

Getting Things Done

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

Many dramatic problems face the United States today, including what to do about Russia, North Korea, health care, immigration, gun violence and climate change. One of our most serious difficulties today is not just these challenges, but our inability to make progress in dealing with the issues. The process by which we have historically gotten things done in public policy and public life is not being effectively utilized today.

In my experience, the values and ethics behind how we approach issues determines how effective we are in addressing them. In today's environment, our society's best values — such as mutual respect, collaboration, equity and reciprocity — are sometimes in disfavor. They are regarded by some people as dispensable, fuzzy-headed, naïve, too much trouble and not able to produce effective outcomes.

Quite to the contrary, in my experience, making choices that represent a strong ethical stance is not just “right.” In the long run, approaches that are inclusive and based on values such as empathy, respect, reciprocity and collaboration make good business, good policy, good strategy and lead to the most successful outcomes.

Over the past 40 years, I've been fortunate to serve in leadership roles in some very challenging situations, ranging from local civic issues to national and international problems. In every case, I've found that the choices and approaches reflecting our best values have been the most successful.

On the international front, “loose nukes” in the former Soviet Union was the most dramatic problem I've been involved in addressing. In 1991, when the Soviet Union broke up, nuclear weapons were left in four countries — Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. This was dangerous, potentially leading to three new nuclear weapons states and the ability of terrorist groups to readily obtain material and technology for nuclear weapons due to lax control in these newly minted nations.

To accomplish our goals of denuclearization of the three non-Russian countries and reduction and protection of the remaining nuclear weapons in Russia, there was a bipartisan process in the United States that designed and oversaw negotiations and assistance that led the former Soviet countries to dismantle their nuclear weapons. We engaged directly with the four countries involved, meeting their needs for assistance in dismantling the weapons.

Over time, we were able to eliminate 2,650 Soviet missiles and bombers capable of delivering nuclear warheads to the United States, to see more than 11,000 Soviet nuclear warheads dismantled, to better secure the warheads that were allowed to remain in Russia under a previous arms control agreement, to destroy 2 million chemical artillery rounds in Russia with 5,400 metric tons of lethal chemicals,

to eliminate an anthrax biological weapons facility in Russia, and to better protect Russia's remaining nuclear material against terrorists.

And so the threat to the United States of three additional nuclear powers was prevented. It was the approach — bi-partisan, collaborative and preventive rather than reactive, partisan or confrontational — that led to success.

Turning to the local front, in the 1970s and 1980s, a federal flood control project on the Guadalupe River in downtown San Jose, and relocation of homes and businesses for noise abatement near San Jose Airport, made 250 acres of prime land available in the downtown area.

A commission held public hearings and engaged in a transparent decision process to determine that the best use for the land was a public park. And when a threatened lawsuit over environmental concerns could have halted the park project, a collaborative approach resolved the dispute and allowed the park to proceed.

Today San Jose has the Guadalupe River Park, with diverse elements including bike and walking trails, ball fields, picnic areas, greenswards, areas of drought-tolerant native grasses, a heritage rose garden of “old roses,” programs educating school kids about the ecology of the river, a historic orchard to educate on the agricultural past of the Valley prior to the technology industry and an area commemorating the Olympic skating champions from our region — Peggy Fleming, Rudy Galindo, Kristi Yamaguchi and Brian Boitano.

Dedication by the city of San Jose to the public interest, collaboration, respect for differing views and finding ways to bridge conflicts has been key to securing this important resource for one of the country's most rapidly expanding urban areas.

There are many more examples of how, on both the international and domestic fronts, our society has successfully solved problems by tapping our best values as a democratic society.

So, when you hear leaders indicating that berating, confrontation, demeaning others, denying the viewpoints and interests of others and similar approaches are effective in solving the problems we face, don't believe it.

Mutual disrespect and mistrust in a society is a slippery slope down which lies an inability to solve our problems. And, considering the challenges we face with North Korea, Russia, climate change, immigration, healthcare and so many more problems, that is a slope we cannot afford to be on.



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy