



The Science of Civility: A Strategic Briefing

Introduction: Beyond the Misconception

Civility is frequently misunderstood as a mere social nicety or a synonym for "politeness." This reductionist view overlooks its fundamental role as a prerequisite for effective governance. Far from being a soft concept, civility is a strategic necessity that directly impacts the quality of leadership, the efficacy of decision-making, and the health of our democratic institutions. This document lays out the scientific basis for civility and details why it is an essential component of high-functioning political environments.

The Anatomy of Civility

Compassion in Politics, in collaboration with the **Jo Cox Foundation**, has promoted a **Civility Pledge** to redefine engagement in public life. Civility is about engaging others with strength, integrity, and accountability.

The pledge calls for the use of a civil and constructive tone in debate; acting with integrity, honesty, and compassion; and behaving respectfully towards others, even when there are disagreements. Civility allows people to discuss, challenge, and debate opposing views without resorting to hostility, coercion, and authoritarianism.

The "High-Stakes" Context

The necessity of this work is literal and profound. The **Jo Cox Foundation** was established following the 2016 murder of Jo Cox MP—a tragedy that underscored the ultimate cost of a breakdown in civil discourse. This context remains critical as levels of threat, hostility, and intimidation of politicians are at an all-time high.

The **Jo Cox Civility Commission** recently highlighted that this environment not only affects the wellbeing of those in politics but also creates a systemic risk to the functioning of our democracy by deterring engagement and distorting the political process.

The Neurobiology of Decision-Making

Research tells us that when threatened, our nervous system responds in a way that tries to ensure our survival. This is true for threats to both our physical and psychological safety.

- **The Threat Response:** According to **Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2022)**, a sense of safety is a biological imperative for social engagement. When we perceive a threat, the "Social Engagement System" shuts down in favor of more primitive "fight-flight" responses.
- **Cognitive Narrowing:** During such times, our ability to remain calm, grounded, and reflective diminishes. Our attention narrows; we become hyper-focused on the threat and how to respond to it.
- **Implications for Governance:** These psychological processes are inconsistent with good decision-making on complex matters. Governance requires reflection, the weighing of numerous competing factors, and logical, considered, consequential thinking. This can only be achieved in the absence of threat.

The Strategic Benefits of Civility

Civility is associated with a number of measurable benefits for leaders and organizations:

- **Perception of Competence:** Civil people tend to be perceived as warm and competent. People are more trusting of civil individuals and more likely to share information and seek advice from them.
- **Leadership and Respect:** Research by **Porath et al.** indicates that respect is the leader behavior with the single most powerful effect on outcomes. Those who feel respected report better health, more trust, and greater focus.
- **Performance:** Evidence suggests that as individuals are perceived as more civil, their performance in job roles improves. Politicians who adopt these principles report a shift from personal attacks to the consideration of substantive matters.

Capacity Building: Civility as a Teachable Skill

A core tenet of our work is that civility and psychological awareness are not innate personality traits, but rather **cognitive and emotional competencies that can be taught and learned.**

Authorities such as the **OECD** confirm that social and emotional skills—including emotional regulation and impulse control—are "malleable" and can be strengthened through deliberate capacity building. By bringing greater psychological awareness into politics, we offer training that builds:

- **Neurological Regulation:** Tools to manage the "threat response" and maintain executive function under pressure.
- **Relational Skills:** Techniques in active listening and de-escalation.
- **Institutional Resilience:** Strengthening the ability of teams to function effectively in high-stress environments.

Our Training Offer

To support the practical application of these scientific principles, **Compassion in Politics** provides specialized **Civility Training** for elected representatives, party officials, and their teams. This training translates the evidence base into actionable skills, providing the psychological tools necessary to navigate high-pressure environments with composure and integrity. We firmly believe that if the majority of those within the political space committed

to this pledge and engaged in this capacity building, a greater sense of psychological safety would be experienced, leading to more robust and effective governance.

References

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- **Porges, S. W. (2022).** "Polyvagal theory: A science of safety." *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience*, 16.

For further information or details about our Civility Training please contact:

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