

Example column for MNA members, February 2024

Campaign to promote respect

Words can send a powerful message. That is especially true during an election season. They are a means of relaying information, and effective communication is vital to a well-connected community. It is the basis for a free society.

Most people have written or said things they'd like to retract. I certainly have.

A free-speech society sometimes means thoughts and ideas are going to be shared that can be hurtful or damaging. The damaging aspect is not always preventable because sometimes the truth and how it is shared will be detrimental to somebody. That doesn't mean we shouldn't share truths with others.

But deliberately attempting to harm somebody out of spite or because we think we are clever is counterproductive.

It's hard to pinpoint the exact cause of the linguistic anger that seems to simmer at the surface for so many people, but social media and its anonymous nature certainly have not helped. The mob mentality plays out daily on social media where it's easy to ridicule, mock and sandbag anyone who doesn't subscribe to our ideals.

Solving that puzzle takes personal responsibility and a desire to find ways to help those around us succeed, rather than eagerly pointing out their failures.

It does take some effort and self-examination, but it couldn't come at a better time. We know this election season will be volatile for many people. It is a line in the sand for some. Compromise, while still achieved frequently in our daily endeavors, is seemingly abandoned when it comes to politics. Many of our politicians set that example years ago, and scores of us have regrettably followed.

But there are ways to participate in an election season, be loyal to your party, and still be capable of respectfully engaging in conversations or contemplating comments from an opposing party's platform without blowing a gasket. Not agreeing may still ultimately be the outcome, but vilifying or deleting somebody from your life because they aren't lock-step with you on certain key issues is isolating, and it stunts our ability to understand why other people think a certain way, believe in a cause or how they approach difficult decisions.

We all learn and gain so much from others, but that only happens when we are willing to communicate with those we don't always agree with.

Starting in February, we want to reinforce the power of positive communication by initiating a "Respect Campaign" through a series of advertisements that are designed to serve as a reminder about being respectful of others when we communicate. The advertisements share a simple message that also remind us that kindness can play a role in our daily lives. Will we always agree? Will we always find a shared solution? Will we always be able to influence? No. But making the attempt without crucifying others is a good start.

If we can do that, then we have made significant strides for the good of our communities and the greater society. And there's always the chance we might also learn something valuable along the way.

- *Keith Anderson is director of news for APG of East Central Minnesota.*