

# HOW WE CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES



## By Neil Denton

Across all of our discussions, many people have reflected that resistance to change is widespread, whether through culture, systems or practices but we can still play a part in driving change by:

- Challenging and changing whatever stands in the way, including the deep-seated assumptions that can prevent us from being our best selves.
- Calling out inequalities and abuses of power, and making sure everyone can participate on their own terms.
- Assuming the best in others and seeing difference, conflict and division as an opportunity to pause, seek to understand, and find a fresh way.

Over 2022 we're looking more deeply at how to do this, with Neil Denton as our thought leader. He writes here about how conflict and division can be bridged.

I act as a mediator in situations where difference has become a divide, including in areas which have experienced a disaster, and I also reflect on the lessons in my work as an academic. Sometimes I ask myself why I do this work. Being a mediator is difficult and it can feel overwhelming and exhausting. Someone once said being a mediator is a bit like bringing a bucket of water to a drought and it's tempting to think, 'What's the point?' But a bucket of water can also be seen as a million little drops that can help seed new growth, if you carefully place them.

Very often even a crisis can end up in conflict. The initial stage often brings people together, especially at a neighbourhood level, and with those whose identity and circumstances we relate to, creating what academics call bonding social capital. However, these connections and collaborations can fade as time goes by, and people begin to acknowledge that their own needs differ from others. As communities become aware of these differences, the energy generated by a disaster can change from being a force that brings people together, to one that drives people apart.

The Covid pandemic, for example, has brought many neighbourhoods closer, at least in the early stages, but it has also brought inequality into plain sight. As the pandemic wore on, we saw a reduction in connections and collaborations with groups 'not like us' (what academics call bridging social capital), with an increase in 'out-group' blaming, for example between vaccine advocates and anti-vaxxers, where the potential for destructive conflict is real. We can see this in the quality of public debate in recent years. Debate and disagreement has become more 'tribal' and polarised. There is a lot more shouting than listening.

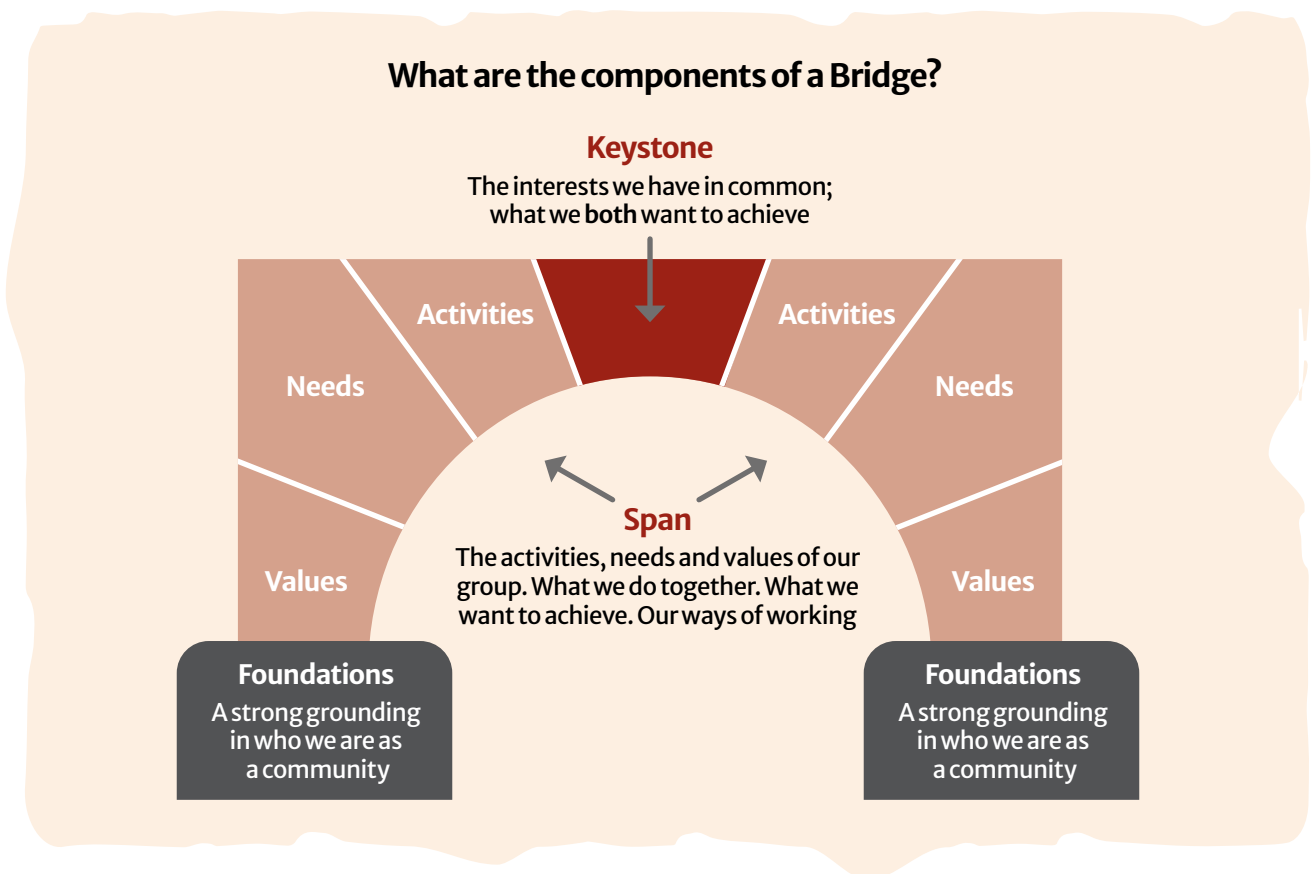
Differences, if managed well, can help us all see the world in fresh ways and achieve positive change. But what happens when conflict develops is what Marshall Rosenberg – in his work on NonViolent Communication – calls 'enemy thinking'.

We stick labels on people, seeing them as good or bad, blaming others and always starting with what is wrong. Words like 'I can't, you have to and they must' go with an 'either/or' mentality in which we either win or we lose. That's how wars begin. In peacetime, people are curious. They don't say that they know what the other group are thinking, they try to find out.

So how do we build bridges when differences become divides?

With the Relationships Project I have written the Bridge Builders Handbook, which sets out the critical components of how to build a bridge. This diagram sets out what a good bridge looks like.

What you don't do is build the bridge from the middle. If you try to start from superficial points of connection and



similarity, the bridge eventually falls down. What you need instead are strong foundations on either side first.

A mediator in these circumstances sits in both camps, listening with their eyes, head and heart and looking at the activities, needs and values of each community to see if they can build a story about them that will make sense to the other group, so that differences stop being deal-breakers and start becoming objects of curiosity. That's how you build a lasting keystone. It is held in place by genuine connection to the values, needs and activities of both two strands. The trick is to find legitimate goals that work for both groups and don't harm either. For example, not keeping a park safe by keeping the other group out, but making it safer and inclusive for everyone in the community. The energy for change comes out of genuine partnership.

This work is messy. It won't all go to plan and that's ok, as long as we keep talking to each other, and remain open to surprises.

You need a compass, not a map, in which you keep aware of two things at once – where we want to go, and where we are now – and accept that the exact route is uncertain. It's like putting bi-focals on, keeping sight of the goal, but being attentive and responsive to the everyday happenings.

Above all, you need to give it time. Time to be kind to ourselves and each other. Time to reach across empty and suspicious spaces and to place the drops from the bucket of water in a way that brings lasting change.

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