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Can We Talk About Energy? Really Talk?

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I have been working with energy clients for more than thirty years. Never before has there been an environment so challenging to discussion about energy development in this country. And in my view, much of the challenge is rooted in how we talk with each other.

An effective dialogue about energy supply, notably around fossil fuels, doesn't yet exist. The best-intentioned collaboration strategies still miss the mark in some ways.

In the fall of 2014, to an audience of business leaders in Calgary, I put forward the need to reset conversations with and among Canadians about energy. We need to redefine the conversation, and move from dialogue, where we talk at or past each other, to co-creation. We'll do this by first finding common ground for all parties and expanding the conversation from there. Can we agree that we still need fossil fuels, at least for now?

This reset to our conversation, going back to that shared principle, will allow all of us with an interest in our energy future to more productively address both ongoing use of fossil fuels and integration with other energy sources. A big obstacle to this co-creation effort, however, is a lack of broad understanding about how the energy industry works.

A study undertaken by our Firm on perceptions of the Canadian energy sector among members of the reddit.com online community shows there continues to be a vast chasm between what Canadians are concerned about in regards to energy, and their understanding of the root causes of the things that they are concerned about. This despite the wealth of information available from sources ranging from industry to government. Who regulates the sector? Why are heating and transportation costs different in different jurisdictions? What are the social - and financial - implications of various energy supply options, and how do we balance them? The fact that these questions are being posed indicates there is understanding of the complexity around the choices we might make, and shows there is room to find the necessary common ground.

Part of a larger annual research project entitled [Bold Thinking, What Canadian Culture Creators Want You to Know](#), our study of reddit conversations about energy shows that the affordability of energy often trumps the environmental impact. Redditors want responsible, sustainable energy sources, but are more supportive of supplies which keep energy costs low. If a project will lead to economic benefit, concerns about impacts are somewhat

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softened, as long as there is a certain confidence the project will be developed in a responsible manner.

The conversations on reddit indicate a willingness to discuss the important issues around energy from a pragmatic perspective, in a way that allows all parties to see themselves as being treated responsibly and fairly, and is one indication that it is possible to reset the conversation.

Industry can and should continue to advocate, educate, and consult and individual Canadians need to continue to pose tough questions, but if we're to accomplish anything productive in the discussion about our energy future, all of us need to first find a meaningful, sustainable common purpose that will lead us to a collaborative discussion about energy development.