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Reaching Across The Aisle
Innovations for Cross-Party Collaboration
By
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All of us are here for a common purpose, to make America a better place. There is and must be room for all our voices to be heard to achieve our common purpose.

Representative Peter Welch, January 5, 2007
On the floor of the House of Representatives.

At a 2007 retreat for US Senate Chiefs of Staff, designed to promote greater cross-party collaboration and dialogue between the Members, the Chief of a well-respected Republican pulled one of the facilitators aside and whispered in his ear.

“If this process gets any traction,” he said in a hushed voice, “the party leaders will squash it like a bug.”

As the editors of this volume correctly observe, there is often an “ingroup/outgroup leadership trade-off,” and nowhere is this clearer than in the Congress of the United States of America.ⁱ This chapter addresses this subject and poses several questions, including:

- Can partisan leaders work for bipartisan purposes?
- What are the obstacles and rewards for doing so?
- What are the trade-offs between working together “across the aisle” and working effectively within one’s own party?
- Can changes made in off-site laboratories be applied to the real world of Capitol Hill?
- What is the relationship between “group” and “intergroup” leadership?

This chapter addresses these questions based on the author’s experience as a participant-observer in more than a decade of bipartisan

“retreats” and “dialogue trainings” with both Members of the US House of Representatives and Chiefs of Staff from both the House and Senate. These experiences provided intimate, off-the-record, personal contact with hundreds of House Members and dozens of Chief of Staff. My observations are based on personal testimony from Members and their Chiefs of Staff, and other primary and secondary sources about the House of Representatives.ⁱⁱ

To understand the challenge that the House faces as an organization, imagine a corporation divided in half, with roughly fifty percent of the executives on Team A, and the remainder on Team B. To make matters worse, their Team Leaders discourage them from collaborating and encourage them to denigrate the executives on the other team. The corporate culture consequently consists of an avalanche of negative stories and half-truths about their “colleagues” on the opposing team. All executives in this company *must* be on one team or the other; virtually no “independents” are allowed. And every two years, they ask their “customers” to vote to rehire their own team of executives and fire the other!

If such a divided company existed, it would certainly fail to compete against its competitors. It would be so inefficient that it would ultimately go out of business.

Although it continues to function, the U. S. House of Representatives as an institution may face a similar fate. It was designed in the 18th century for a few dozen lawmakers from thirteen states to represent their local communities. Today, in the 21st century, the House of Representatives contains 435 elected officials from four times as many states. Similar to the fictional company described above, they are divided down the middle into two warring parties.

Although many Republicans and Democrats, *as individuals*, know how to play the role of bridge-builder or “mediator,” the built-in polarization of the two-party system turns the aisle between the parties into chasm.

This dividing line often makes moderate leaders on both sides of the aisle feel powerless. Privately, Members of the House from both sides complain bitterly about how their respective party leaders dominate the proceedings to such an extent that they lose their voice.

Even members of the majority party felt disenfranchised by the two-party straightjacket. "You don't seem to understand," one of the most respected and well-placed Republicans representatives confided during a break to one of the moderators. "I am powerless!" Although the House was under Republican control at the time, this senior lawmaker felt so disempowered by the party leadership that he literally felt he could make no difference. Because of this partisan stranglehold on the institution, bipartisan collaboration is in danger of extinction. *iii*

Just as the house in which a family lives requires some care from family members, so does the U.S. House of Representatives require care from those who work under its roof. For many years now, Members have cared more for the welfare of their party and their own careers than for the institution. If that neglect can continue, we can expect more leaks in the roof, more unpaid bills, and a house that declines in value.

The men and women serving in the House and Senate do not need outside experts or elaborate research studies to know that repairs are necessary. They need to come together, across the aisle, and speak the truth to each other in a safe, trust-building environment. In such settings, they can decide together what they can do to turn the US House into a genuine home for democracy.

They have done it before; they can do it again; and they should do it soon, before it is too late. The Capitol building may be made of stone, but the process within it is made of trust. It is now time to rebuild that trust.

Why does this matter so much at this point in history? It is not because of some faint-hearted, nostalgic wish for a return Miss Manners-type decorum. On the contrary, it is because of a tough-minded, post 9-11 recognition of the complex, global decisions that face our nation. America

cannot fulfill its destiny in the community of nations if our energies are squandered on kneejerk, paralyzing internecine warfare.

Against this backdrop, the question is not why intergroup leadership is rare in the US Congress. The question is how it can emerge at all. To improve these odds, this chapter highlights five innovations developed in a variety of off-site retreats that were “laboratories” in which one could experiment with alternative processes. We address the question: if adapted and incorporated into the workings of the Congress, could these innovations enhance the effectiveness of the institution?

This chapter, then, briefly outlines five innovations that made these off-site experiences effective, and then explores the feasibility of applying these principles to the way the US Congress currently works.

1. Catalyzing cross-boundary leadership from inside.
2. Creating incentives for co-leadership that build trust.
3. Adopting ground rules that promote genuine dialogue.
4. Fostering systemic rather than partisan thinking.
5. Inspiring learning and decreasing stereotyping.

As we explore each of these in turn, it is useful to bear in mind that these five innovations are mutually reinforcing tools that are best implemented comprehensively rather than piecemeal.

-----> This inquiry shows that, to varying degrees, these creative reforms in the process by which Congress operates would not only increase civility and respect between the parties, but would lead to a more effective, more innovative legislative output.

Unfortunately, fostering cooperation in an “artificial” setting away from Capitol Hill is not the same as building it in the raw, intense environment of party politics, massive lobbying, media magnification of differences, and a host of other equally divisive factors. For that reason, describing the new approach, practice or method that was used in the off-

site event will be followed by an analysis of how it might — or might *not* — be put into practice in the day-to-day workings of Congress.

OUTLINING THE FIVE OFF-SITE INNOVATIONS

1. Catalyzing cross-boundary leadership from inside.

During a particularly vicious partisan exchange on the House floor in mid-1996, Rep David Skaggs (D-CO) turned to one of his respected colleagues across the aisle, Amo Houghton (R-NY), to express his dismay. Houghton agreed that the quality of discourse was appalling, and the two invited Rep Tom Sawyer (D-OH) and Rep Ray LaHood (R-IL) into a four-way conversation about the abysmal decline in civility that had turned the House floor into a verbal boxing ring.

The four Congressmen enlisted another four, and then the eight of them sought out another eight. The sixteen then wrote a letter inviting their colleagues to join them in requesting an officially authorized Bipartisan Congressional Retreat that would focus on how the two parties could function with less bitterness and hostility and more respect and civility. Despite parodies in the press that suggested that they would bring Miss Manners to Capitol Hill, the founders of the Retreat process made clear that their goal was not to make everyone be “polite.” It was to prevent the House from becoming fatally fractured and to enable its Members to fulfill their duties and responsibilities to the electorate.

Faced with a letter signed by 86 Members, equally drawn from each of the two parties, Speaker Gingrich and Minority Leader Gephardt agreed to making the Retreat a vital part of the new Congress. To manage the event, a Bipartisan Congressional Retreat Planning Committee (BCRPC) was formed, which included five respected members of each party.^{iv}

2. Creating incentives for co-leadership that build trust:

The Members request for a bipartisan retreat generated the formation of a committee that was unlike any other. Consisting of five members of each party, it brought together these ten Members as equal colleagues — *not* as representatives of a majority and minority party. They were co-conveners jointly designing a shared event — *not* party representatives trying to create advantage for themselves. It was a group of Members working for a *common* purpose — *not* as majority-vs.-minority adversaries.

These ten Members were not only co-leaders; they were a microcosm of the entire community. The five “D’s” and five “R’s” were selected because they represented the wide range of backgrounds and attitudes of their fellow party members. For this reason, they were a convening body that could build trust across the aisle.

Exploring the issues of incivility at a retreat involving more than half the members of the US House, as well as many of their spouses,^v involved significant emotional and political risks. Like a couple’s therapy session except under intense public scrutiny, it put the Members at risk *emotionally* because their anger, hurt and resentment might surface. Even more challenging, it put them at risk *politically*. If their patterns of acrimony persisted at the Retreat, they might be even more publicly embarrassed than they were by their misbehavior on Capitol Hill.

For this reason, privacy was of the utmost concern. They wanted no “outsiders” present at the Retreat. The press was to be completely excluded; Members were asked to honor the ground rules of “confidentiality;” and no “professional facilitators” were to be included in the proceedings.

One of the consequences of this decision was that the Members *themselves* had to become the facilitators. To their credit, they realized that this could not be accomplished without learning new skills. The ten committee members committed themselves to participating in a “facilitation training[¶]”; furthermore, they invited 14 other Representatives, thus providing a total of 24 participants. This group of twenty-four was

given the mandate of “facilitating” the retreat. Each of the twelve pairs of “co-leaders” was responsible for one small group meeting room with approximately thirty Members (and spouses).

3. Adopting ground rules that promote genuine dialogue:

Given the frequent outbursts of sarcasm, hostility, bitterness and occasional meanness that erupt on the House and Senate floor, Members often conclude that Congress should strive to cultivate institutional rules and personal discipline that would maintain “rational debate” and “keep emotions out” of their deliberations. The off-site experiences, however, led many of them to a different conclusion: namely, that is better to invite emotions to come in through the front door so they don’t sneak in through the back door. What astounded veteran Members and staff alike was the quality of personal engagement that they witnessed in the participants of the entire process. At every phase of the process — the six months of planning meetings, the co-leaders’ facilitation training, the Retreat itself, and the follow-up — they were struck by the emotional richness of the experience.

At the co-leaders’ facilitation training, for example, the 24 Members “rehearsed” a process that they would be facilitating at the Retreat. The process involved groups of eight, consisting of equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans, addressed in a council format (one-by-one, three minutes each) the question: “*How does the quality of discourse in the House of Representatives affect me personally?*”

Given the format, which gave each of the eight Members three minutes each, the councils were estimated to require roughly 24 minutes followed by 5-10 minutes of reflections. Instead of lasting 30-35 minutes, however, they were still deep in dialogue after almost an hour. The small groups were still talking together — resisting their staff’s attempt to pull them away for other business, *and* resisting my efforts to move them onward to the next agenda item.

Exactly the same intense, unexpectedly prolonged participation occurred at the Retreat itself. As one Member said, when he was encouraged to end his small group in time to attend a dinner: “We have needed an anger workshop for so long,” he said, as he poked his head of the meeting room door on which I had knocked. “We can’t stop now.”

Based on their own experience, the Members of the House recognized the vital and *potentially healthy* role of emotions in the legislative process.

To accomplish this goal, the Retreat adopted a set of ground rules. They resulted from a conversation in which one skeptical Member confronted one of the designers of the Retreat during an early planning meeting and asked bluntly: “How can you be sure that we will act better in Hershey, Pennsylvania, than we do on Capitol Hill?”

“I can’t be sure unless—,” the facilitator began to reply.

“Then why in hell are we spending almost one million dollars,” the Congressman interrupted angrily, “to go make fools of ourselves somewhere else?”

That confrontation catalyzed the adoption a set of ground rules for the first Bipartisan Congressional Retreat which they Members *themselves* authored and pledged to enforce. The chart below was posted in every small group meeting room and (with one minor infraction on the first retreat, and two on the second) was strictly honored for the duration of the two Retreats.

That the ground rules adopted at the retreat — respect, fairness, openness, privacy, commitment — seem quite ordinary and unoriginal is, in fact, the point. As any classroom teacher or assembly line foreman would agree, basic civility is necessary in order to accomplish the work at hand. This is even more true on Capitol Hill than in other workplaces because the pressures are so intense, and the stakes so high.

Ground Rules

Objective: “To create a safe environment for open conversation

RESPECT:

**“To show consideration for;
avoid violation of;
treat with deference.”**

**Demonstrate valuing of people and process as much as outcome
No personal attacks**

FAIRNESS:

**Equal time for speakers
Speak briefly; time is limited**

LISTENING:

**When others speak, listen – don’t prepare your remarks
Listen with intent to understand**

OPENNESS:

**To other points of view
To outcome
To each person regardless of seniority**

PRIVACY:

**Treat sessions as confidential
Outside the retreat do not attribute comments to others
Speak from your own experience**

COMMITMENT:

**Be present
Communicate if absent**

4. Fostering systemic rather than partisan thinking:

During the small group work at the first Retreat in 1996, one of the most moving exercises was the mapping of obstacles to civility in the House. Participants were asked to write down on large “post-it” notes what they felt were the most important barriers to improving communication in the House of Representatives. Every Member was then asked to find someone from the other side of the aisle who agreed with them and who would “co-sign” what they had written. These obstacles to civility, each

bearing the initials of at least one Democrat and one Republican, were then posted on the wall in one of the following three categories:

- obstacles within the House of Representatives itself
- obstacles in the overall political system
- obstacles in the larger American culture

The result of this exercise, which took place in twelve small group meetings simultaneously, was one of the most comprehensive “insider” analyses of the challenges to intergroup leadership ever compiled. It was not the work of an academic expert or think-tank consultant; it was their own.

Members and their spouses looked at their maps of obstacles, and found themselves overwhelmed by the wide range of powerful forces that had combined to poison their communication patterns. These included intensified media intrusion and more polarized coverage; prolonged political campaigns; greater financial pressures; the heightened role of unsupervised and increasingly irresponsible partisan groups; etc. As they realized the degree to which the system was *designed* to breed incivility, many seemed to feel compassion for themselves and each other. On the other hand, armed with a shared analysis of the problem and a cross-party recognition of the personal as well as civic damage that it caused, many felt more committed to doing something to change the system.

Ten years later, in October 2007, a similar process was undertaken by 38 Senate chiefs of staff, equally divided between Republicans and Democrats. This time, however, the participants were asked to list desired innovations, not obstacles that prevent them. The result was equally impressive: a list of more than two dozen reforms that at least two Chiefs of Staff from both parties believed would promote positive intergroup leadership in the US Senate. (In several cases, the proposed innovations had inspired five to eight signatures, not just two.)

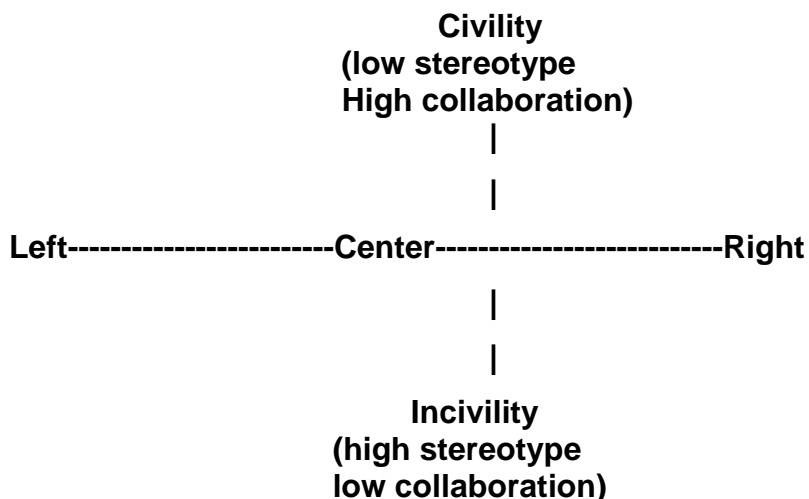
The result of these and similar experiences breeds a systemic rather than partisan analysis. By creating a process and structure that promotes

cross-party collaboration, thinking alters perceptibly. The emphasis shifts from “us-versus-them” (in-group thinking) to “us-and-them” (intergroup thinking).

5. Inspiring learning and decreasing stereotypes.

At the various off-site gatherings, there was no legislative agenda. The only goal was building civility, understanding, “dialogue,” or learning tools for “crossing the aisle” more effectively. The common by-product of these activities was that, as cross-party collaboration increased, the amount of stereotyping markedly decreased.

For the 24 Members who were part of the facilitation team, this process began long before the off-site weekend. It began in planning meetings and facilitation training during which they discovered that their yearning for a better way of conducting the people’s business was shared by their counterparts from the other side of the aisle. To be more precise: both Democratic and Republican Members who facilitated learned that, in their commitment to civility and creative cross-party problem-solving, some Members of the *other* party cared more about civility than some Members of their *own* party. A fragile yet tangible bond began to build among the organizers of the Retreats that did not correspond to the horizontal “Left-Center-Right” political spectrum, but which created a vertical “Civility- Incivility” spectrum.



The result is markedly different political map in which horizontal polarization (“in-group” leadership) must now confront an alternative model (“intergroup” leadership).

As it became clear that neither party had a monopoly on intergroup leadership, stereotypes of the “other side” began to erode and were replaced by human beings whose sharing included phrases like:

“ For a while I actually forgot who was from what party...
“I’ve served six terms, and I can’t remember it ever being this poisonous....”
“My opponent was a decent guy. It was all these special interest groups and their ads that made it so ugly... “
“What’s the point of working here if we can’t even conduct the people’s business anymore!”
“There’s just no reason for demonizing each other the way we do.”
“I have to admit that I feel more drawn to working with some members in the opposing party than to some in my own.”

APPLYING INNOVATIONS ON CAPITOL HILL

Can these innovations make the transition from off-site laboratories to on-site political maneuvering? Can the tools and methods with which the Representatives, Senators, and Chiefs of Staff experimented become part of governance? Can what they practiced in theory be applied in reality?

To answer these questions, let us re-examine each of the five innovations outlined above based on their practical applicability on Capitol Hill.

1. *Catalyzing cross-boundary leadership from inside:*

This proves very difficult in the real world of Congress because there is no forum, no platform, no ongoing basis for developing such leadership. Indeed, as the Chief of Staff’s comment that opened this chapter suggests, any embryonic attempt to build cross-party groups, events, or initiatives immediately creates a concern in the party leadership.

Even if party leaders do not “squash it like a bug,” they will almost certainly attempt to contain or limit its influence. In addition, Democratic and Republican Party chieftains will almost certainly discipline their members who are become too close to the “enemy.”

Historically, the context where Members of the House could experiment with positive intergroup leaders was in Committee. The Committee structure was designed to be a place where small groups from both parties could work together in relative seclusion to build cross-party working relationships in specific legislative areas. But even this relative haven has been invaded by partisanship and centralized control.

"I have been on the Agriculture Committee for a heck of a long time," a veteran Democrat said during a private interview in his office. "Now I wonder why I even show up for committee meetings. There's no real debate, no real policymaking anymore. It's all been pre-arranged in the leader's office."

In order for cross-boundary leadership to emerge, the off-site innovation of a bipartisan “co-leader pair” could be adopted in each committee. These two Members could be designated as a “bridge” or “third side” for the committee that could step in when relations became strained or progress was being derailed by venomous debate.

But even this innovation would not change the fundamental reality of committee life: they are inherently structured for hierarchy. Control is in the hands of a unified Majority; the Minority, even if unified, can only oppose.

Which leads us directly to the second potential innovation:

2. *Creating incentives for co-leadership that build trust:*

The omnipresent reality of “majority” or “minority” status completely dominates the culture of Congress. Democrats and Republicans do not work together as peers. From the Majority Leader to the Minority Leader at

the peak of the leadership pyramid, to the rank-and-file member on one side or the other of the aisle, everyone knows their “place” in the hierarchy.

The simple innovation at the Retreats of developing the position of co-leaders has, therefore, a transformational implication. It implies the possibility of being peers. It suggests that collaboration is not a dirty word, but actually a potentially honorable pursuit. While fully honoring the will of the electorate, and the ever-shifting numerical ratio of how the finite seats in the House are distributed, the Retreat created an oasis of *partnership* in a partisan desert.

At one of the series of “dialogue retreats” for House and Senate Chiefs of Staff, one whispered to a facilitator during a break: “We have been told to oppose all of their amendments. I am told that *they* have been ordered to oppose all of ours. I really have a problem with that.” Then, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening, she added: “*I don’t think that’s leadership!*”

Institutionalizing the concept of “co-leaders” would make impossible such kneejerk, mechanistic, systematic sabotage of creative collaboration. If Members were encouraged to find one (or more) counterpart across the aisle with whom to explore strategic partnerships on specific issues, the House could be a creative catalyst for a wide range of creative approaches to policy challenges. The goal would not be to *end* partisanship (that would be neither constructive nor realistic), but rather to create a parallel, “transpartisan” level of engagement in the House that would complement the usual party-based maneuvering.

It is difficult to imagine Democratic or Republican Party chiefs deciding to create or support such innovations since doing so undermines (at least in the short run) their in-group leadership power. However, despite the insularity of Capitol Hill that can make the 15,000-member community appear to be a hermetically sealed world, Members of Congress and their staffs do not exist in a vacuum. Even if party leaders intensify disincentives for cross-party collaboration, the public has a mind of its own. The voting

public, which tends to be more attached to results than to party affiliation, may provide the incentives that Representatives need in order to become more collaborative. When only a small fraction of voters approves of Congress' performance, lawmakers have an incentive to collaborate: re-election.

3. Adopt ground rules that promote genuine dialogue:

If the House or Senate wanted to sustain the kind of authentic, emotionally honest, and constructive tone that emerged in off-site laboratories, the culture of the institution would have to more fully embrace *two tracks of communication, not just one*. By law as well as by custom, it must provide an advocacy-based forum for pro-versus-con, Democrat-versus-Republican debate. (Although the quality of that debate has deteriorated, that form of discourse nevertheless has an avenue for expression).

To work effectively, however, Congress also needs a functioning second track of communication, which is often referred to as dialogue.^{vi} It is an inquiry-based environment for the kind of deliberation that allows Members to explore competing assumptions, values and beliefs.

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Assuming that there is a right answer, and you have it	Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer
Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding
Listening to find flaws and make counter arguments	Listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
Defending our own assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for re-evaluation
Framing issues with two polarized "sides"	Seeing all sides of an issue
Defending one's own	Admitting that others'

views against those of others	thinking can improve on one's own
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in others' positions	Searching for strengths and value in others' positions
By creating a winner and loser, discourages further discussion	Keeps the topic open even after the discussion formally ends
Seeking a conclusion or vote to ratify your position	Discovering new options, not seeking closure

Both communication tracks are essential because, as the chart above indicates, each has its own purpose. Debate is excellent for exploring two alternative strategies, and for arguing their relative merits. Dialogue is well-suited for examining the competing assumptions between the two approaches, and for creating new possibilities that may be superior to either of the two existing alternatives. Generally speaking, dialogue should precede debate, and the legislative output is better when both tracks are employed, not just one.

Unfortunately, avenues for catalytic dialogue are increasingly constricted and, for many Members, have virtually disappeared. Most representatives from both parties, at every off-site event, concurred that every avenue for dialogue, both formal and informal, has narrowed in recent years. Members spend more time in their districts, leaving little time in Washington for informal dialogue. Party activities and functions are increasingly segregated. "Co-dels" (bipartisan fact-finding delegations to points of concern, both domestic and foreign) have fallen into disrepute. Committees tend to take orders from party leaders and have, in recent years, spent less time in open discussion. Expert witnesses now are often "hired" by one party or the other, and are not offering unbiased information but rather pre-fabricated, well-rehearsed ammunition for one side or the other.

The consequences of a dialogue-starved Capitol Hill culture was reflected in one of the most common laments uttered by lawmakers as they

prepared to leave off-site gatherings and return to work. Invariably they felt they could now create better legislation.

“Too bad we can’t do this on Capitol Hill,” more than one Chief of Staff lamented privately.

To make it possible, both parties would have to agree to change the ground rules that operate during specific working sessions. It is clear that they have the power to do so. But whether they have the will is not.

4. *Fostering systemic rather than partisan thinking*

To foster a different kind of thinking requires a different kind of inquiry. Committee hearings are the most natural forum for doing so on Capitol Hill. Unfortunately, hearings have been reduced to well-rehearsed forums in which pre-fabricated statements are recited by each party to support its own position and discredit the other’s. This prevents any systemic analysis from emerging, and serves only to entrench further existing views.

Unless and until this changes, the innovations developed in off-site processes well not be able to penetrate the almost Orwellian walls that divide thought itself into two party lines. The truth is that many Members and Chiefs of Staff return from off-site experiences to Capitol Hill excited and energized about implementing a wide variety of innovations that would enable more systemic thinking and fewer polarized “sound bites” about legislation. (They ranged from shifts in committee procedures, to new codes of conduct on the House Floor, to stricter limits about where reporters could and could not congregate within the House.)

As tempting as it may be to explore some of these proposed reforms in greater depth, doing so would be politically naïve because there is no force capable of developing, advocating and implementing them. Until there is a bipartisan entity capable of doing so, all significant reforms will perish. This is because, structurally as well as politically, it is not in the

interest of party leaders (certainly the majority party) to cede any decision-making power to such a “third side” force.^{vii}

5. Inspiring learning and decreasing stereotypes

As the retreats and other off-site experiences demonstrate, contact alone is not enough to produce positive intergroup leadership. Contact is necessary, but not sufficient.

Some Members of each party accept, and engage in, a high degree of combativeness and incivility; other Members of each party do not. As a general rule (and there are obvious exceptions to it), party leadership tends to reflect the interests of their less collaborative, more partisan followers. This leaves the bridge-builders of each party often feeling adrift in the “grey” middle, outflanked by their more partisan, “black-and-white” colleagues. Without no structure or leadership to represent their interests, they face a stark choice: either jump on the partisan bandwagon, or be left behind in the no-man’s-land of so-called “moderation.”

New member orientations are a case in point. Little more than a decade ago, a newly elected Representative was invited to an orientation that was designed for members of both parties. Today, each party has its own. From that point on, except for service on committees, Members of the opposing parties never have to sit side by side. (They have their own entrances and exits; their own cloakrooms; their own side of the aisle. They are, to borrow a word from America’s past, segregated.)

A very positive innovation, which would require no direct structural changes on Capitol Hill, would be to return to the practice of *bipartisan* orientation experiences for new members. Instead of being initiated into the culture of the US Congress by a strictly partisan event, creating a cross-party orientation sends an important message to newly elected lawmakers: they are entering the US Congress, not just their party caucus. Doing so also sets a very different tone: they are being initiated to lead as Americans, not just as Democrats and Republicans.

Assuming that no viable third party will emerge in the near future to challenge the status quo, the most constructive step for promoting learning and decreasing stereotypes is for Members to insist on more opportunities, both formal and informal, for genuine collaboration. While party leaders may continue to discourage “fraternizing with the enemy,” Members are free to do so. If they can find enough allies on both sides of the aisle, they will become leaders of a different kind — leaders of the whole.

Conclusion:

Research in the area of intergroup relations has established that it is not enough to *decrease negative* feelings toward the “other.” One also has to *promote positive* feelings towards them. Or, as Todd Pittinsky pithily summarized: “To transform an overgrown lot into a garden, you not only need to pull weeds. You also need to plant flowers.”^{viii}

This is why, after more than a decade of various off-site activities designed to promote positive intergroup leadership on Capitol Hill, the five potential innovations outlined above have not been implemented. Some weeds have been pulled; but no flowers have been planted.

Intergroup leadership — creative cross-party collaboration on critical legislative challenges — is still the exception, not the rule. While as citizens we naturally have a strong desire for our representatives to be effective and collaborative, the truth is that they are not. Even positive off-site experiences do not change this hard reality.

During the ten-years since the first Bipartisan Congressional Retreat, senators who experimented with running as “independents” were punished; scores of complex issues were turned into Left-Right litmus tests; electoral cycles led to even lower levels of voter trust; and media-fed campaigns reached new levels of partisan distortion.

On the one hand, it is evident that even an intensely partisan, uncivil, inefficient, and hostile Congressional is not fatal to those who work there.

America will survive even the most depleted kinds of discourse on Capitol Hill. When necessary, in emergencies, the Members of the House may even rise to the occasion and distinguish themselves with serious inquiry and attentive advocacy.

On the other hand, as the years pass without the innovations outlined here being implemented, the danger of long-term corrosion of the congressional process increases. Although there is no absolutely reliable quantitative measure, the institution is losing its stature and is attracting candidates of lower caliber. While Congress may act decisively on small matters, it is often failing on significant ones. It is not setting direction for our nation, but is instead being whipsawed by media firestorms and blown in different directions by the shifting winds of public opinion.

It is up to us to ensure that the system in which our leaders work is designed for greatness, not pettiness; that it inspires collaboration, not acrimony; and that it lifts them up, not tears them down. The Founding Fathers passed on to us an excellent structure for our common home; but only we can make the necessary house repairs.

END

1. Pittinsky, T.L. (2007) The science and practice of intergroup leadership, In T.L. Pittinsky (ed.), *Crossing the Divide: Intergroup leadership in a world of difference* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press (forthcoming)).

2. During the decade (1995-2005), I helped design and facilitate two Congressional Bipartisan Retreats for House Members and co-led several retreats for House and Senate Chiefs of Staff. (Although the dynamics I will analyze are also present in the Senate, I will make focus primarily on the House.)

The two Retreats for House Members in which I was directly involved were held in 1997 and 1999. The four retreats for House and Senate Chiefs of Staff were held annually, beginning in 2001. I will stress particularly the experience of the two Retreats for House Members, but will illustrate my main points with supplemental evidence from the Chief of Staff gatherings in which I participated.

3. It is, unfortunately, a model of domination and subordination. Although every committee has a chairman (of one party) and a co-chairman (of the other), they rarely act as partners. The former represents the majority, the latter the minority. The primary

loyalty is not to their committee, much less each other, but to their party. In this sense, co-leaders are not running the committee collaboratively at all, but instead act more like emissaries from opposing armies.

4. The original eight were Eva Clayton (D-NC), David Drier (R-CA), Tillie Fowler (R-FL), Charles Stenholm (D-TX), Amo Houghton (R-NY), Ray LaHood (R-IL), Tom Sawyer (D-OH) and David Skaggs (R-CO). After the November 1996 election, they later added two newly elected members: Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO) and Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX).

5. One of the many difficult issues that the BCRPC dealt with was whether or not to include spouses. Eventually, the Committee decided to do so on the grounds that it would strengthen the event's overall purpose and also create greater gender balance. As a result, approximately 180 spouses participated in the 1997 retreat.

6. For a more detailed description of the debate-dialogue contrast, see Chapter Nine "Dialogue" in Gerzon *Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences Into Opportunities* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006).

7. See William Ury, *The Third Side* (first published as *Getting To Peace*) New York: Viking, 2004.

8. Presentation by Todd Pittinsky, "Allophilia," at the International Leadership Association Annual Conference, Vancouver, Canada (November 2007).