THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

OPINIONS

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OUR TURN: by Tamara Woodbury and Tara Jackson

Your help is vital to repairing Arizona

Arizona is at a crossroads. As representatives of the five organizations who have joined together to create the event It's Up to Me AZ, we believe this moment calls to us to reach beyond the angry sound bites that seem to overwhelm our public conversations and unnecessarily divide our state.

Instead, it is time for us to support respectful, thoughtful actions that bridge the divide. It's time for us to focus on our shared concerns. It's time for all of us to do what we can to move our state forward in a constructive direction.

It shouldn't be difficult. The Gallup Arizona Poll commissioned by the Center for the Future of Arizona indicates that Arizonans agree more than they disagree about what needs to be done to achieve the Arizona we want. Unfortunately, this poll also says that only 12 percent of respondents believe that "people in their community care about each other" and only 10 percent believe their "elected officials represent their interests." (Since this poll was released, we've seen heightened anger and distrust, so the levels may have decreased.)

What Arizonans share in common is a strong desire to feel more connected to their community, to have elected leaders work together in representing our collective interests, to have access to good jobs and to have an education system that supports our competitiveness in the new world economy.

How best to accomplish these goals is certainly subject to debate, as it should be. But to be productive, that debate needs to be one of open dialogue that supports learning, discovering, imagining possibilities and creating common ground together. Right now it's too often "black and white" when the issue is complex and nuanced. Right now, it's too often about making the other side look bad for a short-term win that ignores the complexity of the issue and comes at the expense of long-term solutions benefiting the entire state.

With that stark reality staring at us, five of Arizona's premier organizations decided it was time to stop waiting for someone else to take the lead. We pointed the proverbial finger back at ourselves. We decided it's up to us.

The Arizona Town Hall, Girl Scouts - Arizona Cactus-Pine Council, Arizona Foundation for Women, O'Connor House and Center for the Future of Arizona began to discuss our common concerns and ideas. We share a basic interest in community involvement, and our missions intersect even as our audiences span decades, representing not only the wisdom of seasoned leaders but the young minds preparing to shape our future.

Here is the question we posed to each other: How can we create positive impact in our communities and in the state as a whole instead of standing by as Arizona becomes crippled by polarizing debates?

The result is It's Up to Me AZ, a daylong collaborative event planned for Thursday that will join together these varied constituencies to consider the indicators that tell us where Arizona is now; to explore the kinds of leadership, relationships and conversation that will put our state on a better path; and to employ a powerful exercise that will demonstrate to participants how effective they, as individuals and as groups, can truly be.

Even as we planned this event, we learned. Working together challenged each of the partner organizations to do to our own work differently. Everyone had to be willing to set aside current plans for their own organizations to focus on something bigger. Everyone brought what they had to offer, equal or not.

Through our own process, we moved away from wringing our hands and instead chose to be open and authentic, giving each other and our organizations the benefit of trust and good will to make it work. Collaboration can be messy and challenging; it takes more time and a willingness to change our time-honored patterns of behavior and ways of work. But in the end, it's always worth it.

The best thing that can happen from this collaboration and this day is an evolution of how we individually and collectively approach a problem. The method we use to solve policy issues may, in fact, be more important than the issues we solve. We're committed to finding ways to get Arizonans understanding, talking and working with one another in a better way.

The strength of our state and its future lies in our ability to connect and engage people across different political, cultural and community divides. We know it's up to us. We urge you to understand that it is also up to you.

Tamara Woodbury is the CEO of Girl Scouts - Arizona Cactus-Pine Council, and Tara Jackson is president of Arizona Town Hall. They are part of a five-organization collaboration presenting It's Up to Me AZ: A Day of Civic Action. More details are available at www.itsuptomeaz.org.