

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 356: KEITH ALLRED

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people, to grow your organization because organizations don't disrupt; people do. And the building block of that growth, it's you. A wise person once said a compromise is where both parties leave dissatisfied. We find ourselves compromising every day. It's how things get done in a society where we all want what we want. But what's the root of compromise? Isn't it this idea that solving the issue, whatever it is, is more important than checking off everything that we want? It can seem that those ideals have been left by the roadside in the past couple of years. How many times have you felt like an imbalance of power meant someone didn't even have to meet you halfway? Our guest today is working to instill that idea of meeting folks halfway back into our political culture. Keith Allred is the executive director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, a nonprofit dedicated to pushing through bipartisan legislation. Before that, he ran a pilot of the institute's ideology in Idaho, where after five years, because he was so successful, state Democrats ended up asking him to run for governor. So, what can we take from the House of Representatives into our own C-suite? I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** Keith, I want to start with the art of cutting for listeners. That's the American sport of separating one cow from a herd while you ride a horse. A crucial skill, if I understand correctly, to winning a cutting competition is cow sense. The instinct that the rider has in reading where the cow is going to go next. You are decorated in this sport. We want to hear more about that, and then we want to hear how your cow sense has played a role in your political career.

**Keith Allred:** Whitney I can't think of a better place to start the conversation. It is the thing I may be most passionate about in my life. I'm a fifth generation Idahoan who grew up working on the family cattle ranch. It's sort of what you do when you found yourself in Boston, where I started, actually, you know, back when we knew each other Whitney, and in D.C., like, what does an Idaho cowboy do? Well, you do cutting. And so, it's a way of

keeping that cowboy life alive. It goes back to the old roundup days where you need to separate a cow to do the branding. But these are the top of the horse world. These are the most intelligent, athletic horses, It's this very subtle, reading the cows, figuring out which one you're going to be able to get separated. And it's this very subtle balance of being pretty assertive and kind of taking control of the cow. But you've got to do that in a kind of a subtle way that doesn't sort of blow them up, that keeps them calm. And so, both for the rider reading the cow and the kinds of horses, it is this incredible combination of grace and power.

**Keith Allred:** You'll be going 25 miles an hour across the arena, keeping the cow from getting back to the herd. The cow will turn back. That horse will stop in a single stride. We'll go from 25 to 0 in a nanosecond. Pick up their front legs, pivot 180 degrees to go back the other direction and be full speed in a single stride. And they will do it with this grace that is just intoxicating and addictive. It has kept me sane over the years to be able to go do that. One of the really unusual things about cutting is that once you separate the cow from the herd, you have to put your reins down, so you don't get to cue the horse with your reins. And you're making the biggest moves that are made in any equine sport. It's not a prescribed pattern like most equine sports. And so, this horse has to be super smart and athletic. But there's this subtle relationship between horse and rider, because you can only give really subtle cues to make these really big stops and moves. And so there's a kind of an affinity that's developed with the horse that I just absolutely love.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you still do it even today?

**Keith Allred:** No, I've hung up my spurs, as they say. The strongest way I can communicate my passion for what I'm doing in my day job is that I gave up cutting horses to come do it right after I finished eighth in the world in 2017. I got this offer, and coming to D.C., it was just clear I couldn't continue to do it at that level. My whole family was committed. My wife and my three kids. All of us were. We had a five-acre place in Eagle, Idaho, and two arenas and a barn and a really great working horse operation, cutting horse operation. I just can't replicate that in D.C. but I felt like what ails the nation politically was so dire and that this was such a compelling opportunity that I would even give up cutting horses to come to it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wow. Okay, so we're going to come back to what you're doing now in just a minute. I'm just curious, how has your cow sense played a role in your political career?

**Keith Allred:** I think one way you could characterize our politics today is, is that most people find themselves in, you know, two camps, two ways you could divide up the world politically. There are those who are really active in politics, and there tends to be a lot of bluster and chest pounding. And then there are those who just really aren't very active, and they kind of shy away from it. It's like, gosh, it just looks so nasty. I just really don't want to be, involved in it. And cutting and cow sense is a sweet spot between those two. The ability to be kind of assertive and have an influence on the course, shape the cows movements, you know, keep it, get it separated and keep it from coming back to the herd. But to do it in a way that's sort of skillful and quiet and more effective. My grandpa had a saying back when I was working on the ranch and just regular working cattle nut and a cutting competition. He'd say it's faster to herd cattle slow. And it was this ironic statement that if you just tear in there on your horse and you're going to just stir things up so much that then if you've got a particular objective, you're trying to get the herd through a particular gate, it's going to take you a lot longer to get through that gate than a kind of respectful, I'm going to work with you, but I'm going to insist you got to get through this gate, but I'm going to kind of ease you in there. And I do think, we need more of that in our politics. There's an option besides bluster and chest pounding or doing nothing. It is assertive, but skillful and quiet.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So now let's go away from the cows to another C, The Common Interest Organization. You launched a five-year pilot in Idaho. What did that organization do?

**Keith Allred:** So, our whole aim there was to identify where there were policy solutions wise enough to attract grassroots support across our partisan divides and then champion those in the Idaho legislature. The intuition was based on the research I'd done when I was a professor at the Kennedy School, that we weren't nearly as divided on the issues as people thought, that there was a lot more ready consensus among everyday citizens than was generally appreciated. And that if I could find a low barrier, high hope way for everyday citizens to get engaged, to identify where there were those solutions, and then for us to engage the legislature jointly, that we might

actually be able to influence policy in a in a positive way, so that we could do things on a more substantive and bipartisan basis. So that that was the aim. So, we had ultimately over 1700 Idahoans, Republicans, Democrats and independents from across the state. We'd pick a couple of issues per year to work on that looked especially ripe for action and develop thorough policy brief on that. So, staff, myself and Christine, my wife, and others would develop the brief. They were not position papers. We weren't telling Idahoans, here's what you should think about this issue. They were policy briefs. And the crucial part of that was to make the strongest case for and against each proposal covered in the brief, and then let them form their own opinion. So, once we developed the brief, then we posted it online, and members had committed to spending an hour or more per year reviewing that brief and then weighing in. And for every proposal in the brief, they'd indicate whether they supported or opposed it. And so, we weren't doing anything to try to foster consensus. We were just looking to see where does consensus kind of naturally emerge if everybody brings their own independent take on it, not asking you to check your convictions at your door. Bring those convictions to it, and let's see if there are places where there are overlap. And if there are, then let's elevate that and engage the legislature with it as a way of maybe moving the ball. Those were the actions that we took to try to identify and champion bipartisan solutions.

**Whitney Johnson:** Which is a precursor to what you're doing now, which I'm going to ask you about in just a second, because I want to stay a little bit chronological before we get to what you're doing today. So, after this pilot of five years, which is probably more than a pilot - it was successful, you ran for governor in Idaho. The Democrats asked you to helm their ticket. What did you learn from that race, from running for governor? What are some important lessons?

**Keith Allred:** Well, one thing, I became far more forgiving and understanding of elected officials. This is a tough job, you know, and the kind of constraints you face politically, it's like, with a lot of things - if you actually have a little experience with it, that those that have done it and have done it, well, you're like, "hmmm, I'm impressed and I kind of understand the constraints better. I really enjoyed the experience, had a great time. It was sobering in the sense of how much we have come to rely on political labels as a substitute for really taking a look at candidates. So, you know, I'm not a Democrat, I'm an independent. And it was the Democrats that approached me, and they said, hey Keith, how about running for governor? You know, we'd had this track record of passing lots of legislation in the Idaho Legislature on this model with The Common Interest. And they said, well, it could run in the legislature, how about running for governor? And I said, well, wait a second. You're asking the Democratic Party? I'm like, I'm not a Democrat.

**Keith Allred:** And they said, you know, essentially, yeah-but we're Idaho Democrats, so we're desperate. So, you don't even have to adopt our platform. You know, you can take an independent approach and we'll back that. And I really stuck to that through the campaign. I told them, I said, are you sure you want to do this? Because I'm serious. I'm not changing my spots to do this. And Obama was in office. I was like, I don't agree with everything Obama is doing. I'm not going to pull my punches on that. They said, yeah, we're ready to do it. So, I took a very independent approach, but it is very hard to break through the partisan noise to get people to recognize. They just assumed, here's what he stands for because there's a D behind his name. And in many ways, for example on some tax policy things, I was more conservative than Butch Otter. And it was very hard to get that message through, where we have become so tribalized into our political or partisan camps to get that message through.

**Whitney Johnson:** Interesting. So, as I'm hearing you talk through this, you had done this this Common Interest organization, been very, very successful. Seeing the power of being bipartisan. Then you went into this laboratory of experimenting with it, learned some things, some valuable lessons, which then allowed you, I think, to do what you're doing today even more effectively than you would have if you hadn't run for political office, which is now to be the National Institute or the executive director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse. Is that is that accurate?

**Keith Allred:** Yeah, absolutely. You know, I'm a recovering professor, a professor at the Kennedy School at Harvard. And I think both the five years running The Common Interest really involved. Most days of the legislature, I was down at the legislature talking to legislators. So that was a very kind of practical, in the weeds experience. And then running for office. for a former professor, it was just really good to exercise those muscles and understand the constraints, the rough and tumble of politics today to get a realistic view of what's a change strategy that can actually work? Much of which of what's cooked up in, in universities probably just doesn't work

in the real world. And so, I was really interested, deeply concerned about the state of our politics and really interested in doing something that would have an impact. I didn't want to flutter around the edges or, you know, create circumstances where we sing Kumbaya and everybody feels good for a couple of hours, but it hasn't really changed anything on the ground. I was serious about can we do something that would actually make an impact? And so, I really appreciated my career as an academic and the rigor of thinking that gave me and the research, grounding that it gave me. But also, the kind of real-world experience in politics, in refining a model that I thought could actually make a difference.

**Whitney Johnson:** I really love that academic theory, like you said, rigor, grounding, then running this Common Sense for five years and seeing and practicing and sort of laboratory, then running for office and all the experience and like you said, the rough and tumble of that that brought you to what you're doing now, which is the National Institute for Civil Discourse. And one piece of it, in particular, that I find myself intrigued by, Common Sense American, which is what actually got me to reach out to you in the first place. I had read an article that you had written, which I thought, this is really intriguing because I'm one of those people that hasn't been in the bluster. I'm going to be in politics. I've been on the side like probably many people. And I thought, but I know that it's important for me to be involved in politics. And so, when I read about what you were doing, I went on to Common Sense American. I participated in one of the in one of the projects. And so, I would love for you to talk about how do people participate in this? What are some of the issues that people are looking at right now and just kind of walk us through it so that if there are other people who are listening to this who are like me and want to participate, this is a really great way to do it. So, walk us through that.

**Keith Allred:** Yeah. So, you can just go to commonsenseamerican.org and sign up and become a member. A A member simply means committing to spending one hour per year on the issue that we chose for the year, to review a brief and weigh in. And so, we now have over 69,000. We're about to hit 70,000 members - Republicans, Democrats and independents from across the country. And so, once you join, you join with us to take four steps. So, the first step is we pick an issue together to work on each year. And we're very careful in our issue selection. So, we are looking for the most meaningful issues that are ripe for bipartisan action this year. Now, that obviously narrows the solution set considerably. What could Congress actually do on a bipartisan basis this year? Well, it tends to not be a really long list. But we will interview The White House and about 50 or 60 congressional offices, kind of January and February of each year. And we'll ask them that question. What do you see as the most meaningful issues ripe for bipartisan action in Congress this year? We come up with a top ten list of issues from those conversations. And then our members rate those issues, and we pick the issue that our members rate as most important.

**Keith Allred:** So that's step one. Step two is then we develop that thorough policy brief like we did in Idaho, where we developed the strongest case for and against each proposal. We really work these briefs hard. They're not, you know, a super light quick read. You know, you commit an hour. And so we're going to say, look, to really to have an impact in Congress we've really got to get into what is the debate, you know, where are the substantive differences. And so, we're going to get you up to speed. So, you can really bring an informed opinion. So we really work those briefs, I mean hundreds and hundreds of hours go into the brief. We engage experts from across the country in the political spectrum and congressional staff and members of Congress. And when the brief is done, we go to the third step, which is the members weighing in, fulfilling that commitment to spend an hour reviewing the brief. They review the brief for each proposal that's described. We ask you; do you support or oppose it? And then there's some open-ended questions and some other kinds of questions. So then that's the third step, is the members reviewing the brief.

**Keith Allred:** And then the fourth step is we engage Congress with those results. And it is basically just engaging Congress with, hey, if thousands of everyday Americans from across the political spectrum have a chance to get really deeply and fairly informed on this, here's where there's broad bipartisan consensus and here's where there's not, and we just frame that up for them. And, you know, so that seems like kind of a I mean, getting back to cutting, that seems like kind of a modest sort of low key, like we're walking into that herd pretty slow and kind of reading the cows where there's possibility and it's not chest pounding, blustery. It's like, gosh, this looks like let's just kind of keep going this direction with this particular issue. That seems like there might be some possibilities there. And simply by making salient to members of Congress, here's where every day Americans agree, and here's where they don't. That has turned out to be shockingly, like it did in Idaho, shockingly effective. We're actually

three for three in Congress. We've taken on three issues and have prevailed on all three, which is frankly an utter shock to me Whitney that we've been that successful.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay, so what are the three issues that you've taken on?

**Keith Allred:** So, the first one we took on was surprise medical billing. This was in 2020. So, this is this crazy case we had in this country that if you show up to an emergency room, you're unconscious and the hospital assigns to you an anesthesiologist that's out of network, you didn't agree to it. You were unconscious, but it was out of network. That anesthesiologist can charge you anything they want, and you are legally obligated to pay it. You didn't sign a contract or anything. You're legally obligated because they're out of network. We were bankrupting tens of thousands of families a year this way with what's called surprise medical bills. And there was a serious bipartisan effort afoot in Congress to stop that. That looked like that was both meaningful and achievable to us. So, we got in on it and ended up in our very first year, I'll keep with the ranch and cowboy thing, first out of the gate issue, prevailed and got a lot of credit. Senator Bill Cassidy, Republican from Louisiana, was the one that really got that going. And he's said that publicly in on video and was like, ah man, the Common Sense American really made a big difference in getting that passed. So, surprise medical billing is now outlawed in the United States.

**Keith Allred:** So that was our first one. The second issue was fiscal infrastructure. So that, you know, the infrastructure bill, the bipartisan infrastructure bill that passed in 2021, that was obviously a cast of many characters involved in that. So, we played a role, but one of many. The part that we played the most important role in, I think, was, as you may remember, progressives in the House were taking physical infrastructure hostage as a way to get the rest of their agenda through. And we had a finding that 67% of the Democratic members of Common Sense American were opposed to that hostage taking. And a big piece in the *USA Today* on that shortly before the House debate. So that helped persuade progressives to let the physical bipartisan infrastructure bill go ahead on its own and then got passed. So, we were seen as playing an important role there. I think our high-water mark was last year. I think this was the issue that you worked on Whitney, was the Electoral Count Reform Act. So, the Electoral Count Act is the act that governs what happens on January 6th and the counting of the Electoral College votes. It was a law that was written in 1887, incredibly rickety and prone to abuse.

**Keith Allred:** Democrats had abused it since 2000. Every time a Republican president had been elected, they had they had tried to exploit some of its weaknesses. President Trump really escalated that exploitation. And so that seemed like a kind of maybe a tough, polarizing issue. But it turned out there was real consensus emerging in Congress across party lines that we really needed to update this so that we could be sure we had peaceful transitions of power. And in fact, because of our success on the two issues, the bipartisan group of 16 senators working on this actually approached us and said, we really want you to pick this as our issue this year. So, Senators Manchin and Collins were leading that. They came and lobbied us to pick it. In fact, they went and lined up funding for us. That's how far they went so that we could move really fast on it. Because, you know, they felt like they had to get it done right away. And so, we played a really quite central role in that. The bipartisan group actually got a little high centered after they'd been working on it for a year when we started working on it, and they were high centered on a few remaining issues. And they...

**Whitney Johnson:** What do you mean when you say high centered?

**Keith Allred:** Sorry. They were stuck. They couldn't get there. There were a few points of disagreement. And so they kind of purposely let us go ahead and complete the brief and get our preliminary results in, waiting to hear from us and largely resolve some of the outstanding issues with the results from our members. So, we actually shaped the bill itself. They introduced the bill after we'd shared with them our preliminary results. And then we were pretty centrally involved in getting it passed. It passed in December of last year and Whitney, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say with the Electoral Count Reform Act, we fortified peaceful transitions of power in the United States for generations to come. It just felt hugely consequential.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, so good. So, if people are interested in getting involved now, what's up next and what will they get to weigh in on?

**Keith Allred:** So the current issue is career connected learning, specifically Workforce Pell Grants. So, it's basically taking on this issue that today we spend \$112 billion per year supporting students seeking a four year degree. We spend 7 billion per year on those students not seeking a four year degree but looking for other kinds of post high school education. And that's even more lopsided when you consider we've never gotten above 40% in this country that attained four-year degrees. So, for the rest of the 60%, we give them a pittance of the support for getting real skills and Whitney, I think, as you know, the way the workforce and the American economy is moving, there are a lot of really high skilled jobs out there that do not require college. Lots of in technological fields, lots in health care. And so, these are serious jobs that require serious training, but not college. And we give a pittance of support for that at the federal level. You know, we have huge worker shortages where employers cannot find people with the skills for the jobs they have. So, it's a real drain on the American economy. And so, there's this building consensus in Congress. We need to do more for the 60% of the country not seeking a four-year degree and not try to shove people into that where they shove them into it, and then they go take out a bunch of student loans, may complete the degree, may not, but then they've got student loans to pay off.

**Keith Allred:** So, they're actually worse off than they were had they not pursued that degree. So, you know, is there anything smart we can do in terms of federal support there? That's kind of the question. And the leading legislative vehicle to do that is called Workforce or short-term Pell. So, we have Pell Grants as the main way the federal government helps college students attain a four year degree. The proposal under consideration is to extend Pell Grants to be able to cover these shorter programs, not college, that are workforce training, to get more people into that. And there's some hot news on this Whitney. Yesterday, I was at the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, where they passed on a broad bipartisan basis - The Bipartisan Workforce Pell Act. And so, this is really picking up steam out of the committee. So, first step in the process. Now it will go to the floor of the house and then we'll have to go to the Senate.

**Keith Allred:** But this was sponsored by Virginia Foxx, the chair of the House Education Committee, who is a very fire in the belly conservative, and Representative Bobby Scott, the ranking member on that committee, who is a quite liberal Democrat. And they have really done an impressive job of working together in a substantive way where they had some real differences about how this should happen. They've worked those differences out in a pretty sane way. And so, they introduced that bill last week, had a hearing on yesterday. That is record speed for Congress. They are really moving fast. So, it's got some legs. And we are again very deeply involved in that. In fact, we shared our early results again, like we did with the Electoral Count Act with them as they were still negotiating the bill. And the bill came out about 90, 95% in line with our members views. So, it's just an extraordinary way for an everyday American, wherever you are, spend an hour at a time and place convenient of you. Review the brief you know, on your computer, and we can bring you into the room in Congress, and your voice can be helping shape sound, sensible policy.

**Whitney Johnson:** When you're talking about this, like every part of my body just resonates with just joy at that idea that, you know, I think for me, and I suspect many people listening think, oh, there's nothing I can do, this sense of helplessness. And so, hearing you talk about this and being able to contribute in a meaningful way and then seeing meaningful change and giving people the tools that they need to do what they want to do. It's just, it's fantastic.

**Keith Allred:** Well, thank you. And I think it's a way, it's an option - like what you were talking about Whitney, it's like, yeah, I'm concerned about our politics. I feel like I ought to do something, but what are you going to do? And that's going to be effective that like in the busy life you're probably never going to eat, breathe and drink politics. Right. So, there's not an infinite amount of time you're going to put into it. And would it be effective? And even if you did put a lot of time in it, would it just be so like, I feel like I have to take a shower after? It's such an anathema to kind of who you are and how you want to engage issues. So, this is a way where you don't have to pretend to be more committed to this political tribe or that one than you really are. Just bring your best judgment to these issues. We'll do that with thousands of other Americans, and let's just see where we agree and see if that can help. If you don't mind me just digging a little bit down on this point, this idea that I think this was in the article you read, this idea that broad and diverse support is a pretty good indicator of wisdom, is, I believe, one of the core American ideas. This is at the core of how the American founders take 3000 years of dozens of attempts at self-government that had all failed and bend the arc of history not only to establish the first successful

self-government in the world, but to take self-government from a laughingstock to the dominant form of government in the world.

**Keith Allred:** It's an extraordinary achievement, and I think at the very core of this was an idea by James Madison where he basically said what I call the commonsense principle, that a sense held in common across our divides, that a policy is wise, is more likely to prove wise in practice than a policy that only looks good from a narrow partisan or factional perspective. I think that's just very intuitive, and that really resonated when I first read Federalist No. 51 and James Madison expressing that. And that's essentially what we're doing. We are fulfilling that basic American idea that allowed us to bend the arc of world history and create such a successful republic is saying, let's just see where there's kind of naturally occurring consensus across our country of over 300 million teeming with diversity. Everyone should sit up and take notice when there's something that we agree on. That's pretty compelling. So that's all you have to do to join is just say, I'm going to bring my own best honest convictions on this. I'm not going to be cajoled into saying, well, tow the party line on this. Just bring your own good judgment and let's see what that reveals.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. And I coming back to the cow cutting or the cutting that we started with is when you were talking about nudging. The nudging is let me give you a way. Let me nudge you into spending some time thinking about this, not let me nudge you into thinking the way that I think. I want to nudge you into thinking about this. And I think that's an important distinction.

**Keith Allred:** And we'll try and make it easy for you. So, we'll tee up a really good brief where we make the strongest arguments for and against. I think we did over 20 versions of this brief before we put it up. So, we will take drafts and take it to the players on the issue, the Republicans and Democrats in Congress, the interest groups, we'd already interviewed them. We try to capture it in the brief. We take it to them and say, did we get your perspective right? And so that's a little hard to get these days, that kind of information and in-depth on a particular issue that could move in Congress. But really, we get to a consensus on the brief across the differences. Yes, you fairly captured the issue. It may not be an agreement yet on what the right policy answer is out of that brief, but you fairly captured the arguments for and against each of these proposals.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, it's interesting to me, that you majored in American history, and I wonder, you know, would you have ended up going down this path if you hadn't majored in American History? And what prompted you to want to study that?

**Keith Allred:** Yeah, I can trace it back to a very, very specific experience as an undergrad in American History. So, it was the spring of 1984. I was at Brown University. So, you got to just imagine a fifth generation Idaho cattle ranching kid going to Brown, not really knowing anything about Brown, not knowing it was the most liberal and diverse of the Ivy League schools, right? That really did rock me back on my heels pretty good. But I was an American History undergrad because I'd always been fascinated by the American founding. How do you go from 3000 years of failure to a really successful republic? What did they figure out? And so that's why I was an American History major. And I had Gordon Wood for history of the early American Republic, who may be the best historian of our founding ever that we've ever produced, multiple Pulitzer Prize, Bancroft Award winner, like 22 students in this class. It was just a phenomenal class. And in that class, I first realized how much the American Founding Fathers had diagnosed what they called "the spirit of party" as the reason republics always fail. You know, they reasoned that they had better understand that history and why they always failed and have a better answer, or else they were going to suffer the same fate. And they came to this overwhelming consensus that it was what they called the problem of "the spirit of party". And they observed this pattern that when you put the ultimate power in the people, different groups would form trying to drive the government in different directions.

**Keith Allred:** And the contention that ensued among those government, among those groups, made the government so incompetent and unstable that it opened the door for authoritarianism to come back in. So it just saw this repeated over 3000 years. So, it's the main problem that they're trying to solve in establishing the American republic. How do you create a system robust to the kind of bitter partisanship that always seems to emerge in republics? So that was their diagnosis of the problem. And that really just seized upon me. I just became fascinated by that. And then the second insight that that really set me on my course early in life was what their solution was. And essentially their solution was to craft a constitutional structure with stout defensive

barriers so that no one party could impose their will on everyone else. So, the reason we take separation of powers further than anyone else, the reason Madison argued that we should do a republic on a big, diverse scale is so that it would be hard for any one party to impose their will on everyone else. And so that really captured my imagination. Fresh out of Idaho at Brown University, I was kind of keenly aware of just how big and diverse the country is. And, but there was a part that I thought of. I couldn't have articulated it quite this way as a sophomore in college. But a sense of man, this puts a real premium on our ability to work across our divides constructively.

**Keith Allred:** If you're going to purposely block partisan solutions with these barriers, and the only game left in town by design of the founders are these solutions that are wise enough to attract broad and diverse support, by design. Like, well, then that means you've got to engage across those differences to try to identify those kinds of solutions. And I'm not sure, but I haven't noticed that we as human beings are all that great at working across those divides. And so, this puts a real premium on how do you do that. And so, I became fascinated in why is it that we as humans are so prone to, you know, it's not just that we disagree on substance, but it's that because you disagreeing with me, I concluding that you're dumb and immoral. You know, that creates this kind of angry animosity. It's not this kind of dispassionate, "oh, isn't that interesting? You have a different perspective than I do". Let's talk about that. It's like, no, you're a bad person because you think that. And so, it gets so angry and vengeful across those divides, which is exactly what the founders saw was the dynamic. So why are we that way? I want to have a deep understanding of that. But for a practical purpose of hoping that that would help shape a model, an idea for me that we could identify and champion broadly supported solutions at the scale of a huge, diverse country like the United States.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. A mechanism for doing that. So that's become your life's work.

**Keith Allred:** Yeah. So that was after undergraduate. I transferred to Stanford, graduated from Stanford and then went and got a PhD at UCLA focusing on negotiation and conflict resolution, PhD in Organizational Behavior. Didn't intend to be a scholar. I really, that kind of practical work on the ground was what I was most animated about but had an offer to join the faculty at Columbia coming out of grad school. And, man, if your Twin Falls, Idaho kid, Columbia professor, wow, that's pretty cool. Okay, I'll go do that. And then there three years, and then the Kennedy School called and said, hey, we're going to hire our first position in negotiation, conflict resolution. Would you be interested in that position? Gosh, that sounds pretty good. And so, I went there for five years and all the while kind of doing my research on why we become so angry and conflict and how much that keeps us from realizing optimal solutions, and then trying to think about giving an understanding of that. How could you structure alternative ways for us to engage, and essentially had the idea for the common interest, and which was originally to do it at a federal level. But I was like, man, don't start there.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, that's what a disrupter does. They start, they start in a place where no one else is playing. And so, you start in Idaho.

**Keith Allred:** Yeah. So, I resigned my position at Harvard and moved back to Idaho and said, let's try it here.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, so good. All right. So, last two questions. What was useful for you in this conversation. And so, I'm asking you to zoom out and you reflect on the arc and sort of the, the sense of this. What did you observe? What was useful for you?

**Keith Allred:** Well, you know, oddly, you'd think I might have thought a little bit more about the connections between cutting and what I'm doing. I had, you can't get Keith to shut up about cutting and yet I hadn't, you know, made quite as much of a connection. So that was kind of for me. I don't know if it's fun or interesting for any of your listeners, but that was fun for me to think about the connection.

**Speaker3:** Yeah. Any final thoughts?

**Keith Allred:** Yeah, I'll say this. I think of the American system of self-government in generational terms. So the American founders pulled off something truly remarkable in establishing a system of self-government that could succeed. Then it's been, you know, every succeeding generation. It hasn't really done anything to deserve being born into that system. But it falls to that generation that's on the stage at the current time to be the caretakers of



that and pass it on to the next generation and as good or better shape than they found it. On this issue of spirit of party, of how well do we engage across those differences? You know, without taking time to go on all the research on it. Arguably, our generation has the worst record in American history. I mean, we've been more deeply divided. We had a civil war, the civil rights movement and Vietnam War era. We were probably more deeply divided. But what's unique about our era, like the worst of any generation is how deeply and toxically divided we are along purely party lines. That's new in American politics. And because of the way, our way our system is structured, it's got really unique challenges.

**Keith Allred:** So, I think of this as a wildfire. You know, the bitter partisanship is a wildfire threatening to burn down American democracy. And that's happened. That fire lit and grew to catastrophic proportions on our generation's watch. That is not okay for us to hand this republic off to the next generation in its current shape. I think we owe it to the preceding generations and the future generations to do our part to address this problem. And so, I would really make that plea to listeners. This is a unique system of government that we're under. We have got to do our part. And with Common Sense American, we've teed up a pretty easy way that will fit within your lifestyle and your preferences and tastes to have a pretty powerful impact in bringing some common sense to Washington. So, I really hope we can all join together, our generation in doing our part to hand this off to the next generation in better shape than it is now.

**Whitney Johnson:** Keith, thank you so much. Amazing.

**Keith Allred:** My pleasure. Whitney. It's been a real delight to be with you today.

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When do you use cow sense in your own life? Where do you have that instinct or reflex that lets you succeed where no one else can? Whether a feeling for stock prices or an eye for a skittish customer. Whatever it is, you need to follow that natural talent. Keith's cow sense is both real and metaphorical, guiding cows away from the herd, on one hand, guiding legislators towards common sense change on the other. And that's the real crux of the National Institute for Civil Discourse. Common sense. We find compromise in the issues that are too glaring for us to bicker over this clause and that clause. When you're put under for an emergency surgery an out of network provider shouldn't saddle you with debt just for wanting to live. Bipartisan issues are common sense issues. If we can come together on these issues, then we can see that we're not alone in our pursuit, no matter how the climate might make us feel like we are. If we're confident in the common sense of our community, of our workplace, we know compromise is possible. We can hold in our hearts that others have our best interests in their hearts.

For more on breaking the cycle of destructive conflict, there's [episode 260](#) with investigative journalist Amanda Ripley on taking a dream like grassroots political change and turning it into reality. I'll point you towards my recent talk with Diana Kander, [episode 340](#). And if you're working in a place where compromise is not the norm, there's [episode 301](#) with Gary Turner with practical steps on disrupting the status quo. Thank you again to Keith Allred and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. Thank you to our producer Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.