


people & business



**the**  
**DON'T**  
**GET ME**  
**STARTED!**  
**toolkit**

Strategies for a  
Culturally-Challenged World

BY DON HUNTINGTON

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Patricia Kutza and Connie Payne are on a mission to make a positive impact on society and to change patterns of behavior in order to make the world a better place to live.

Patricia and Connie have known each other for more than four decades. Connie is a retired schoolteacher who spent 30 years in San Jose and Antioch public schools. Patricia grew up in the east but has lived in California since the late 60s. She was a business analyst working for the Bell System and was a technical writer in the areas of business and technology.

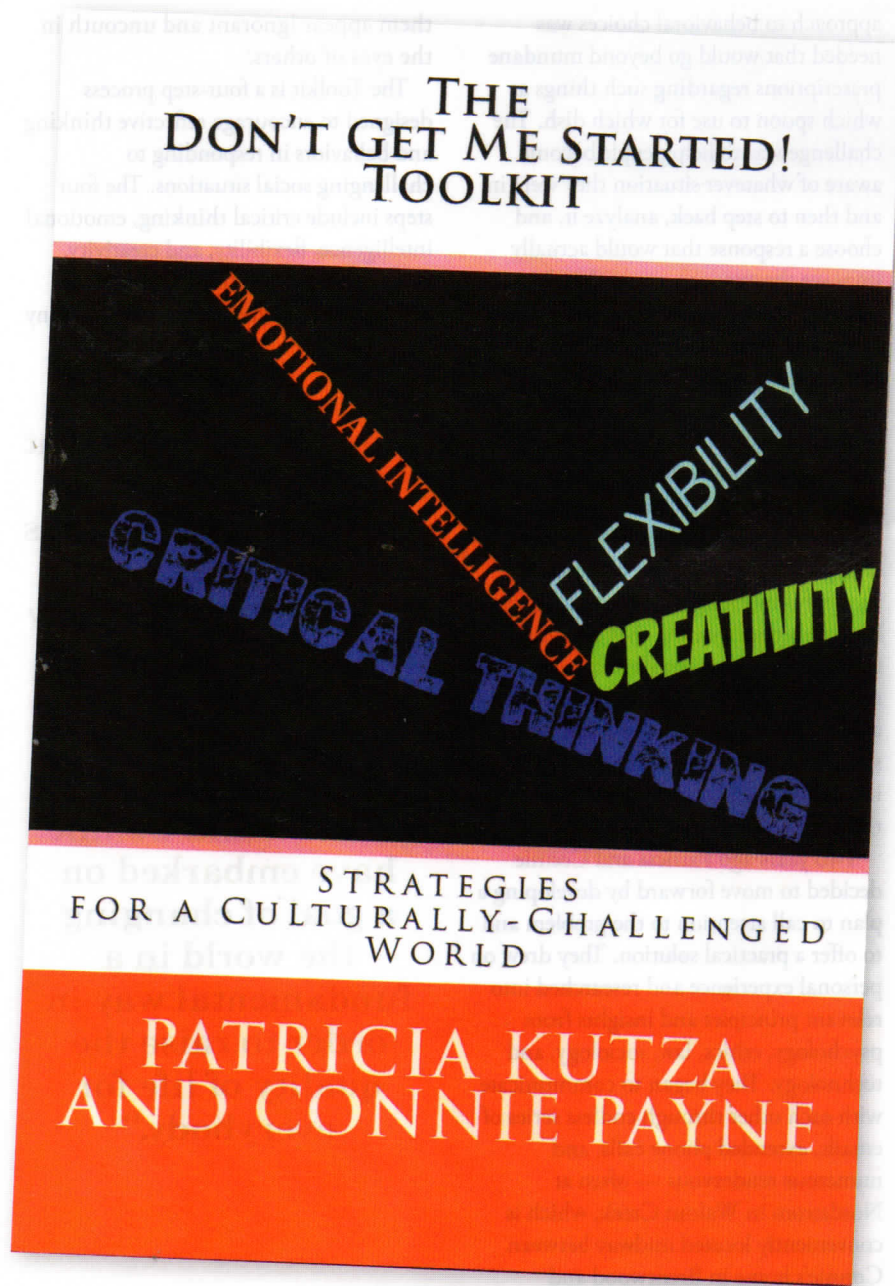
The two women are having fun on their quest. They complement each other. Also they are related; Patricia is Connie's aunt. "I've known Connie all my life and most of hers," Patricia said with a smile. The roots of their mission were planted when the two of them would meet each other at birthdays, funerals, reunions, and other family events. In the course of their conversations they began to note how levels of polite behavior seemed to be declining and were being replaced by apparent rudeness and a lack of good sense about how to behave in public. People were wearing flip-flops and t-shirts to weddings. Polite participation in social gatherings was often marred by attendees being massively distracted by their cellphones.

They would call each other up and would conduct extended conversations about the problem of declining behaviors. At one point the two realized that they would often preface a comment with the words, "Don't get me started..." but would then "get started" anyway with their latest observations about the downward trends taking place in public manners. They began documenting the breakdown they saw as people were ignoring the traditional rules of etiquette that for generations served society as a roadmap showing people how to get along with each other.

Modern society is challenging these traditions. Family structures are breaking

down, the role of parenting is undergoing dramatic shifts, and the dynamic in public school classrooms is changing in fundamental ways. Gender identities are in a state of flux. Our culture is becoming increasingly less homogenized; diversity is an inescapable reality. Society has become an unassimilated amalgam of subcultures, each having standards of etiquette and ethics that are disconnected from the others. Millennials, Gen X, Baby Boomers, and older traditionalists hold to distinctive and sometimes contradictory behavioral patterns from each other.

The old patterns by which standards of etiquette were passed from one generation to the next were not robust enough for the modern changes taking place. Patricia and Connie came to realize that successful navigation through our complicated culture requires a new kind of awareness. They understood that the answer to the question "Can't we all just get along with each other?" requires each of us to develop a set of social skills that will help us to recognize situations calling for some etiquette-based awareness and then to choose appropriate responses. A rational



approach to behavioral choices was needed that would go beyond mundane prescriptions regarding such things as which spoon to use for which dish. The challenge was to help people become aware of whatever situation they were in and then to step back, analyze it, and choose a response that would actually improve the experience and thereby reduce conflict, controversy, and division.

They realized furthermore that fundamental change would never take place by simply trying to convince the world that such change was important. The actual solution would come only as people committed to building a set of habits that would implement the desired change. Just as an athlete becomes successful by repeating actions until they become second nature, they advocated through repetition the development of a set of habits to the point that the person is able to understand the dynamics of a situation then to choose an appropriate intervention and response without thinking about the process itself.

Two years ago Patricia and Connie decided to move forward by developing a plan to call attention to the problem and to offer a practical solution. They drew on personal experience and researched into relevant principles and insights from psychology, ethics, law, sociology, and technology. They began to communicate with each other through endless series of emails, extended phone calls, and numerous rendezvous — often at Nordstrom in Walnut Creek, which is conveniently located midway between Connie's home in Brentwood and Patricia's in Vallejo. They used Dropbox to share with each other the files and notes as they created them.

When they started working on the book itself, their initial design focused on anecdotes that would illustrate their points. They realized, however, that they needed a way to focus the learning more directly on actual behavioral modification. They came up with the idea of a Toolkit as a way of encouraging people to actually make changes in behavior that would help them avoid the *faux pas* that would fail to make situations better while making

them appear ignorant and uncouth in the eyes of others.

The Toolkit is a four-step process designed to encourage reflective thinking and behaviors in responding to challenging social situations. The four steps include critical thinking, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and creativity. People engage with the Toolkit by developing the habit of invoking as many

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of these as possible in real life situations.

The steps begin with pinpointing the actual problem and then defining a goal for the response. For example, imagine someone struggling to carry heavy boxes into a post office. You could apply the four skills to finding a solution.

Fundamental etiquette standards operating in previous generations would have led people who happened on the scene described in the post office scenario to immediately see the problem and respond with appropriate helpful solutions. However, as their “Don't Get Me Started...,” insights revealed, a

growing number of people would simply pass by the person struggling with the packages in a state of complete oblivion to the fact that they were being confronted by a situation in which common etiquette demanded an appropriate response.

Patricia and Connie understand that some people fail to offer assistance in such a situation through mere ignorance of the fact that there actually is a problem. They will pass by the struggling person with what would formerly be regarded as an air of callous indifference. However, they are not doing so because of an absence of kindness or sympathy but because they simply lack the psychological conditioning and corresponding set of habits that would have made them aware of the problem and then becoming an agent in finding possible solutions.

Such a thing will not happen to people who have incorporated Patricia and Connie's Toolkit into their behavioral patterns because in that situation they will apply whatever resources from their heightened critical thinking, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and creativity to become aware of any problems with etiquette components and then searching for solutions. In the case of the packages at the post office example, they would become immediately alert to the problem, which was getting the boxes through the door of the post office and up to the counter, and then would search for appropriate solutions. They could obviously offer to help the person by sharing the load. If there are too many boxes for a single trip even with their assistance, they could move forward with critical thinking, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and creativity to find a better solution. For example they could go into the post office and borrow a tub to carry the packages.

The example provides a simple illustration of applying the Toolkit to a problem that anyone might encounter. You can imagine, furthermore, that a person could find multiple instances every day in which the Toolkit might be used in such a fashion.

So now *The Don't Get Me Started! Toolkit* book has been published and is available in print or Kindle at Good Reads, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.



But Patricia and Connie use other channels to get their message out including Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, and their YouTube channel. They also continue to promote their revolutionary vision at workshops. They recently published a workbook focusing on grades 6 through 12 that is already being used by a number of local schools including Pittsburg Unified School District and Brentwood's Independence High. They are currently working on a version for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. In addition,

they make presentations to whatever wineries, service organizations, or groups invite them to come. They have presented their program to Morgan Hill's Retired Teachers Association, Brentwood PAL, the Rotary Club of Brentwood, Summerset and Cortona Park senior living communities, and in the *Arts in Action* cable show on public television. Their story was featured in the *Vallejo Times-Herald*.

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a better place than they found it and would wish for their lives to have a genuine positive impact. Patricia and Connie have embarked on a goal of changing the world in a fundamental way in order to raise the quality of life for everybody.

If any goal is worthy, theirs is a worthy goal for sure. **110°**

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