

Positive Leadership in a Polarized World

Author : Margaret Henderson

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The leadership skills of public leaders of all kinds -- especially city or county elected officials and managers -- are being challenged this week in the aftermath of the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. In the midst of this pain and conflict, some effective leaders are employing strategies to move us forward in a positive way.

The purpose of this blogpost is not to take a position on the correct decision to make about Confederate statues; that is up to individual communities to decide. Instead, our intention is to share wise leadership strategies to employ in the situation.

1. **Get the facts.** Invest in the appropriate research to learn exactly where the monuments and statues are in your community. Who owns the property or holds the responsibility for its management? Uncover the story of origin of the monument or statue. Who paid for it, erected it, or dedicated it? These facts provide clarity about history, intention, responsibility, and decision-making authority, while beginning to distinguish between legend, myth, assumptions, and truth. Adam Lovelady writes about the legal issues related to removing Civil War monuments and statues from public property in today's post on "Coates Canons: NC Government Law" [Statues and Statutes: Limits on Removing Monuments from Public Property](#)
2. **Figure out who cares, and why they care.** Alone or with others, engage in some political mapping to assess from where the currents of change leadership currently originate or where they might emerge, as well as where the resistance can be found. Be sure to include a broad range of perspectives. Why does this issue matter? Consider not only the perspectives of people of color or descendants of Civil War soldiers, new comers or old timers, but also people of faith, the business community, historians, investors in your community, school children, etc. If there are critical events coming up, such as local elections, assess how or whether this issue will be played out in that arena.
3. **Invest in the process of decision-making.** An earlier blogpost, "[Making 'Big Rock' Decisions](#)," points out the importance of slowing down to listen, and doing so thoroughly and respectfully, when a decision is highly visible or symbolic. Another blogpost, "[Conflicting Views on Confederate Flag, Memorials, Symbols: What to do in a 'Post-Charleston' Environment](#)," provides suggestions for successful citizen engagement on highly emotional issues. Be prepared for public meetings to run long, attract large crowds, or require formal facilitation.
4. **Avoid reinforcing the polarization with your language.** Train yourself to say

"yes....and..." rather than "no....but..." Whether or not a statue stays in place might become an "either/or" decision, and communities can still find ways to honor diverse histories or perspectives.

5. **Choose your words carefully.** In volatile circumstances, we all need to take responsibility for not encouraging negative behaviors. That can happen deliberately, but also by accident, by using phrases that are somehow vague or open to interpretation. When public safety is at stake, public leaders are challenged to 'share all relevant information' and build trust by practicing transparency, while also tracking the magnification or distortion provided by the rumor mill, social media, or traditional media.

None of us can control how others react to our words and deeds. All we can control are the steps we take to get clear on our roles, invest in the processes we use to make decisions, communicate clearly, and, as always, practice patience with our community members as we go about our work.

** The School of Government will offer a one-day leadership development training on "Positive Leadership in a Polarized World," on November 3, 2017, as part of its [Public Leadership development series](#). Be informed of updates by clicking on the link for "Notify me when details are available."