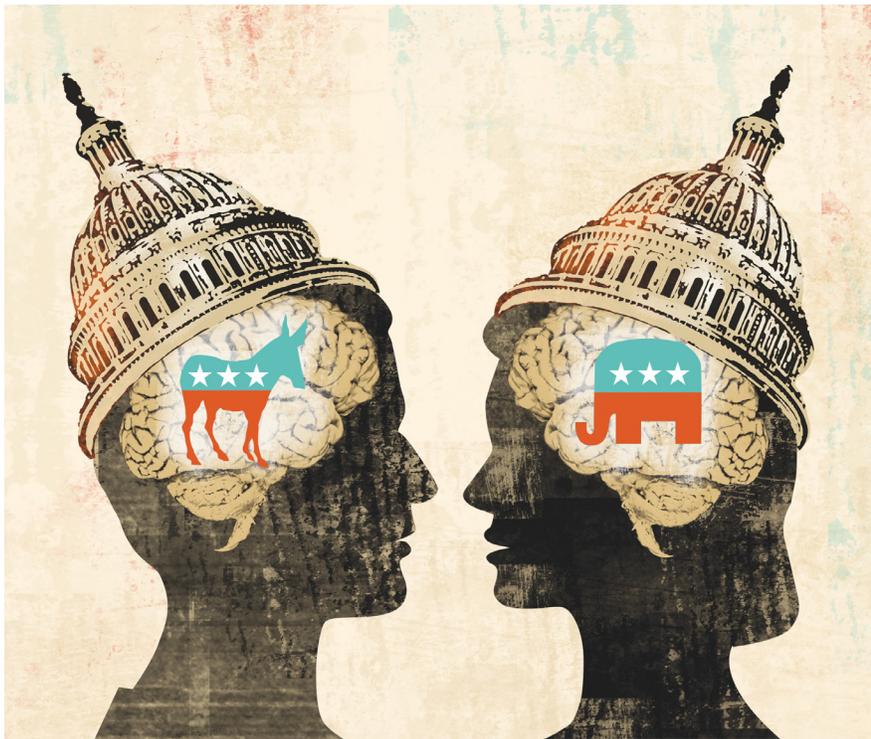


Dinners with Anne; Dysfunction in Congress

Employment attorney JONATHAN A. SEGAL dines with a colleague who disagrees about almost everything and offers some suggestions.

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Anita Dufalla / Post-Gazette

I am an attorney. Anne is a human resource professional. We have worked together for more than 20 years. We are friends, too.

Every year or so, Anne and I have dinner. And we talk about everything, including politics.

Neither Anne nor I need to vote. Each election we cancel out each other's selections.

Our voting patterns are bright red and blue. Yet our dinners are pleasantly purple.

While we disagree on political issues, we respect each other professionally and care for each other personally. So we ratchet down the rhetoric and stretch to see the world through the other's window.

One night, after one of our dinners, I was listening to talk radio on the road

home. And I heard vitriolic diatribes about the other side.

I didn't think of the political figure vilified (whom I have vilified, too). I thought of Anne. I removed the station from my selections.

It is easy to demonize a conceptual "they." It is much harder to demonize a human being if you are one.

Everyone knows that bipartisanship is dead. And, with all due respect, the media often make it worse. Extreme views are more interesting than moderate ones and fighting is more riveting than collaborating, so that is what we see and hear.

Yet two of our most effective politicians, Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill, disagreed on most major issues but would have a beer together when they were done jousting. And that brings me back to my dinners with Anne.

Anne and I find common ground because we have no choice if we want our relationship to be authentic and viable. Our political impulses are tempered by our personal relationship.

One of the problems with Congress is the virtual absence of personal rela-

tionships among political foes. We have two tribes which share one common goal: the destruction of the other.

The problem is obvious. Less obvious is the solution.

Political scientists offer some suggestions for fixing the political process. But political solutions are, well, political.

Political problems are really organizational problems. From that perspective, they are not unique.

I have seen workplaces operate (or not) like Congress. Companies fail to achieve their potential (or fail altogether) because of the absence of meaningful relationships between and among silos, offices, departments, cost centers, etc. Loyalty to the group translates into opposition to the whole.

Smart leaders know that personal relationships are important to creating strong teams to achieve optimal business results. And that means creating incentives to bring together divergent groups.

We need to apply some of these incentives to Congress. We have a dysfunctional workplace, and we should start managing it like a business.

If Congress were managed like a business, we would not have Democrats and Republicans sit on opposite sides of the aisle. It is too easy to disrespect the opposition when you are safely protected in a sea of pure red or blue. Integrate the seating of Democrats and Republicans so that our representatives are sitting next to their political opponents. It is much harder (for most) to disrespect one's immediate neighbor.

If Congress were managed like a business, we would evaluate Congress people not only on their ideological purity, but also on their collaboration. Those who failed to reach across the aisle would be evaluated negatively in terms of their effectiveness. Develop a collaboration index for members of Congress. Those who take pride in never working with the other side should take that pride to the private sector where they will enjoy at-will employment as opposed to a 2-year or 6-year employment contract.

If Congress were managed like a business, we would discipline those who act unprofessionally -- and that includes engaging in personal attacks of their co-workers. Every business knows that healthy debate is healthy, but personal attacks are corrosive and counterproductive. Develop performance management guidelines to apply equally to both parties and hold leaders accountable for conduct that would never be tolerated in a "real" workplace.

If Congress were managed like a business, we would create informal social opportunities in which the tribes mingle. No, I am not suggesting our representatives need more fun. Quite the contrary. I am suggesting that social inclusion is a vital part of business inclusion. If we want the New York Democrat and the Texas Republican to work productively together, perhaps they need to break bread together first.

If Congress were managed like a business, we would develop diverse teams to solve problems and hold the team accountable if they don't develop constructive solutions. Diverse teams come up with better solutions by seeing all sides of the issue. Yet political diversity is painfully absent from decision making in Congress (regardless of which party is in control).

If Congress were managed like a business, it would have been out of business a long time ago. But we can't put Congress out of business, so periodically anti-incumbent sentiment sweeps across the country, as appears to be the case now.

Will the replacements for the incumbents in both parties make things better? Not if the current organizational dynamics remain as they are. We need to change the systems in which relationships are formed, not just the players in the systems.

Things will not get better unless and until Congress is run like a business. I don't know whether and when that will happen. I know I'll keep having my dinners with Anne. ■

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