



Value of Leadership: Why are we so polarized? *Episode Transcript*

Samantha Cherry:

This is Samantha Cherry and you're listening to the Value of Leadership, a podcast from the Aspen Global Leadership Network at the Aspen Institute.

At the Aspen Institute, we pride ourselves in prompting more questions than answers. And on this podcast, we make space for leading thinkers and doers to reflect on the big questions of our time and offer ways forward. Today, we're asking: Why are we so polarized?

We are living through a time of intense conflict in what seems like every part of society - online, on TV, and in our communities. You're not imagining it.

A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center, surveyed Americans' attitudes across 30 political values such as guns, race, climate, immigration, and foreign policy. The average gap between democrats and republicans on these hot button issues? 39 percentage points. And things don't seem to be getting any better when it comes to finding common ground. In the summer of 2020, another study by Pew reported that 77% of Americans said the country was now more divided than before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

But division isn't an issue solely owned by the United States. The rise in populism, old and new cultural conflicts, and economic hardships have all intensified polarization and conflict across the world. What led us to these deep divisions? Is it human nature or a product of systems we've created? How are social media and our information echo chambers contributing?

One thing is clear - to solve our greatest challenges people need to work together across differences.

To discuss how we get there, we turn to experts on how people and communities transcend divides. Amanda Ripley is an investigative journalist and New York Times best-selling author. Her latest book *High Conflict* is an exploration of what happens when people get locked in seemingly intractable feuds and how they've broken free.

Amanda Ripley:

"I think I actually feel like there is a huge unmet demand in the United States and in other hyperpolarized countries for something else. And the more miserable people get, the more opportunity, ironically, there can be."

Amanda is joined by Eric Liu, co-founder and CEO of Citizen University. He also directs the Aspen Institute's Citizenship & American Identity Program: home to an initiative that trains people in how to have what they call: "better arguments."

Eric Liu:

"...the premise of that project is that as polarized and toxic as our civic and political life are right now, we don't need fewer arguments. We just need less stupid ones."

Samantha Cherry:

This conversation comes from the stage at the Resnick Aspen Action Forum. It is moderated by Rima Maktabi, London Bureau Chief of Al Arabiya news, and Fellow of the Middle East Leadership Initiative - Over the past 20 years, Rima's covered conflicts across the Middle East, making her no stranger to the topic of this dialogue.

Rima Maktabi:

I'm coming to you from Beirut, Lebanon and I'll start this conversation with a very brief story. Last night of all places, I joined some friends and some of them, they were from the US and three of them were Republicans and two were Democrats. And despite we are in a country that's witnessing major financial and political crisis, the topic was about you US politics. It starts to get heated. And suddenly, one of them said, let's just not discuss this. Let's all stay silent, avoid this topic or else it's going to end up in a bad discussion or in a bad conflict. Amanda, my first question is to you. Is remaining silent an option? And then the floor is yours to comments on this topic. Why are we so polarized?

Amanda Ripley:

Thank you, Rima. It is so good to be here with all of you and particularly to have your voice from a place that has seen so much violent conflict. There is an irony, isn't there? There's a paradox that happens in intractable conflict where people on the extremes seem to get louder and louder, especially on social media or TV news. And then everybody else gets quieter. And we see this happen all over the world, where in the US, just to take one example, half of Americans say they have stopped talking to someone because of something they said about politics. And two thirds say that they have a political view they're afraid to share. So we know enough about human psychology to know that that conflict, when you stifle it, doesn't go away.

Amanda Ripley:

It goes underground and ferments. It becomes hardened. And it's understandable. So it's understandable that you would have some people getting louder and some people getting quieter. So both behaviors are normal and dangerous in different ways. And I remember, actually, after Trump was elected here, going to my husband's family for Thanksgiving in New Jersey, as we always do. And I walk in the door and there's signs that some of the younger cousins had posted. These are like in college, the signs say no talking about politics. So this thing that was on everyone's mind, we weren't allowed to talk about.

Amanda Ripley:[]

And it's not like it's gotten better since then. So I'm curious how that works in Lebanon, do people talk about conflict more openly, given how intense the conflict is?

Rima Maktabi:

Yes, of course they do. And sometimes it gets into a bloody conflict. So a simple discussion over dinner or people are queuing now for fuel in Lebanon, there's a lack of fuels and the waiting hours and the tense discussions can lead to a fight where the army or the local securities can interfere. Yes, I'm coming from the part of the world where the concept of high conflict that you talk about is not very common. So if you tell us more about high conflict.

Amanda Ripley:

One of the things that I've learned in spending the last five years following people who were stuck in very

intractable conflict all over the world and then shifted out, is that the problem isn't conflict, to your point. The problem, conflict makes us better, right? It's how we stand up for ourselves. It's how we get pushed and challenged in our families, in our communities and our churches and mosques and synagogues. That's how we get better. The problem is high conflict. So high conflict is a kind of conflict where it escalates to a point that it takes on a life of its own. And there's been a lot of really fascinating research into this, but we know that in high conflict, once it starts, it's very magnetic. It becomes an us versus them kind of feud. Humans make many more mistakes in high conflict.

Amanda Ripley:

We literally lose our peripheral vision, like literally and figuratively. So we miss things. We miss opportunities. We make mistakes. Right now just to take another quick example, currently Democrats in the United States think there are twice as many Republicans who have extreme views than actually do and vice versa. And this is partly fueled by this paradox of some people getting louder. So we know that 97% of tweets about national politics are posted by 10% Twitter users. So you get this effect where it seems like everybody, especially on the other side, has lost their mind. And so it has this effect of perpetuating the conflict and then eventually it becomes conflict for conflict's sake. So what you really want is to shift out of that into good conflict, the kind where there are some rules of engagement.

Rima Maktabi:

And here, where my question is to Eric and the floor is yours. Why are we so polarized and how do we get to good conflict?

Eric Liu:

Rima, thank you for that. And thanks to everybody for being part of this gathering, it's really exciting to engage in this topic. And I want to tell you a little bit about this question from an American perspective, although I think the ideas that I want to share here are completely relevant worldwide. You know, I think that part of why has to do not just with the circumstances of this moment, but recognizing deep tectonic shifts here in the United States, for instance, and I think any society can kind of find its own version of these. In the United States, the grinding levels of inequality that have unfolded over the last three, four decades, the profound demographic shifts that are changing our notion of who is us and creating a lot of status anxiety across the board. Those are some of the drivers of polarization, of course social media, but there's something I want to zoom out and actually remind us of.

Eric Liu:

And it's something that Amanda alluded to when she said that conflict itself is not the problem. And I work at the Aspen Institute in the program that I lead here. We have a project called the Better Arguments Project, and the premise of that project is that as polarized and toxic as our civic and political life are right now, we don't need fewer arguments. We just need less stupid ones. And that's not to be glib. I think actually one of the things that Amanda and others have really shown is that there are ways to argue that are more constructive or more destructive. But even more than that, it is recognizing that in the American civic and political context, argument is not just okay. Argument is the point. American civic life is an argument. In American civic life we are torn perpetually by design between liberty and equality, between a focus on strong central national government and local control, between the pluribus part of our motto, E Pluribus Unum, and the Unum part of our motto, and on and on. There are these tensions that are baked into the American system of self-government.

Eric Liu:

And the point of living like a citizen is not to have one side or the other of these polar tensions achieve

quote unquote, final victory. God help us if one side achieves final victory in one of these tensions. You don't want a society that's only about liberty and not about equality or vice versa, but the point is actually to be able to navigate those tensions, perpetually and healthfully. And so we've created this project that begins with that premise. Number one, that it's possible, it's necessary to argue, but what does it mean then to have better arguments?

Eric Liu:

Well, better arguments are those that in the first place are honest about power and power differentials. They're arguments that have some measure of emotional intelligence in the way that Amanda was alluding to, and there are arguments in which you recognize and acknowledge the place of history and the ways in which this is not just an argument that popped up without context right now for you in this moment.

Eric Liu:

And in the work that we've done around the United States, you'd think that a lot of these arguments settings are just left versus right, Republican versus Democrat, like Rima, you experienced at dinner last night, and yes, those are many of them. But remember these kinds of arguments in civic life can unfold around other tensions as well. In a city like Detroit, where the tensions have been between long-timers and newcomers and the long-timers tend to be black and the newcomers tend to be white. The long-timers have struggled through decades of a city going through so much grinding crunching change, and the newcomers are more economically privileged and arriving as if they're getting to remake the city without paying attention to its past.

Eric Liu:

Those tensions don't map a left right Republican Democrat axis, but they are as polarizing and as visceral as some of what you might see in national politics. And these principles, we've laid out five principles of better arguments, which I can talk about in a moment. But I think as to how we got here, it's recognizing partly these circumstances of demography and economic inequality, and partly at least in the American context, because it's in our operating system, we're supposed to argue and left unchecked, left without intentional cultivation of self and circumstance, things get polarized this way.

Rima Maktabi:

I'll pass the question to Amanda because we have the US example now that Eric is talking about. If we look at the broader picture and the bigger perspective, are there societies capable of avoiding conflicts or high conflicts, more than others, or countries?

Amanda Ripley:

Definitely many societies at the micro level and the macro level that have for periods of time developed the traditions and rituals that tend to cultivate good conflict, some of which Eric mentioned. And there's ways in which it's easier to see at the institutional level. One of the stories that I write about in my book is about a synagogue, actually, in New York City that almost blew up in internal conflict over Israel, which happens in a lot of synagogues in the United States. And typically, rabbis just don't talk about Israel because it's so radioactive, to this point about avoidance.

Amanda Ripley:

But what happens is people suppress their opinions and they don't go away. So in this case, the conflict spilled out onto the front pages of the New York Times, the rabbis were more left. The congregation was more right. People were saying terrible things, leaving the synagogue. It was pretty awful. And the rabbis

tried to make the problem go away, which is what most of us do in conflict. And then it didn't go away, it kept coming back. So they, to their credit, brought in some mediators who had worked with Israelis and Palestinians, and they spent a year creating new traditions and rituals and routines that intensely went into conflict with guardrails that Eric talks about.

Amanda Ripley:

And they managed, it took a year. It was hard work. It sounds really starry-eyed, and it's actually not. It took a year of 25 different conversations and having rules of engagement that everyone came up with and agreed to, getting curious, not trying to persuade all those kinds of things. And eventually, after a year, people started to actually feel moments of delight in profound conflict. And if you've ever experienced this, it is truly exhilarating. It's a strange transcendent feeling and you want more of it.

Amanda Ripley:

So the next conflict that blew up or threatened to blow up the synagogue was about interfaith marriage. And they knew what to do. They went into it with the same rituals and routines. They had hard conversations to get to the understory of the conflict, the thing it's really about that we never talk about. And they get curious in that conflict. So it is certainly possible.

Rima Maktabi:

So just in two minutes for each, because I'm running out of time, is there hope? Does it look better as we look at the future? Eric?

Eric Liu:

Well, I think there always is hope, but the hope is not because of something else outside us in the future. The hope is whether we make a commitment, and I think this collective leadership emphasis at the action forum today really underscores this. You know, there are five principles to a better argument that I just want to rattle off to invite you all watching and listening to inhabit them. Number one, take winning off the table. It is incredibly possible to have a better conflict and a better argument if the point is to understand rather than to win or crush the opponent.

Eric Liu:

Number two, prioritize relationships and listen passionately. Silence or quiet can be okay if what you're doing is truly listening deeply and not just checking out or avoiding. Number three, pay attention to context, especially cultural context. Arguments don't happen in some rationalist intellectual vacuum. They happen in cultural context, as you know well, Rima. Number four, embrace vulnerability. Admit your doubt, admit your pain, admit your fear and the others will reciprocate over time if you have faith and commit to that.

Eric Liu:

And finally, number five, make room to transform. You can't possibly change someone else's mind if you're not willing to have your own mind changed. And leaving that space helps make a better argument. And I think if we can commit to these principles, there is hope. And if we can't, no amount of program, no amount of anything else is going to change things.

Rima Maktabi:

Amanda?

Amanda Ripley:

Yes. I think I actually feel like there is a huge unmet demand in the United States and in other hyperpolarized countries for something else. And the more miserable people get, the more opportunity, ironically, there can be. And when I talk now to members of Congress or gang members, or even rebel fighters in Columbia, I see the same fatigue, the same exhaustion, the same desperate desire to get out, if only they knew the path. And that is typically what you need. You need to hit that saturation point. And then there is an opportunity and it's a lot easier if people can do it as a group. There is an opportunity to make that shift. And I love Eric's principles, I think that all makes sense. For me, the prerequisite that makes all of those things easier, which you mentioned, is listening deeply. 50% of what people want in conflict is to be heard and understood, even if you still disagree deeply.

Amanda Ripley:

That is a huge skeleton key that opens up conflict. And I swear, I know it sounds a little squishy. It is like magic. And once you can work on those skills, which almost none of us have, by the way, so it takes some practice. Once you work on those skills of deep listening and understanding, then you get amazing returns on conflict.

Samantha Cherry:

That's it for this episode of the Value of Leadership. To learn more about High Conflict and Amanda's other work visit amandaripley.com and for more on the Better Arguments project, visit betterarguments.org. You can watch other conversations from the Resnick Aspen Action Forum on trust building, social change, collective leadership, and more on the Aspen Institute's website via the link in our show notes.

The Value of Leadership is a podcast from the Aspen Institute's Aspen Global Leadership Network (AGLN). AGLN's mission is to develop authentic, high-integrity leaders. People who are committed to proactively confronting societal challenges, individually and collectively, in order to create a more just, free, and equitable society. And Fellows are putting their values to work all across the globe. To learn more about the network and the work of our Fellows, visit agln.aspeninstitute.org.

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