

Reframing Brexit: Changing the nature of the debate

Leave or remain, Brexit has given us a chance to re-evaluate our debating abilities, says Tania Coke.



What I found most striking about the Brexit referendum was not its outcome, but the nature of the debate that led up to it. We Brits – or what I saw of us in politicians, economists, journalists, family, friends and myself – proved ourselves pitifully under-equipped to have the kind of discussion we needed to have before placing our votes on 23rd June 2016.

Time after time, the debate was hijacked by self-righteousness or simplification, and usually both. Over the centuries, Brits have excelled in every area of scientific, technological and cultural development. Surely we can do better at having a difficult conversation!

With last year's collective communication failure ringing in our ears, three Brits in Tokyo decided to experiment. The team was made up of a diplomat/coach, an artist and a mime/mediator.

Drawing on these eclectic backgrounds, we designed an event for a small group of people from UK-related organisations, including the British Embassy, the British Council, the British Chamber of Commerce and the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce).

The aim of the event was to share perspectives on Brexit, but to do so in a unique way.

The conversation was grounded in three principles of engagement. The first was the principle of personal responsibility: instead of pointing fingers or shooting down opposing viewpoints, we agreed to focus on our own thoughts and actions and to look for ways that we personally could make a difference.

Second was the principle of expanding perspectives: we would use the conversation as a way to expand our understanding in the knowledge that none of us has a monopoly on the truth.

Thirdly, we agreed to participate not just through intellect, but to engage faculties such as emotion, imagination, intuition and body, to make sense of and deal with the important issue of Brexit.

The session was structured into two main sections: awareness and action. The aim of the awareness stage was to expand our individual and collective understanding by listening to the perspectives of other people and to our own less-explored attitudes and ideas.

Throughout this stage, the focus was on opening up to new perspectives, without worrying about right and wrong. The underlying question was not 'Is Brexit the right thing to do?' but 'What does Brexit mean to you?'

It was only in the second stage - the action stage - that we put on our practical hats and began to think about what we might think or do differently.

The conversation took place through a series of guided activities. In the opening exercise, each person expressed their attitude towards Brexit through their physical placement (are you right at the centre of the debate? are you turning your back on the issue?), and through the use of objects which symbolise what Brexit means to us.

There was also a drawing exercise, which tapped into our non-verbal, intuitive thinking. And there was a coaching exercise, which drew out the contradictory opinions within us and helped us think about how we deal with contradiction – intellectually, emotionally and physically.

These principles and activities opened the door to a strikingly different kind of communication from what I had experienced in the run up to last year's referendum. It made me think what might be possible in workplace relations and business communications if these kinds of approaches were more widespread.

There are of course many organisations that are experimenting with new approaches to communication like these. The one I know best is workplace mediation, which gives people who are experiencing conflict a space to express themselves more fully and listen more deeply to the perspectives of others.

Meanwhile, coaching, including conflict coaching, is now established as a way to expand the emotional intelligence of employees, and art-based training is finding its way into growing numbers of corporate training programmes.

There is a quiet revolution taking place in the workplace.

Our eyes are being opened to new and more diverse ways to communicate on divisive issues and these allow us to have courageous conversations at work: ways which allow us to express ourselves, expand our awareness of ourselves and others, and uncover more creative shared outcomes.

Sadly, based on the evidence of last year's Brexit debate, these approaches still have a long way to go before coming of age. Perhaps in the debate running up to the general election in June, we can have a better conversation.