

Fighting the F.E.A.R.S. (Part Two)

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In the first of a two-part series, I wrote an article about the FEARS: people who Fire-up Everyone Against Reasonable Solutions. In Part Two, I'm going to talk a bit more about the FEARS, such as how to spot them. If you can't spot them, you can't defeat them before it is too late.

Nowadays, FEARS are most commonly found on the internet—particularly social media. Before the advent of social media, the FEARS were forced to ply their wares in the bars or coffee shops, or on the street in whispers. Even then, however, FEARS were limited in power and effectiveness because they had to spread the fear and hate and lies through face-to-face contact. A wise person would know their names, see their faces, know their reputations, and look them in the whites of the eyes to spot a lie. Even if a person didn't immediately know it was a lie, they were at least reluctant to spread anything that sounded absurd, for fear of looking absurd themselves.

With social media however, FEARS don't have to look someone in the eye to work their magic. They don't even have to use their real name, or any name for that matter, and they often don't. They say whatever they want to say about whomever and whatever they want, and so many people unknowingly believe and repeat the garbage that is spewed. Facebook and Twitter are full of FEARS. And what the FEARS say is easily spread, because folks with momentary lapses in judgement often pass on the lies and anger. Often, they pass it on without the ill-intention initiated by the original FEARS, but it gets passed on nonetheless.

I haven't joined a single Rant and Rave group on Facebook, but I researched them as part of my MBA final project. They are the perfect breeding ground for the production and propagation of what FEARS try to create—animosity. Though few folks are anonymous on them, surprisingly it doesn't stop them from spreading the fear, lies and hatred they so desperately need to seed and later, feed on.

One community group posted a discussion about whether more regional cooperation between communities could lead to better business attraction and economic growth while at the same time saving costs. An innocent question, and a worthy discussion...until the first FEAR joins in with, "Those Nazis from (insert larger community name here) just want to get control of everything, and take our money!" And it begins...the idea is planted and grows into a rage fest as more FEARS join in to fuel it.

FEARS are easily identified when they compare anything, and sometimes everything, to Hitler, or Nazis, or Communists. Those groups are collectively responsible for killing hundreds of millions of people, so it is extremely ignorant to compare a little discussion at the community level about a new initiative in the same context as the murder of millions and millions of people. But FEARS do that, and it works effectively to invoke fear and hate in others.

Don't get me wrong, however. The FEARS are not always that obviously angry. Many of them are subtle and skillful in the way they propagate the hate and the lies, to generate fear. They still spread misinformation, but they do it with phrases such as, "I don't know if this is true, but they say..."

"...the new subdivision will decrease our property values."

"...the council made off with all the money from the utility fees."

"...the county's new plan for storing snow will flood our whole neighbourhood."

I have heard thousands of phrases like this being used. And so have you. You may have even used them. They sound innocent and questioning, but they are all comments based in fear, and designed to spread it. Who are "they"? Why would rational people do something to hurt others? Where are the facts, or the real information?

Sometimes I think this has all been created because we grow up in a TV world. During every show I watch with my youngest son, he asks me, "Dad, who is the bad guy?" We have been taught to always see a good guy and a bad guy, instead of simply two people with competing interests. We believe that our side is the good side (notice how our side is ALWAYS the good side) and the other side is full of evildoers. It makes life easier to understand, I suppose. It makes the other side easier to hate, I suppose. It certainly makes us feel better about ourselves. Certainly, it makes it easier for the FEARS to do their job—spreading hate, and lies, and anger.

FEARS remain a very dangerous opposition to building a strong community that seeks solutions for present problems and opportunities for the future. Addressing current challenges and seeking new opportunities means that things will change, and change is a scary thing even when the FEARS aren't in full force, demonizing the discussion, and working to make good people sit down and be quiet while they rage on. But FEARS have to be identified and overcome early on, or your community won't be able to meet its challenges head-on, and capitalize on new opportunities. Nothing will change, and your community will fade into the past.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.