The Search for Real, Integrative Solutions

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The Search for Real, Integrative Solutions

This inaugural issue of Solutions marks the beginning of what we hope will be a long and fruitful dialogue across our global society. To help build a shared vision of where our society wants to go and initiate a broad agreement about how to get there—these are our intentions.

We want Solutions to help us move beyond the debate that dominates public discussion toward substantive and constructive dialogue between all stakeholders in society. “Dialogue” means “through speech.” Webster’s dictionary defines the purpose of dialogue as “seeking mutual understanding and harmony.” Daniel Yankelovich, a psychologist and public opinion analyst, views it as a special form of discussion with almost magical abilities to build cooperation, if done properly.1 With Solutions, we aim to do dialogue properly and extend this special form of constructive discussion to include not only speech, but also visual forms of communication.

One of the root causes of our inability to make progress is that we live in a society where academia, media, law, and politics cast complex problems as polar opposites. This ‘argument culture’ encourages the protection and definition of disciplinary territories with sharp boundaries on the intellectual landscape. Among academics, this makes issues that cross disciplinary boundaries difficult, if not impossible, to deal with. Moreover, large gaps in the intellectual landscape are not covered by any discipline. Deborah Tannen notes in *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*:2

> “Throughout our educational system the most pervasive inheritance is the conviction that issues have two sides, that knowledge is best gained through debate, that ideas should be presented orally to an audience that does its best to poke holes and find weaknesses, and that to get recognition, one has to ‘stake out a position’ in opposition to another.”

While there is nothing wrong with debate and direct confrontation on some issues, it does not work for all issues. Certainly, the complex, interconnected issues that we face today—the ones focused on in Solutions—require a complex, multifaceted approach. This approach must encourage real dialogue and must not cast every discussion as a zero-sum, win-lose, either-or dichotomy. People are ready to read about realistic, creative ways in which to create a more harmonious world. They will find some of these ideas in Solutions.

Solutions will help us break out of the argument culture by emphasizing constructive collaboration, shared goals, respect for alternative views, and civility. One way we will achieve this is through a “constructive review process,” to encourage people to build on ideas rather than claiming them as turf and defending them.3 Another way necessitates traveling beyond our national borders, to examine how other societies and cultures address similar problems. Expect to hear undiscovered voices and see unexplored places in Solutions.

Building a culture of constructive dialogue will not be easy from within the existing argument culture, but it is essential if we are to create a sustainable and desirable future. What kinds of ideas do we expect this dialogue to produce? We expect the unexpected, but there are several recurring themes. In order to create compelling, integrative solutions, we must:

- create clear visions of a future that embody necessary solutions
- design whole, integrated systems, not just individual parts
- acknowledge and understand cultural evolution and how it interacts with biological evolution to create change
- understand the deep connections between world views, institutions, and technologies and how they interact to produce different qualities of life

Solutions will actively seek the best new ideas and give them a platform. If successful, Solutions will help change the world and meet the challenges of the future. We need broad participation in the ongoing, constructive dialogue that we hope to create and foster. It is the most important thing we can do. Please join us.

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References


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