

## **“How To Make A Difference”**

**By Mike Whitehead**

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Russia invades Georgia while our President and much of the world celebrate the Olympics in China.

Exxon announces record profits while much of America sinks into financial strain.

John Edwards joins the mid-life crisis club and risks tarnishing the Center for Poverty, Work and Opportunity.

For some folks, reading headlines like these leaves us feeling angry, resigned and cynical. Often we feel hopeless and paralyzed.

But there are people who read these stories and decide to take action. One example is Mr. Levine's generosity last week towards the Urban League's youth program. Another is a Charlotte Observer reader who was so concerned about the impact of divorce on children that she started a forum to discuss reforming family law. Examples are abundant when you consider Charlotte's active non-profit agencies, mentors, advocates, volunteers and neighborhood partners.

In short, there is some pretty convincing evidence of our community's commitment to make Charlotte work for all of us. I suggest we could gain considerable momentum and get even more people engaged in making a difference if we shifted a few points-of-view.

### **How to Make a Difference: Three Paradigm Shifts**

#### **Shift 1: Separateness to Similarity**

The separateness paradigm looks for differences among people to prevent agreement.

Any difference will do. Here are a few familiar ones: "... people who live on the West Side of Charlotte are different from people who live in Southeast Charlotte; the homeless are different from people who have homes; Latinos are different from people who are black or white; white collar professionals are different than those with working class jobs; those who attend private schools are different than those in public schools." Etcetera, etcetera.

But there is a different perspective. Astronauts say that when they take their first look at Earth from a space capsule, they experience the *Earth* as home. Not Russia as home, or Georgia as

home, or the USA as home. From that vantage point, it is clear that that boundaries and borders are created by people.

If we create these boundaries, we can also abandon them by seeking similarities, commonalities and mutual concerns. When we find what we share in common, we can create real agreement and cohesion in a community.

### **Shift 2: Adversarial to Partnership**

An adversarial view assumes: “I am right” and “you are wrong.” It requires an enemy in order to survive, so is well-fueled by the separateness paradigm. We see it a lot in politics: Republican vs. Democrat. Russia vs. Georgia. Private vs. Public Education.

Adversarial positions include arguments over opinions and beliefs, typically excluding an honest look at the facts. It often involves mentally assembling data to convince ‘the other side’ of its erroneous thinking. Heated debate, combative letters to the editor and hot-headed emails to local leaders qualify.

Some adversarial positions (particularly our own) can be more difficult to expose because they are often hidden or couched in political correctness. Subtle cues include: listening politely while simply waiting for our turn to speak, stewing about a perceived slight, or gossip.

Partnership is created when we catch ourselves ‘being right,’ and move toward becoming curious about another person’s point-of-view. We ask them to lunch, ask questions and listen thoughtfully. If we suspend our positions long enough, facts that highlight common ground can emerge.

### **Shift 3: Apathy to Possibility**

The position of Apathy makes people ‘victims of circumstance’ and absolves them of responsibility. It is a comfortable place for complainers who have given up on making a difference. In apathy, we can stop caring, often hiding behind cynicism disguised as “rationality” or “being realistic.”

The shift to Possibility is generated by curiosity, compassion and creativity.

Several months ago, a 26-year-old guy (and Nobel Peace Prize nominee) named Craig Kielburger gave a talk at the YMCA about a world-changing youth initiative he started at the age of 11. *Free the Children* has since made a huge difference in lives of thousands of people.

Kielburger shared a conversation he had with the Bishop Desmond Tutu about the negativity and hopelessness he encountered in the news every day: “When I told him I stopped reading the newspaper because it was full of despair, Bishop Tutu told me, “When I open the paper, I see my daily to-do list.”

Kielburger said the conversation drastically changed the way he operates, that each hurdle became an invitation to possibility and an inspiration to get creative.

Every day we each have a choice between continued polarization and making a shift. By

changing our point-of-view, each individual community member increases his/her capacity to make a difference. What's more, it is an immediate and equal-opportunity choice that can transform local and global communities into a place that works for everyone.

What shift will you and I make and what actions will we then take to make a difference in our community?

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