is that because of that, not everybody actually frames the issue the way that we frame it, as much as we like to use the binary metaphor to describe, say, a moral issue. It's how we want to frame an issue so that it as as simple to

deal with as possible, given its complexity--we'll narrow it down to a binary when in reality we're dealing with multiple binaries. This is where now the framing of the issue becomes of central importance. And this is where I think we tend to fail, which is why they have so much difficulty of getting people to the table.

Now I'm going to depart from the typical binary metaphor. I'm going to talk in terms of eyesight. The way that humans perceive color is through cones inside the eye that basically are there to detect particular colors. And the color that you see is the combination of what the cones themselves observe, because the cones can only see a couple of colors. So we have red-green cones and we have blue-yellow cones. Red-green and blue-yellow cones are just basically very different structures. And both sets of cones need to be working so you can see every color in the spectrum. But of course, to a cone that sees the world only in red and green, it is not possible to understand blue and yellow and vice versa.

You know, this is a way of thinking about how we frame problems very, very differently that make it very difficult for us to see the other side's perspective or even be able to talk apples to apples. Because if I'm in a collective that sees things in terms of red and green, and let's say that my particular collective sees green as good and red as bad, then when I'm having a conversation with a blue-yellow cone, we're not talking the same language. We're talking past each other.

So now let's look at things from the other person's perspective where everything is blue and yellow. And let's say that blue is good and yellow is bad. According to that cone, they can't see red [and] do not understand red. They may be accusing us of being yellow. And we don't understand what yellow means because we don't speak yellow. The different cones, they sort of frame the light, the same beam of light in very, very different ways.

So what I want to do is I want to try to figure out how to carry the metaphor to trying to get people to the table and focus on the frame and that to have a good conversation, we have to put some effort into aligning the different frames that people use. One of the challenges that I think we face is that we do tend to, especially with social media, where we can see the entire world on our smartphones. We've got to think about what is the appropriate scope for the problem that we're talking about. What we really should be thinking is in terms of narrower scope as opposed to broader scope. The challenge with some social issues is that when we're talking at a national level, it does make it really difficult to make the issue tangible and make all of the factors tangible, all of the things of which we're trying to trying to get our arms around and understand.

The more strategic we get, the more ideological we get, the harder it is to understand how it works out in brass tacks. That's another source of attention, perhaps of different ways in which people frame things where, you know, if you're talking about one set of people who see an injustice or see an issue that is real present on the ground, physical, tangible, then the other party who's taking a much more broad brush, strategic perspective is not going to be able to understand it. We should instead [get this] down to a tangible level.

This is where I think the *Talking About Organizations* episode that we just released on Philip Selznick in the study of the Tennessee Valley Authority is kind of useful because there was an example all the way back in the 1940s where national interests were imposing themselves on what was essentially a local issue--national interests coming from Washington, D.C. or national groups. They saw that these local issues that were going on in the Tennessee Valley. They framed what was a local discussion in terms of a broader national debate and where winning was essential because at a national level, to win in a local area sets precedent for other settings. Or if the local issue, if one fell on the losing side of the local issue, then that might create a slippery slope where the negative result could be applied to other scenarios--and a whole way of framing a problem could become null and void.

So, yeah, there was an instance where the national debate was really aggressive in imposing itself on the local [situation]. The danger of this, of course, is that the results can be disappointing because it sort of encourages more division, and it makes it easier to dehumanize the other because [we] paint the person who is on the other side of the negotiating table can become part of this broader national evil conspiracy. It's easier to dehumanize them. And what ... we want to do the opposite. We want to humanize the other, the principles of respect, the principles of love. They all call for humanizing the other. And that can only be done if we set conditions that favors the narrow local concrete's perspective over the national broad or strategic.

This leads us to the ultimate answer for the best approach, which is classic pragmatism. I'm going to draw in some some insights from an article that I wrote with the help of Chuck Allen, a close colleague of mine. We wrote this article on the challenges of trying to come up with permanent solutions or enduring solutions in diversity and inclusion. But I also believe that the same ideas apply to any complex issue where you have different parties who frame both the problem and the solution very, very differently.

Classic pragmatism. There's three factors or three elements of it that I think are worth noting. One is that *the practical results are much more important than theory*. So we need to dive down to the concrete and not worry so much about broad theoretical patterns that can be applied anywhere. Classic pragmatism doesn't view those types of solutions as valid.

[Second,] the *importance of experience* to address problematic situations and a problematic situation is one that is not ordinarily resolved through typical or natural responses by people, at least not to everyone's satisfaction experience and something tailored to the situation at hand. The problem that's being face is the preferred approach.

And then third, *addressing one problematic situation exposes or creates the next problematic situation*. This is exactly what I've been saying about dialectic change. No solution is permanent. The next problematic situation may very well just be a second or third order effect, totally unrelated to the original problematic situation. Whoever was involved in the first negotiation may very well find themselves having to be involved in a completely different problem. Or maybe it's a different group. I don't know.

But this also gets into how do you actually address it? And for this, I turn to the work of Patricia Shields and the *communities of inquiry*. The communities of inquiry are people who get together and come from all sides of the problematic situation. These are not necessarily a result oriented activity. The focus is on how is the problematic situation addressed. And it's through action, not not necessarily debate. I mean, yeah, there's going to be dialogue and debate involved, but ultimately there has to be something done to address the problematic situation. So it's got to be concrete. It's got to be practical. And the community of inquiry is not necessarily defined by collectives. I mean, it could very well be individual representatives of a collective [or] it could be individual peer experts, non-experts, it doesn't matter as long as all perspectives of an issue are brought to the table.

Now, how does a community of inquiry operate? What Chuck, Alan and I came across was was a work by Brendel (2006), [who] basically came up with what he called *applied pragmatism*,¹ basically where the solutions have four characteristics. And so the community of inquiry, in order to develop a solution, has to satisfy these four characteristics--practical, participatory, pluralistic and provincial. This is a way of measuring the dialogue.

So the *practical* means that the problem is examined as it is and not how anyone wishes it to be, and that the outcomes are converted into real and tangible action. And it's by the community itself to implement and not vetted by broader interests. And with no particular stake in the discussion, you know, the imposition of national interests into the local situation should be avoided.

The second is *pluralistic*. This is where people with as many different perspectives are included. In essence, using my eyeball metaphor, it means that we have to make sure that we have every color of the rainbow

Participatory. Everyone has a voice and everybody should be active participants and there should be nothing that inhibits that active participation. And most importantly, there's no social loafing. There's no by-standing.

And then finally *provisional*. That is again a recognition that no solution and no outcome is ever final. The community of inquiry stands by awaiting the emergence of new problems.

And then there's recognition that the community of inquiry, under the principle of sovereignty and the principle of social responsibility, recognizes that the solution is going to be challenged because of the fact that there will be broader interests at stake and the community has to fend off those interests. And it's going to be very, very difficult. So in order for this to work, there has to be an understanding that permits communities of inquiry, their efforts to stand regardless of the opposition faced. And that's going to be hard. I recognize that's going to be hard, but that's ultimately what right looks like.

How would this work? Let's take any controversial social issue and consider the national and the local perspective of it. So, I just described what it looks like from the local perspective. If we took education as an example, the problematic situation could be an enduring problem of inequality and unfairness, where children with vastly different access and experience in school for socioeconomic reasons, special needs, anything else that presents the problematic situation and the local perspective is, is that the local has to do something about it. Something has to be done in order to restore equitability and fairness into the school system.

The community of inquiry should then be comprise a set of those most affected in the school system. So that can be administrators, teachers, parents, students, citizens. But all of these folks have to join as equals, which is difficult because now we're talking about people of different status, and sometimes status can get in the way of the solution. If we have an administrator and the discourse puts the administrator in a bad light, well, the administrator is not going to be too happy. It's going to make things difficult to make a solution stick. But that's exactly what has to happen. Things like status cannot get in the way of resolving the problematic situation.

The community of inquiry can only work if everybody trusts each other, if there's mutual respect, because otherwise, if this is like a tiger team or working group where the solution is done and the group disperses and never to be seen again or has to be reformed, when the solution ceases to work effectively in future, it's going to be biased towards those with greater status of power. And you're going to end up with a repeat of the same types of problematic situation because the bias prevented a good solution from being instituted in the first place now at the state or national level. And this is where what would be the alternative to the national level entities imposing their will on local entities.

The thing is, is that the problematic situations at a state and national level, we have to be clear about the difference of those problematic situations. The problematic situations that are tangible at a state or national level would be more like the distribution of educational resources, establishment and enforcement of standards, curriculum development, certifications of teachers and programs. Whereas, say from the local level, those things are much more abstract. But those working at the state level, there are a lot more tangible communities of inquiry at that level should be handling those kinds of problems. And of course they are. That's exactly what state level [educational organizations] certainly deal with.

So the issue then is the boundary between what is considered to be a local context, local to the school system, so that the community of inquiry operating. At, say, state or national level is doing its thing. Coming up with practical solutions for the problematic situations it faces and leaving the local contacts to be able to deal with those things that a local school board faces, the challenge of not imposing will unduly in either direction. The bridge between the two levels has to be along the lines of the same principles that we've been talking about of what the state would present as a just equitable and fair solution for state level issues to the local school boards. And then the community of inquiry would include state and local levels in order to negotiate solutions. That's the concept.

It's going to be a challenge to implement because we have to we have to get past this orientation of thinking about the other as the enemy. And we also have to be prepared to get over ourselves and be prepared to humble ourselves and participate as equals with those who are of different status. To take what is a pragmatic approach with a set of principles that allow for a common language to start a negotiation on tough social issues. This is basically one of those things. It's very different than the way we traditionally do things. And it's also that's what's going to make it really, really hard, because the biases and the flaws in the social contract have been allowed to persist because we simply have not been able to establish any principle, any set of principles by which anybody would agree to begin the negotiation. We leave it too easy to deny that a problem exists. And we also make it too easy for us to just simply choose not to take action rather than to take action. We've got ourselves into such a cutthroat competitive landscape that we don't think of an alternative that is workable. We just assume that it's going to remain cutthroat.

Now, I think that the the approach that I've offered is far more appealing and can help solve the problems that are of our time. The more that we make problems tangible, the more that we humanize each other. In the course of trying to work through these problems, the better chances are that we'll have a good solution.

This concludes the series, and I do hope it has been helpful for getting beyond the rhetoric and think about how we can actually get down to work and make progress. It's messy and difficult stuff. This is only a bunch of ideas. And it was really challenging to put this together because the the issues that I'm dealing with in this are very, very emotional. And I've tried very hard not to show favoritism toward any one side on any and any of the given issues. We've got to incorporate the sensitivity. We have to incorporate all of the background of what are really, really tough issues. But at some point, the emotions have to be helpful to us. They have to help us find ways to understand and to put on the table the issues that are out there so that we can solve them and not simply use them as hammer to batter our opponents--because they will only do the same to us. And if we're going to move forward as a society and really, really make progress, we have to take a different approach. We can't continue doing things the old way.

... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

ALL THE BEST!
TOM GALVIN