

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT:
DEMOCRACY'S LEADERS ADDRESSING CHALLENGES
ACROSS IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES*

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FOR our democracies to function well, in states or countries that have wide ideological divisions, our leaders must be able to engage with each other effectively across these divides in order to develop broadly embraced ways to address problems and to create opportunities.

Tonight, I am honored to talk with you about our attempt in the State of North Carolina to enable our policy leaders to develop this capacity.

North Carolina, like Greece, has a population of about 11 million people. Our voters are essentially evenly divided between Democrats, Republicans, and unaffiliated voters.

My lecture will be in four parts:

First, I will explain how and why the North Carolina Leadership Forum was created, and what its goals are.

Second, I will explain the Leadership Forum process.

Third, I will discuss the basis for some of the unique aspects of a Leadership Forum and why we think they are important.

Finally, I will talk about the results we have had to date.

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HOW AND WHY THE NC LEADERSHIP FORUM WAS CREATED

In 2013, in North Carolina, there was an explosion of venomous partisan polarization. For the first time in decades, the Republican Party controlled both houses of the State General Assembly and the Governor's Office. This led to a determination on their part to push through their conservative agenda, including important changes to the revenue structure of the State, to public education, and to how elections were conducted. The Democrats, and other progressives, responded with protests, sit-ins in the legislative building which resulted in arrests, and boycotts. Both sides publicly demonized the other. North Carolina's policy leaders had always had disagreements but had previously managed to work together, for the most part amicably. In 2013 they simply quit talking with each other.

At the same time, in North Carolina, as in the rest of the United States, there was fracturing of the traditional news media, with people watching, hearing, and reading the media that confirmed their biases. Policy leaders did not even have an agreement about basic information about facts or events. The ascendancy of social media only compounded the media bubble problem.

The North Carolina Leadership Forum (NCLF), a program of Duke University, was born out of this dysfunctional polarization. John Hood, then the Executive Director of the conservative John Locke Foundation and a respected libertarian thought leader, responded to these events by writing a newspaper column bemoaning the loss of a place for conservative and progressive leaders to have an honest argument. I, then the Executive Director of the progressive Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and a former Democratic North Carolina State Senator, read the column and agreed with it. We met and thought that perhaps together we could create a place for our policy leaders to have an honest conversation about their disagreements. John and I had never agreed on almost anything before this, and it took six months of discussion for us to trust each other enough to decide to move forward with the idea together. Fortunately, the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University agreed with the need, and NCLF was established as a program of Duke.

The goal of NCLF is to build the will, skills, and relationships public policy leaders need to engage with each other constructively across political parties, ideologies, and other differences so they are able to develop broadly accepted ways to address problems and to create opportunities.

John Hood's and my creating this program together has been essential to NCLF's success. We are public thought leaders known to disagree with each other deeply. Promptly establishing a steering committee that has gender and racial as well as ideological diversity has also been important to enable a broad array of people to feel included. As we recruited a variety of public policy leaders to participate in the program, the result was that each leader we were recruiting could look at us and, at least to some degree, identify with at least one of us.

In addition, John's and my working together publicly has proved to be important role modeling, and it has given our participants confidence that they also can work effectively with people with whom they disagree.

THE KEY FEATURES AND FLOW OF A LEADERSHIP FORUM

When starting a Leadership Forum, the first step is to pick a topic for deliberation that is controversial and complex enough to sustain a deep discussion. Some examples of our topics have been what would be the best energy future for our state, how can we improve health outcomes, and how can we improve access to adequate housing.

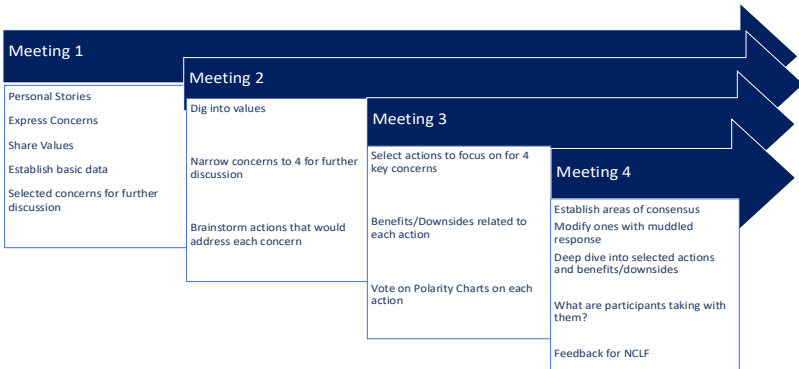
Then we invite a diverse group of 30-36 policy leaders to participate in the Forum. By leaders we mean current leaders, not aspiring leaders or former leaders. We generally invite some leaders who have expertise in the field we are discussing, and others who are general leaders who need to grapple with that topic among other concerns.

By diverse we mean by party and ideology including both moderate people and leaders with more extreme views. We also invite policy leaders from three sectors: (1) Government leaders, mostly legislators or other elected officials, but also some high-level executive branch leaders; (2) leaders of business that engage in policy advocacy; and (3) leaders of non-governmental policy organizations (NGOs).

All three sectors influence the public policy environment and can exacerbate or ameliorate polarization. We also strive for geographic diversity, especially rural and urban, diversity in race, ethnicity and gender, and a wide generational spread.

NCLF is a deep dive program. A typical cohort attends four sessions each of which is a day and a half in length. We do not think these very different leaders can build strong relationships and skills in less time than that. Just sharing a meal or a half day meeting would not be sufficient.

Here is the typical flow of an NCLF program:



The first meeting: We start each Leadership Forum by breaking down barriers to relationship building. Most people in the room do not know each other, or they know each other only shallowly. So we start by asking each participant to “introduce yourself by talking about an experience that was transformative and shaped the person you are today.” We encourage participants to be candid and vulnerable. By the end of the exercise everyone has a good idea of who else is in the room in a very human way.

Then we ask people to articulate the concerns they or people in their communities have related to the topic of the program. Participants may articulate as many concerns as they want, and then we cluster them by themes. For example, when one Forum deliberated on increasing access to adequate housing, some of the concern clusters were:

1. Housing is too expensive.
2. There is too much government regulation of housing development.
3. Housing development is destroying the character of existing neighborhoods.

Next we focus on values: What things do the participants value relevant to the topic under discussion. Again, we urge participants to articulate all the values they have, and then we cluster them. We are not talking about universal values like truth or kindness, but, for example, with regard to access to adequate housing, some of the things valued were:

1. Everyone should have a safe place to live.
2. Developers should be able to make a fair profit.
3. As new housing is developed, green space should be preserved.

Some of the values will be in conflict with each other. These value conflicts often reappear later in the process, underlying why some people support a proposed action and other do not.

At the end of the first meeting, we put some basic data and information on the table—unspun numbers and the content of current laws or regulations. We know that data silos are part of the polarization problem, and if we can get leaders to agree on the accuracy of basic data, that is a significant first step to a meaningful conversation.

At the second meeting, we start by digging into how the participants prioritize the things they value. I will talk more about that later. Next the group selects the three or four concerns that will be most fruitful for the Forum to focus on. They spend the rest of that meeting developing actions that would address each of those concerns, and narrowing down those proposed actions to the four or five per concern that they will discuss deeply.

At the third meeting, the group analyzes the benefits and downsides of each of the selected 12-16 proposed actions that would address their concerns. All actions have downsides, and it is important for the proponents of the actions to understand them. Most leaders want the benefits of the proposed actions. It is the inability of some leaders to tolerate the downsides of the actions that usually causes the opposition to them.

Once the benefits and downsides of each of the actions have thoroughly been discussed, the participants vote on *polarity charts* to determine their level of enthusiasm for the benefits and their ability to tolerate the downsides. I will show you examples of these polarity charts later when I discuss why NCLF focuses on difference, not on consensus.

At the fourth meeting, we start by discussing the results of the participants' votes on the polarity charts. We note the actions on which there is a consensus, meaning that almost everyone supported the benefits and could tolerate the downsides. Even though the purpose of the program is not to create a consensus agenda, participants benefit from understanding what they agree on notwithstanding their differences. Also, sometimes, members of the group decide to collaborate in advocating for these consensus actions.

For actions that have mixed support, this usually means that there is some strong support, and not much strong opposition, but a lot of participants in the middle. For these proposed actions, it is usually a belief that the downsides outweigh the benefits that is preventing more enthusiastic support. The participants discuss whether the action could be modified in a way that reduces the downsides and, by doing so, increases support for the action.

For the actions that are the most polarized, usually meaning some leaders strongly support them and others strongly oppose them, the group digs into what is underneath those differences. I will discuss why we focus on these differences in a few moments.

The remainder of the fourth meeting is devoted to bringing the program to closure. We ask the participants what they are taking away from the program: how have they benefited from the experience, what surprised them, and what have they learned. Then we ask them to reflect on how this will change their behavior as leaders, and to

write down at least one thing they will do as the result of their participation after the completion of the Forum.

We also ask what NCLF's organizers and facilitators should learn from the participants' experience: what went well for them that we should keep or emphasize more, and what did not go so well that we should modify or eliminate.

That Leadership Forum concludes with a graduation ceremony and celebration of the leaders' participation and new relationships.

UNIQUE ASPECTS OF THE NC LEADERSHIP FORUM

Leaders: NCLF Focuses on Leaders instead of Grassroots Citizens in Addressing Destructive Polarization

The primary reason NCLF focuses on leaders is that our goal is to improve the public policy making ecosystem, and leaders are the key players in that political system. In addition, there is extensive literature across disciplines about the indispensable role of leaders in setting agendas, determining the language of dialogue, inculcating followers, and shaping social norms.

For example, in a recent paper¹ the Carnegie Endowment reports that, in the United States, leaders are more ideologically polarized than is the general public. Instead of being ideologically polarized, the general public is more affectively, or emotionally, polarized. Furthermore, the language of ideologically polarized leaders feeds the affective polarization of their followers. Most ordinary people do not spend their days thinking about public policy issues; the cues that lead to grassroots polarization come from the language used by their leaders.

There is some evidence that leaders cause polarization in their followers in Europe as well as in the United States. For example, a 2022 Dutch Election study² showed that when opinion leaders used more

¹ The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says*, September 2023.

² PUCK GULDEMOND / ANDREU CASAS SALLERAS / MARIKEN VAN DER VELDEN, *Fueling Toxicity? Studying Deceitful Opinion Leaders and Behav-*

extreme language on social media, people who followed those social media posts became more affectively polarized, and then the followers used more uncivil language in their own social media posts.

Our conclusion is that focusing on leaders is the best way to reduce destructive polarization in the policy making ecosystem. If there is a cycle of leaders and followers reinforcing each other into dysfunctional polarization, political leaders are the primary drivers of that polarization, and changing their language and behavior is the more effective way to intervene in the cycle.

Trust: NCLF Spends a Significant Amount of Time Building Trust among our Participants

Our core belief is that, for democracy to function well, our policy makers must be able to address problems and create opportunities in ways that are broadly accepted. To be able to accomplish this, democracy's leaders have to be able to engage constructively with people who have different ideologies, perspectives, values, and goals. And to do that, the leaders have to trust each other.

There is extensive literature that shows that, in the business environment, to have effective deliberative negotiation, there must be trust between the parties to the negotiation. Translated into the public policy realm, to have effective cross-partisan or cross-ideological engagement, the policy leaders who are engaging with leaders who have different views must trust each other.

Building on that, the more severe the conflict of views and goals between individuals, the greater the positive association between the individuals' level of trust in one another and the likelihood of their cooperation. Trust is even more necessary to achieve cooperation in situations where parties have highly dissimilar perspectives than it would be if parties had somewhat similar perspectives. So in the highly polarized environment in which many of our states and countries find themselves, having leaders on the various sides trust each

other is essential for a public policy making body to be successful at its job.

In addition, the more diversity within teams, the more creative and better solutions they come up with. But this is only true if they trust each other enough to communicate well, including being willing to discuss disagreements openly. Conversely, lack of trust is an impediment to good outcomes. Lack of trust leads people to misrepresent their own beliefs when there is a disagreement, either by understating or overstating their degree of disagreement.

Either overstating or understating the level of disagreement impedes authentic, constructive engagement, which makes it less likely that the leaders will be able to develop broadly embraced solutions.

Finally, one of barriers to truth in democracy is self-censorship. Self-censorship reduces candor and prevents honest conversation. Self-censorship arises from fear of the consequences of being candid. This is exacerbated by widespread use of social media. We cannot diminish self-censorship without the leaders participating in a Leadership Forum trusting that the other participants will refrain from using what is said against each of them.

For these reasons, NCLF has concluded that building trust across all the many aspects of difference in our participants is essential to enabling the kind of candid discussions we want to have happen inside the room, during our Forum sessions. More importantly, trust is essential to enabling the kinds of constructive engagement we want our alumni to have outside the Forum sessions, in their roles as public leaders.

Relationships: NCLF Invests in Building Relationships

The reason we spend so much time on relationship building is that we must build trust, and it is impossible to build trust without building relationships.

We enable authentic relationships to be built in various ways. We start with a lesson in active listening and gaining agreement to abide by the Chatham House Rule.

Active listening means that a person listens for the purpose of understanding, not to determine how to respond, and without interrupt-

ing. Most of us usually listen primarily thinking about how we will reply or rebut. It takes intentionality to listen just for the purpose of understanding the view of the other person. Part of this is listening with curiosity, wondering why the other person believes as they do, or how their proposal would work. It also means listening without distraction, for example, not checking cellphones, not wondering about who might have sent a text or chat, and not making a mental to do list.

When a meeting, or some part of it, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of people who responded to what was said, may be revealed. In a meeting that is not open to the public or reporters, using the Chatham House Rule enables speakers to be candid and to abstain from self-censorship. This candor is a critical element for building authentic relationships.

NCLF programs have some activities that are solely for the purpose of relationship building.

We start the program with personal storytelling, as I described earlier, because we know that taking time to share personal background information leads to an increase in trust. We give each participant a few minutes to tell about an event that was transformative in their becoming the person that they are, encouraging them to be personal and vulnerable. It takes almost three hours, but by the end of it the participants have started seeing each other as people, not demons, and have started forming relationships.

We also pair up each participant with a buddy—someone in the cohort that they do not already know and who, in some way or ways, has a different perspective. We ask them to meet for at least an hour outside the NCLF sessions, preferably over a meal, and talk about something of significance. One example is that during the NCLF program on energy, we paired as buddies a leader in the State's pork production industry (who is a white person) and a leader in the State's environmental justice movement (who is a black person). Even though they had known of each other, they had never had a conversation. They met over lunch, talked for three hours, and decided to meet again for a dinner, where they talked for three more hours. The pork

industry leader described this as a life changing experience for her. The environmental justice leader said she felt like the divine was present in the room during these conversations. Participants often tell us that their buddy experience was the one of most important parts of the Forum for them.

Third, because we know that trust cannot be built on task-based communication alone, and that open, personal conversations are necessary to build a level of trust that leads to improved outcomes, we make sure that every meeting has unstructured social time.

The post-Forum participant surveys that NCLF uses consistently show that almost every participant has formed one or more meaningful relationships with leaders they would not have known if they had not participated in the Leadership Forum. In addition, NCLF has many examples of policy makers who have worked together across political parties, after their participation in NCLF, based on the trust relationships they developed in the Forum.

I do need to acknowledge a caveat about the cultural transferability of these practices. While NCLF is confident that the Forum program elements result in our participants' forming meaningful relationships with others who have different views and perspectives, I am not confident that the specific activities would produce the same results in different cultures. That is, I am not confident of their cultural transferability. On the other hand, we were not sure they would work with strong leaders in our culture either. Even if these particular activities would not work in your culture, I am confident that for policy leaders to effectively engage with each other across ideologies and other differences, they have to form trust-based relationships and that programming can be developed to get them there.

Values: NCLF Focuses on Values

People usually ignore values when addressing concerns, instead jumping straight to solutions. NCLF focuses on what people value, because the differences in what people value, or how they prioritize shared values, is what usually heats up disagreements.

When talking about values, we mean, when thinking about this problem, what do you value? We are not talking about universal val-

ues like loyalty and kindness; we are talking about the things they value as applied to the issue at hand. For example, when one group of leaders talked about the best energy future for the State, they lifted up these things that they value:

- The electric system should be reliable.
- Utilities should be affordable.
- The cost of energy should be equitable.
- Sources of energy should be environmentally clean.

In our experience, it is very common for almost everyone to share all, or almost all of the values. But the participants hold the values with different intensities, and they prioritize them differently.

In the energy cohort, everyone in the group held all four of these values, but they prioritized them differently. For example, when forced to choose, some participants prioritized clean over affordable, and some participants prioritized affordable over clean. In that instance, they were about evenly divided.

Even though almost everyone holds all the values to some degree, friction arises because leaders prioritize what they value differently. When we force them to choose between two values, the group will split. But we have observed that the difference in the extent to which participants weight a value is a gradation, not binary. When we do an exercise that lets people express how much they weight one value verses another by standing anywhere on a line, participants stand all over the line. Showing that gradation of comparative values, and getting away from forced binary choice, is important to reducing polarization.

Recognizing that other participants share their values, even if to a lesser degree, helps build trust. Understanding that others prioritize and weight values differently helps leaders understand why others weigh the benefits and downsides of various proposed actions differently than they do.

Difference: NCLF Focuses on Difference

When people think about how to bring adversaries together, most immediately see the goal as “finding common ground.” But for NCLF, finding consensus is a by-product.

Instead of focusing on the easy problems with solutions that everyone agrees on, we ask our participants to engage with each other around thorny, complex issues. We use that engagement to reveal and dig into leaders’ differences.

So why does NCLF focus on differences, not on finding common ground?

My personal first understanding of the importance of focusing on difference came from my participation in one of the University of Cambridge Interfaith Programme’s Scriptural Reasoning groups. Scriptural Reasoning groups bring together Christian, Jewish and Muslim people to read their sacred texts together for the purpose of understanding and accepting their differences.

When I asked Professor David Ford, the University of Cambridge father of Scriptural Reasoning, why Scriptural Reason focuses on difference instead of on common ground, he answered me saying,

...most societies are irreducibly plural,
 so the key question is how we can become more healthily plural...
 The problem with common ground approaches is that where there are deep differences [the common ground] does not really ring true to anyone.
 On any really important issue [the common] ground will fissure.
 So the most sensible way is to bring multiple depths into conversation, and then see what *ad hoc* collaboration is possible.
 ...perhaps there could [even] be long term ...commitment to each other in democratic institutions that can live with deep differences.

Like in Scriptural Reasoning, in a Leadership Forum, we have leaders around the table with differences they are deeply committed to. In Scriptural Reasoning there is no goal or hope of converting anyone else to someone else’s religion. Similarly, in a Leadership Forum there is no goal or hope of converting them to a different ideology. Our democracies will always be plural.

In public policy discussions or debates, we generally just hear different conclusions. But hearing different conclusions is not the important thing. Those are no surprise. The important thing is to go deeper, hearing what is underneath that difference. We ask participants: Where did your conclusion come from? Why do you hold the opinions that you have? What is “the understory”³ of your views?

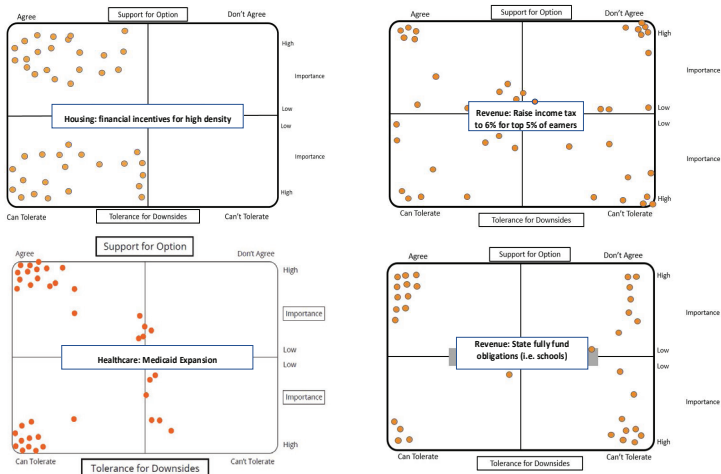
Once you hear the understory, you can understand why the person believes as they do.

Once you understand the “why”, you can accept the feeling, opinion, or conclusion even as you continue to disagree with it.

Once leaders accept the views of the people who disagree with them, then there can be authentic understanding, acceptance, and trust. This acceptance and trust exorcises the demons that polarization creates. They provide the foundations for constructive engagement.

But how do we lead our participants into this deep understanding of what lies underneath their differences?

First, a Leadership Forum uses Polarity Charts to assess the degree of agreement on benefits and downsides, and the valence of those positions. Here are some examples of polarity charts:



³ *High Conflict*, AMANDA RIPLEY, Simon and Schuster (2021).

On these graphs the x-axis on the top shows how much benefit the option provides and on the bottom it shows the level of downside the option has. The Y-axis shows the valence of the opinion with the corners being a very strong opinion and the middle being a weak opinion.

So looking at the top left polarity chart, note that no one disagreed with the benefit of the option though some of that agreement was weak, and no one thought its downsides were intolerable. Thus, there was a weak consensus on that option. In a Forum, we would note this, but we would not dwell on it.

For items that are muddled, like the polarity chart on the top right, notice that a few people strongly support that action, and a few strongly oppose it, but more are somewhere in the middle. For actions on which opinions are muddled, the Forum will take time to see if there is a way to modify the action to reduce its downsides and thus increase support for it.

For proposed actions on which the group is clearly divided, like the bottom two, the Forum really digs into what is underneath that division. The division can be between people who strongly support it and participants who strongly oppose it, like the chart on the bottom right. It can also be between participants who strongly support it and those who just do not think it is important, like the bottom left.

In the cases of clear division, the Forum gives participants enough time to talk candidly about the values or beliefs; experiences; messages they got from their parents, clergy, or mentors; or whatever else is beneath their views, opinions and conclusions.

This is an opportunity leaders rarely, if ever, have in their work as policy makers. We are consistently told that this is the most impactful part of the program.

WHAT ARE OUR RESULTS?

NCLF conducts participant surveys after every program, and sometimes another survey six months later. In addition, NCLF has had one independent assessment and one round of independent post-program interviews. Our findings are consistent:

- Almost every participant builds new trust relationships with leaders that have different perspectives than their own.
- A very high percentage of participants increase both
 - Their understanding of their own positions, and
 - Their understanding of the positions of those who disagree with them.
- More than half of participants modify or nuance their positions in some ways.

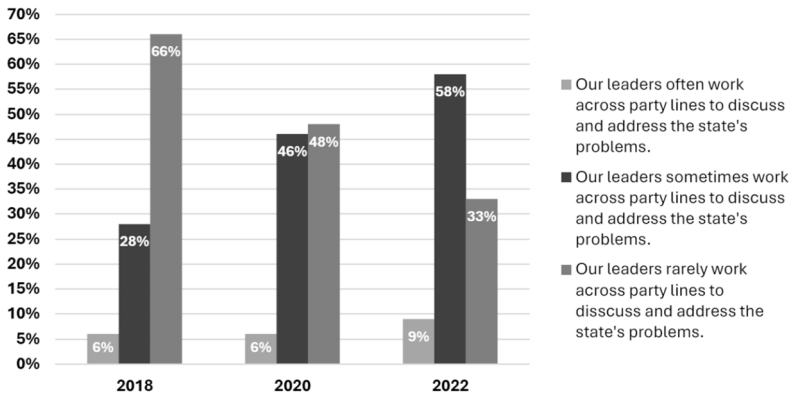
In addition, in interviews, many alumni expressed that the experience gave them confidence that they did not have before to try to engage with people of other parties or ideologies when developing or pursuing actions to address problems.

NCLF has also collected many, many anecdotes and stories about people who hadn't known each other working together or helping each other across party divides. My favorite example is of two state legislators in our education cohort. One was a Democratic State Representative and the other was a Republican State Senator. Although they had met each other before the Forum, they had no relationship. In the Leadership Forum we paired them as buddies. After the Forum, the U.S. states, including North Carolina, received large federal COVID recovery grants to use on public education, and these two alumni were designated by their respective chambers to come up with a plan for spending the funds. It was not easy, and they had many disagreements, but because they had the trust relationship that they had forged in the Leadership Forum, they were able to persist until they reached an agreement. The proposal the two of them developed together was accepted with an overwhelming bi-partisan vote in both the State House and the Senate.

It is clear that the Leadership Forum is having an impact on the leaders that participate in it, but it is harder to assess whether it is having the desired effect on the policy making ecosystem of the State. The best evidence NCLF has is from a poll of policy influencers that was taken in 2018, when NCLF had completed only one Leadership

Forum, 2020, and 2022, by which time NCLF had completed five Leadership Forums.

How would you describe how North Carolina leaders are engaging with each other?



Source: McGuireWoods Consulting surveys, 2018-2022

At a time when the United States as a whole was becoming more polarized and politically dysfunctional, and over the period NCLF had been conducting Leadership Forums, the North Carolina legislature significantly increased its cross-partisan problem solving. We cannot, of course, take complete credit for this development. But these survey results combined with our anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that the Leadership Forum was a contributing factor in this progress.

While we do not claim that conducting Leadership Forums is a panacea, our process is effective for bringing leaders with different perspectives together to build the will, skills, and relationships they need to engage with each other in an ongoing way to address thorny, difficult issues.

Building trust relationships among our leaders will not alone save democracy, but enabling our leaders to engage with each other effectively across their many differences is essential for our democracies to succeed.

ABSTRACTS / RÉSUMÉS

Our democracies are inevitably plural, and our leaders have different ideologies, beliefs, and perspectives. For our democracies to be successful, leaders must engage constructively with each other across difference to devise broadly accepted solutions to pressing problems and to create opportunities. In our ideologically polarized time of social media bubbles and demonization of the ideological other, this constructive engagement among differing policy leaders is rare. The North Carolina Leadership Forum, a program of Duke University, was created to build the will, the skills, and the relationships North Carolina's policy leaders need to be successful at their jobs. This lecture shares the lessons we have learned by bringing together deeply different cohorts of policy leaders for an intense dive into complex, thorny current issues. In the process they come to understand what is underneath their different perspectives, and they build the trust-based relationships they need to engage with each other constructively in the future.

Nos démocraties sont inévitablement plurielles et nos dirigeants ont des idéologies, des croyances et des perspectives différentes. Pour que nos démocraties réussissent, les dirigeants doivent s'engager de manière constructive les uns avec les autres, au-delà de leurs différences, afin de concevoir des solutions largement acceptées aux problèmes urgents et de créer des opportunités. À notre époque de polarisation idéologique, de bulles de médias sociaux et de diabolisation de l'idéologiquement autre, cet engagement constructif entre dirigeants politiques différents est rare. Le *North Carolina Leadership Forum*, un programme de l'université Duke, a été créé pour développer la volonté, les compétences et les relations dont les responsables politiques de Caroline du Nord ont besoin pour réussir dans leur travail. Cette conférence présente les leçons que nous avons tirées en réunissant des cohortes très différentes de responsables politiques pour une plongée intense dans des questions d'actualité complexes et épineuses. Ce faisant, ils parviennent à comprendre ce qui sous-tend leurs différents points de vue et ils nouent les relations de confiance dont ils ont besoin pour s'engager les uns avec les autres de manière constructive à l'avenir.

F. Vagin