

## Op-ed: Conflict Entrepreneurs Don't Have to Win

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### Commentary

*by Dr. Dana Ackley*

We seem to be living in two worlds. The one we hear about on the news, social media, and those relentless political ads, is beset with bitter divisiveness. Conflict entrepreneurs, for their own selfish purposes, seek to pit groups of our fellow citizens against each other. It is poison. Rage is as addictive as heroin. It gives us a false sense of security that feels good, lighting up the same part of the brain as opioids. Conflict entrepreneurs are more than happy to be pushers.

The other world is the one we actually experience. In that world, people go to work every day and make a positive difference. The vast majority of parents take good care of their children, helping them learn to become responsible citizens. It is a world where neighbors help each other despite political differences. Americans divide themselves into seven political groups from right to left, not just two. Only 14% are on the extremes, 6% on the far left and 8% on the far right. 86% of us are somewhere in the middle, willing to at least listen to other points of view.

It would be easy for people to mistake the world of divisiveness as the real one. It gets all the press. When was the last time you read a headline that said 330 million Americans lived responsible lives today? We need to protect ourselves from believing the poison and lies that come from conflict entrepreneurs. You can spot their efforts easily:

They call people names.

They castigate people's character.

They take a tone of moral superiority.

Their messages are emotionally seductive. They appeal to that wish in all of us to belong to an exclusive and higher group. "My tribe is better than your tribe."

But such messages are poison. In the everyday world we live in, hate begets hate. Kindness, on the other hand, begets kindness. Given the challenges we all face, we can use all the

kindness we can get. It is important to keep this in mind as we enter the midterms, when we will be invited to believe that people who think differently than us are enemies.

The Roanoke Collaboration Project (RCP) is a local group of volunteers who seek to overcome the poison of conflict entrepreneurs. We engage in activities designed to bring people who represent different political views, genders, religions, and races together for collaborative dialogue on the important problems our Valley faces. These problems are too important to be left to those who would divide us. When we learn from each other, the chances of developing effective and lasting solutions grows dramatically.

Members of the RCP Steering Committee represent different politics, races, genders, and religions. We have been working together since 2020 and have had many disagreements. We have found that collaborative dialogue has guided us through tough discussions so that we can continue to work together and respect each other. Our shared vision for our special Valley keeps us from succumbing to those who would divide us.

As we enter this election season, let's not let the voices of hate and divisiveness win this time. Not in our Valley. If that sounds good, here are steps each of us can take.

Sign RCP's Pledge for Constructive Dialogue that can be found on our website [roanokecollaboration.org](http://roanokecollaboration.org). Over 300 of your fellow Valley citizens have done so.

Make it a point to have one conversation a week with someone who thinks differently than you do. When you do, follow the tenets of the Pledge for Constructive Dialogue. As we learn from others, it is amazing how smart we can get.

Post responsibly on social media. Don't succumb to the siren song of conflict entrepreneurs.

Demand better from our political leaders. They have every right to their points of view, and to share them, but only in constructive ways. When they call names, spread fear, or assassinate the character of their opponents, let's call them out.

*RCP Steering Committee: Chris Morrill, Joyce Waugh, William Fralin, Rev. Bill Lee, Rev. George Anderson, Dr. Lee Learman, Cynthia Lawrence, Jay Foster, Wayne Strickland, Mike O'Brochta, Dr. David Points, Katherin Elam, Dr. Dana Ackley.*

*RCP is a group of civic-minded volunteers in the Roanoke Valley who believe that courageous collaboration among diverse stakeholders is the key to forming relationships, building trust, bridging divides, and producing solutions. Please visit [roanokecollaboration.org](http://roanokecollaboration.org) to view our Civility Pledge.*