

Creating An Environment Of Respect

An Interview with Robert L. Dilenschneider, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, The Dilenschneider Group, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Dilenschneider is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Dilenschneider Group, a strategic counseling and public relations consulting firm. He is considered one of the world's foremost communications experts and is frequently called upon by the media for commentary on major news stories. He is the author of several books, including *The Ultimate Guide to Power and Influence*; *50 Plus!*; *Nailing It*; *Character*; and *Respect*.



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FIRM BRIEF The Dilenschneider Group (dilenschneider.com) provides access to CEOs and their communications professionals in fields ranging from mergers and acquisitions to marketing, government affairs and international media. The firm's objectives are to bring clients a level of communications counsel, creativity and exposure to networks and contacts not available elsewhere.

How do you describe The Dilenschneider Group's mission?

Our mission is to bring to clients communications strategies that are targeted, innovative, and effective. We believe the product of a strategic communications counselor is not style, it is judgment. And good judgment is best achieved when a leader works with a small, carefully coordinated group of reliable advisors. For us, that involves drawing on a team of consultants who have backgrounds in finance, security, mergers and acquisitions, government affairs, crisis management, and media relations.

What have been the keys to The Dilenschneider Group's strength and leadership in the industry?

Not only do we bring clients a unique level of communications counsel, we provide them with new contacts, networks, and relationships. This opening of new doors helps them to meet their objectives while stimulating new ways of thinking about the challenges they face. Beyond what we do to meet their specific needs, we provide our clients with the information we think they need to see over

the horizon and anticipate the changes in the marketplace, the political realm, and society at large that will affect their operations. To do this, we issue annual Trend Reports that describe scores of these evolving changes and movements, and we supplement those analyses with Special Reports that look at major new developments.

Where did you develop your interest in writing books?

My appreciation for writing was instilled early in life by my father, Sigmund J. Dilenschneider, who was a longtime newspaperman in Columbus, Ohio. He held leadership positions as the business manager for the *Columbus Citizen-Journal* and later as assistant vice president of E.W. Scripps Co., and he taught me the overriding importance of integrity. I loved roaming around the newspaper's building back in those days when huge presses printed the paper and the area smelled of ink and pulp. I'm sure those early experiences led to my pursuit of a master's degree in journalism years later.

As I developed my career in the public relations industry, it was natural for me to turn to writing books as a communication tool. Most of my books are an outgrowth of my experiences in the field, such as *The Ultimate Guide to Power & Influence* (2023). Others are inspirational, such as *Character: Life Lessons in Courage, Integrity, and Leadership* (2025).

What was your vision for writing your latest book, *Respect*?

I have long been concerned about civility – or more precisely, the lack of it in our social discourse. This led me to initiate the Civility in America lecture series in 2012, which has featured many of the nation's leading thinkers from a wide variety of professions and experiences. But in recent years, unfortunately, our national discourse has devolved into coarseness, name-calling and mistrust of “the other” – whatever group that might be. Our country has become divided along several fault lines, not just the political ones. It seems that people are entrenched in their views and don't want to listen to anyone with a different opinion. I felt compelled to do something beyond the lecture series to take the issue of civility to the personal level and develop a roadmap, if you will, for creating an environment of respect in every facet of one's life.

What is the key message you wanted to convey in the book?

The crux of my message is that each of us has the power, and the obligation, to help forge a culture based on respect. That is reflected in the book's subhead, “How to Change the World One Interaction at a Time.” In the face of what seems like an intractable situation, you are not powerless – that's the central

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point. I ask the reader to think about what kind of community he or she wants to live in and then take responsibility for making it happen. Develop respect in family and personal relationships, in the workplace and in our civic institutions, such as education, politics, and religion. And the key to conducting your life with respectfulness – what must come first – is self-respect. My book explains why and how to develop such respect without going overboard.

I may be overly optimistic, but I do believe that together we can change our society to one

in which we listen to each other, respond with respect, agree to disagree at times, and benefit from an atmosphere of civility. Yes, it is possible.

How is the book constructed?

I generally write my books from a business perspective, but I quickly realized that the value of respect has to permeate one's entire life to be authentic and lasting. So, I explored the nature of respect from a philosophical perspective, from Immanuel Kant's belief that every individual is inherently deserving of respect, to practical

advice on how to present your opinions constructively.

I've always believed lessons are more meaningful when they're based on personal stories, and so in my book 13 leaders in fields such as education, religion, politics, nonprofits, publishing, and the arts share their views and experiences regarding respect, including how they handled situations of disrespect. For example, Michael J. Dowling is the CEO emeritus of Northwell Health, the largest private healthcare provider and a major employer in New York State (recently expanding into Connecticut). We've known each other for decades, ever since he came to the U.S. from his native Ireland. Growing up in poverty in County Limerick, Dowling embraced his mother's advice, "Never allow your current circumstances to limit your future potential." He eventually achieved astonishing success in academia, state government service, and healthcare. Setting the right culture in the organization is important to him, and that's why he would meet every Monday with new Northwell employees, typically around 300, to convey the message of respect for one another at every level. Here's how he expresses it: "I spend quite a bit of time on the issues of decency and respect and honesty and how we relate to one another – how we communicate, how we respect one another's opinions, how we can have respectful disagreements. It's central to the culture we try to create inside of Northwell. But it is also central to the societal culture. What kind of community do you want to be in?"

How has the role of a communications firm evolved?

What is needed by clients today is very different from the requirements of five or ten years ago. A new level of sophistication is called for. It used to be that the communications were only at the CEO level. Over the past 20 years this has changed. We need to get back to helping CEOs understand the public challenges their company faces.

With all that The Dilenschneider Group has achieved, are you able to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins?

We stop and take a deep breath every day and look at what is being done for our clients. Our goal is not to celebrate success, but to focus on what more can and should be done. We never stand on the past and constantly look to the future and new ways of dealing with what has to be done.

What is a trend that is occurring in the industry today?

There is a media focus now on business that is totally different from what took place just a few years ago – tougher, more critical, sometimes downright hostile. A minor miscue can go viral and destroy reputations, even whole organizations. It doesn't even have to be a real miscue – it can be an AI fake or a conspiracist's inflammatory lie. We expect this trend is going to continue and will require whole new ways of thinking and more evolved communications strategies. ●

How to Change the World One Interaction at a Time

RESPECT

ROBERT L. DILENSCHNEIDER

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