



# Habits of Effective Bridge Builders

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*Whether it's an uncle, a coworker, a political candidate, or a childhood best friend, we are all likely to experience the desire to label someone our "nemesis" based on something they say or do, an action they take, or a belief or value they hold. In the face of those tensions, bridge building calls us not to demonize, cancel, condemn, or seek to vanquish those we might have labeled "nemesis," but instead to reach out, extend ourselves, and dig deeper. Bridge building calls us to remember that people are more than what we perceive as their worst deed, comment, vote, or belief. Our "nemeses" are humans just like us. As we seek to solve our biggest problems there is power in seeking to cross lines of difference with others.*

*While Bridging The Gap (BTG) is a program, it is also a paradigm. BTG consists of specific practices and skills for how to approach difference, tension, and disagreement. The more we practice each of these skills the more effectively we can cross lines of difference, revolutionize collaboration, and achieve innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges our communities face. Maybe we can open up just a little—ask others to tell us a bit more about what matters to them or about the very topic we had once shut down. Doing so creates the possibility that we learn something about what others believe or why they believe it. With practice maybe we can even open up a whole new space and way to connect with others. These skills can be powerful. In our work, we have found that the most successful bridge builders go beyond practicing the skills and often seek to embrace and embody the following habits.*

## **1. Know yourself and your purpose.**

Bridge building starts with knowing ourselves and recognizing that each person has a unique and complex perspective shaped by their particular experiences, including us. When we have committed to authentically and unflinchingly explore what ignites that fire in our belly, we can do our best work out in the world. Consider 16th century Sufi poet Rumi's words:

*"Everyone has been made for some particular work, And the desire for that work has been put in every heart...Let yourselves be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love."*

Or the words of 20th century writer Audre Lorde:

*"I work with the consciousness of death at my shoulder, not constantly, but often enough to leave a mark upon all of my life's decisions and actions. And it does not matter whether this death comes next week or thirty years from now; this consciousness has given my life another breadth. It helps shape the words I speak, the way I love, my politic of action, the strength of my vision and purpose, the depth of my appreciation of living."*

When we know our purpose we can approach bridge building with a strong back and soft front. We can feel confident in what we truly believe (strong back) so there is no need to behave as if we are brittle or rigid; we can have a soft front. We can stand solid and still be inviting. Bridge builders who are committed to being engaged with this deep awareness about themselves—their beliefs, faith, motivations, and unique purpose—are more likely to be prepared to cross lines of difference with a transformative openness.



## 2. Believe in the power of listening.

Learning to listen with humility, care, and curiosity to the people with whom we fundamentally disagree will change our lives. There are many reasons we might be motivated to become stronger listeners:

- knowing the “enemy” better in order to win;
- creating deeper buy in among diverse stakeholders;
- generating better outcomes by considering less common points of view, idea, or “the wisdom of the margins;”
- illuminating aspects of a situation that no one of us can see on our own;
- engaging more people for the sake of democracy and the obligations that come when living in one; or,
- reaffirming the inherent dignity and humanity of all people.

No matter the reason, there is no value judgment about a person’s motivations—no reason is better or worse than another and each bridge builder can begin to listen from wherever they are. Listening and being listened to unlocks something regardless of why you set out to do it. Over time, the experience works on us and makes other things possible. We also know the converse to be true. If we feel unheard, silenced, or not listened to, the likelihood that we will act destructively or, at the very least be unwilling to engage, is higher. So, bridge builders believe then that when people do feel deeply heard the chance of something constructive unfolding is much, much higher. Bridging The Gap Founder Simon Greer writes,

*“Some people say they are tired of conversation. They want less talking and more action. To them, I would humbly say, if you have had countless discussions and nothing has come of it then these aren’t really conversations and most likely no one has been listening. In true conversation, when deep listening takes place, action is the most natural human outcome. If I am listening and you are in pain, I will be moved to act. Conversely, if I think I can skip conversation, seek shortcuts, driven by the urgency of action, then I will be lost in an endless cycle of detours”*

Bridge builders know listening is a superpower that, when intentionally practiced, can transform us, our relationships, and even the most deeply seated challenges our communities face.

## 3. Embrace complexity.

People are complex and if we forget this we can begin to see others (and possibly ourselves) as monoliths who hold only one viewpoint which is either correct or incorrect. We may also come to believe that we or they are wholly defined by a position or belief. Each of us have had and will continue to have unique experiences that shape our beliefs and we may even hold beliefs others view as contradictory. That said, human beings also have a unique ability to see something, interact with it, and then recognize and utilize it again and again without thinking. Take a mug for example. We drink out of it each day without needing to reassess its function. We don’t confuse the mug with our shoes. We know intuitively that shoes go on our feet and the mug meets our mouth so we can drink. While being able to categorize and repeat patterns with inanimate objects helps us function smoothly, this is not necessarily so helpful when it comes to interacting



with other humans. This sorting capacity may lead us to believe we know how someone voted based on the color of their hat; we can know someone's gender based on their hair; we can know someone's family history based on their religion. But the practice of bridging gaps starts with dropping some of these stories and being curious about the individual person in front of us. Undoubtedly their experiences and communities have shaped their perspectives but to deeply bridge we begin with curiosity. We seek to check our preexisting categories and ensuing assumptions about them and instead reveal the range of beliefs and attitudes that they hold simultaneously.

#### **4. Seek deeper understanding.**

Bridge building reminds us that no person or group of people has a monopoly on truth. Bridge builders honor the integrity of our strongest held convictions by asking how we, and others, have come to believe what we believe. We trust that truly sustainable and transformative solutions can only be found by unearthing our deepest experiences and insights and placing those in constructive tension with beliefs that are different from our own. So, when bridge builders encounter very different, challenging, and even surprising beliefs we get excited that we could learn something new. We orient ourselves toward understanding how this person came to hold this view and why it is important to them. The goal of bridge building is not to "win" the other person over or convince them to change their values. Instead of thinking we can outsmart someone else's values with facts and figures, effective bridge builders are humble and know that our value systems and priorities are not the only valid ones. Rather than proving others wrong, we seek to get inside their "worldview" and what they know as "common sense." Doing so allows us to try as best we can to see the world as they do while knowing we have not lived their experiences.

This disposition also means we do not need to water down our ideas or strive for a "mushy middle" compromise. And, while attempting to bridge gaps doesn't guarantee that we will find common ground between people it does create the possibility where it may have previously seemed impossible precisely because we more clearly see and understand worldviews different from our own and unlock something in that process. A bridge building conversation has come to its end when we have exhausted our capacity to understand.

#### **5. Allow others to be more.**

There are moral or philosophical choices to be made as we build bridges. Labeling people as racist, sexist, ableist, or any other form of bigoted or hateful *and therefore* unworthy of conversation, renders them essentially irredeemable and flat. Doing so posits that they are, in their totality, their bigotry. When we find ourselves labeling others there is a moral dilemma present. If we opt for this view (which we may be well within our rights to do) it does still present the practical question of: how do we actually live in a diverse community and what do we do with people who we have decided are their bigotry and nothing more? Do we vanquish them, expel them from our communities, turn away and hope they change? Can we be so sure that we see the whole story, the full picture, and truly understand all the wicked problems and complex responses we face? Can we afford to write off all of those with whom we disagree and accept that they have nothing to contribute and we have nothing to learn? Will we find common ground where we can, even with someone who expresses a bigoted position? Or is that a bridge too far?



## 6. Choose to bridge (or don't).

Even among the most practiced and committed bridge builders, there will be times we are not ready or willing to bridge gaps. All of us have faced our own trauma, hardships, or discrimination and it is within our right to draw a line at the bridges we are unwilling or unable to cross. The degree to which we are willing to bridge gaps varies from person to person and moment to moment. In honor of that we must be steadfast in noticing and attending to our own mental, emotional, and physical needs when bridging a gap. We must do this internal work to assess the risk versus reward tradeoff in each instance we might bridge. In situations where people intentionally offend or cause hurt it is important to recognize our boundaries. Sometimes that may simply mean a break for our own wellness and then continuing on. Sometimes it may mean recognizing our own limits and knowing when to call it. Even if we call it, the most effective bridge builders also recognize that our limits may shift and remain curious if or when the same gap presents itself again. It is a personal choice to determine who to bridge with and when. We can offer grace to ourselves and others who may recognize they are not ready to bridge certain gaps in certain moments.

Even if we ultimately choose not to bridge, it's important to consider how our efforts to make positive change could benefit from having at least one strategy for how we relate to those we are not currently bridging with. If we are not bridging with them then what are we doing? If we can remember that no person is simply, entirely bad or good—that all of us are better than our worst act, deed, comment, vote, or belief—we may be able to bridge some of the most entrenched gaps in our world. Bridge building is not for the faint of heart—we have the opportunity to courageously choose it each day.

## 7. Create a constructive context

While effective bridge builders do believe conversations across differences are one of the best ways to tackle the most pressing problems we face, we rarely, if ever, square off in an issue debate. Importantly, when we do seek to engage a contentious issue, we invest time up front to create the context in which disagreements on the issues are most likely to make progress. Put simply, the most effective bridge builders believe in breaking bread together first. They start with learning more about one another's values, worldview, hopes, and dreams. In time, relationships can withstand more and more tension. So, we patiently build that trust through our genuine concern for others. Meaningfully engaging those tensions is an essential ingredient in building strong, resilient, authentic, and lasting relationships.

## 8. Use bridge building to solve real world problems.

From criminal justice, to climate change, to immigration, the stakes are high in conversations around issues on which we may deeply disagree. No matter where we find ourselves regarding these topics, bridge builders recognize that all parties involved need a way to move beyond the way things have been done. Pitting different people against each other as a way to further caricature other sides rather than constructively engaging tension has often resulted in more harm and few to no solutions. Take, for example, the case of criminal justice and the way our country has swung between reform and tough on crime policies. Throughout efforts to address this very real challenge, two of the biggest stakeholders are often left out of the conversation: people who live and work in prisons. For these people bridge building is not theoretical or

rhetorical—it is a method to resolve literally deadly challenges. Seventy percent of people who have been incarcerated experience recidivism within five years of their release while the average life expectancy for



people working in prisons is only 59 years (approximately 20 years less than the average American). We do not use conversations across differences to pit “sides” against one another or to grandstand on the issues. Instead, effective bridge builders know that broken systems have the greatest chance of being improved when we deeply understand the varied experiences of people, from many sides of the issues, who are most impacted.

### **9. Commit to lifelong practice.**

Whether it’s choosing again and again to sit in the fire of tension or deep difference, or connecting to our purpose, this work requires a posture humble enough to recognize that bridge building is a practice and not a destination. Even with the best of intentions, our well-established habits are, to put it simply, habitual. Consistently accessing your authentic and grounded leadership as the source for your bridge building in the world requires practice. Martha Graham, a pioneer in modern dance and choreography offers this:

*“I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes the shape of achievement, a sense of one’s being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God. Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.”*

Bridge builders know this work is more than a bite sized training or workshop. Bridge builders often know they are in their growth zone by the questions they are left with after a conversation across difference: should I have pushed harder? Should I have opened up more? Did I let my conversation partner off the hook? Did I hold back? Did I go too easy on the things I deeply believe? This is often personal and private work and while we could rehash these questions over and over again, effective bridge builders ultimately choose to continue on and practice again.

### **10. Cultivate a deep love.**

We can learn bridge building skills to patiently listen to those with whom we deeply disagree for many reasons. Perhaps it’s to better understand the position of our fellow citizens and honor the ideal of equality between citizens in a democracy. Perhaps it’s to open ourselves and our views to potential criticism which may, in turn, clarify and sharpen our own thoughts and beliefs. Perhaps it’s to appreciate and inhabit another point of view because we humbly recognize that we do not have a monopoly on truth. Perhaps it’s to extend love and concern to someone different from us by taking seriously something that matters to them. No matter the reason, bridge building courageously proposes that we can fundamentally disagree with someone and still respect and even love them. This work will not fully live up to its promise, if it just becomes “improved technique” or “better messaging” that make us “effective” in “crossing lines of difference.” It is certainly true that just practicing the techniques can open up new possibilities and, in many cases, serve as a gateway to deeper, inward exploration and human connection. However, the deeper foundation that must continue to animate this work if it is to reach its transformative potential is a profound faith in people. Bridge builders use listening to open our hearts and activate an abiding belief in every person’s dignity and awesome potential. May we always be in service to sparking a deep love for other human beings.