Essential Skills for Effectively Engaging Conflict:

Six Professional Development Modules to Support Effective Collaboration

An essential characteristic of effective people in any community or organization is their ability to engage successfully in critical and difficult conversations.Successful teaming requires a diverse group of individuals to engage in challenging conversations around complex issues.

The six professional development modules offered in this series are designed to introduce you and your team to key concepts, processes, and skills essential to effective collaboration. It is our intent that you will use these modules as a framework for improving individual and organizational effectiveness.

Special Education Resolution Center

OKLAHOMA Education

Special Education Resolution Center
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Modules/Objectives

Module 1. Collaboration and Conflict

A capacity essential to successful collaboration is the ability of people with diverse experience and perspectives to work together for mutual purpose. Collaboration is relatively easy when those you are working with interpret a situation in the same way and draw similar conclusions regarding appropriate courses of action. It becomes much more complex when we experience inevitable conflict while jointly attempting to address complex issues. Peter Senge states:

In great teams, conflict becomes productive. The free flow of conflicting ideas is critical for creative thinking, for discovering new solutions no one individual would have come to on his own.

In this module you and your team will:

- Explore the role of collaboration in the pursuit of mutual purpose,
- Understand the dynamics of conflict and its potential role as a barrier to collaboration,
- See Collaboration as a process for supporting shared learning and decision-making around complex issues and objectives, and
- Review the essential elements of an effective process of collaboration.

Module 2. Starting with Self: Preparation

The only person I really have any control over is myself. An essential characteristic of those skilled in effectively engaging conflict is self-awareness. What are my personal beliefs and experiences with conflict? What do I do when I perceive someone has a perspective different than my own? When do I find myself defending my perspective and pushing my solution as the "right" answer? Stephen Covey, in his book "The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness", shares the following quote:

Between Stimulus and Response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our growth and our happiness. -Viktor Frankl

It has been my observation that for many of us our default response when engaging conflict is often less than helpful. The choices we make in the context of conflict determine whether we escalate or de-escalate the experience. Conflict has two potential outcomes. Conflict has the potential to erode all trust and social capital. At the same time conflict, and our engagement of it has the potential to build trust and social capital and to uncover innovation and creativity. Self-awareness and self-management then become critical to our effectiveness.

In this module you and your team will:

- Identify and explore "styles" for engaging conflict along with the pros and cons of each,
- Increase personal awareness of your current "ways of being" when engaging conflict,
- Expand your capacity for seeing conflict as a context for possibility, and
- Be introduced to a structure for preparing yourself to engage effectively when conflict is likely to surface.

Module 3. Listening for Understanding

When experiencing conflict, what most people really want and need is to be heard and understood. How often we hear, “They are just not listening to me”, when taking requests for mediation. Have you ever experienced people with whom you are in conflict repeating themselves? This is often an indication that they do not believe they have been heard nor understood.

In the book “Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matter Most” the authors introduce the notion of “conversational stances” when engaging conflict. In what they refer to as a “telling stance” we frame the conversation in the following paradigm:

- You see the situation differently than I do.
- I know that I am right.
- We cannot both be right. Therefore . . .
- You must be wrong.

Once we adopt this paradigm the goal of the conversation is to “tell” everyone else where they are “wrong’, and to “tell” everyone why we are “right”.

The alternative to a “telling stance” in their model is a “learning stance”. In a learning stance we choose to frame the conversation as follows:

- It is a given that when engaging challenging conversations, we are always operating from different experience and perspectives.
- Given that the issue(s) we are addressing is/are complex, let’s not waste our time arguing whose experiences or perspectives are the “right” one.
- Let’s commit to having a conversation that will create a deeper understanding of our individual contexts so as to create a deeper shared context from which to operate,
- It is our belief that out of this deeper, shared understanding will emerge options and possibilities we haven’t even considered.
- A key characteristic of a learner’s stance is curiosity. Listening is essential to support curiosity.

In this module you and your team will:

- See listening as more than just something to “do”, but as a way of being present in a conversation,
- Understand the five critical reasons for listening,
- Learn specific strategies for both attending and responding as a listener, and
- Practice the skills introduced.

Module 4. Sharing your Perspective

To be effective at collaboration, one must learn to "balance advocacy with inquiry". In the previous module, Listening for Understanding, we focused on supporting inquiry. Energy is primarily focused on understanding what the other party wants/needs to have understood. In his classic book, "7 Habits of Highly Effective People", Stephen Covey admonishes us to:

"Seek First to Understand...Then to be Understood"

Engagement in collaboration that is committed to mutual purpose and mutual gain requires that we be able to advocate our interests in relationship to the shared issue(s). This can be experienced by many as the most challenging aspect of a difficult conversation. We are concerned that the person to whom we have been listening may experiences the sharing of our perspective as argumentative or as a rebuttal to what they have been sharing. We want to share our thoughts in a way that increase our shared understanding of the issue(s) rather that arguing the veracity of our individual perspectives.

In this module you and your team will:

- Learn the keys to creating safety in a challenging conversation,
- Learn to sort facts, interpretation, and interest,
- Identify strategies for sharing perspective in a way that makes it "easier" for the other person to hear, and
- Know when to "loop back" to listening in order to continue to balance advocacy with inquiry.

Module 5. Exploring Issues to Understanding Interest

Just because we can name a problem does not mean that we understand it. Too often we generate solutions to problems when we have not fully clarified our shared and individual objectives and needs.

Roger Fisher and William Ury, in the paradigm shifting book, "Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In", provide an elegant structure for understanding what needs to be done. The model in a nutshell is as follow:

- When we come together to make decisions around difficult "Issues" we typically bring our "Positions" to the conversation.
- Our Positions usually include our perspective on the issue(s) along with our preferred solution(s).
- As stated in previous lessons, when Positions are perceived as compatible there is no problem. However, when our Positions threaten each other, we open ourselves to the potential "dark side" of conflict. This is where self-awareness and choice become critical.
- The choice is between defending our Positions or suspending judgment and seeking to understand the "Interests" that are driving the Positions of each of us. In this context, where a person's Position expresses "what" they want, their underlying Interest are "why" this is important to them.
- A wise and effective decision is not found in a compromise between our Positions but rather in a solution that meets as many of our shared and independent Interests as possible.

An essential skill for getting at these deeper interests is the ability to ask good questions. All too often our questions at this point are focused on identifying the flaw in the other person's thinking or looking to find a quick and easy solution to the problem. Once again, it is not possible to generate effective solutions to a problem that we do not fully understand. Full understanding is achieved when we can articulate our shared and individual interests.

In this module you and your team will:

- Understand the correlation between the questions asked to the conversation experienced,
- Learn strategies of "Intentional Inquiry" where questions are asked in service of a conversation of shared learning,
- Differentiate different types of questions for different purposes, and
- Practice generating powerful questions.

Module 6. Solutions for Mutual Purpose

The Interest-Based approach described in the previous module is often referred to as a Mutual-Gains Approach. It is based on a belief in the potential of people working effectively together toward common purpose to achieve outcomes that exceed what either party could achieve independently. Our goal at this point is to:

- Generate multiple options with the potential for mutual benefit
- Evaluate the options against our interests and any additional standards that may apply,
- Choose an option or combination of options that we believe have the greatest potential, and
- Bring sufficient specificity to our plan so that we can move forward with implementation.

In this module you and your team will:

- Revisit and create a deeper understanding of the process of Brainstorming,
- Identify a range of strategies for effectively sorting through a range of options,
- Identify critical questions to ask when bringing specificity to plan, and
- Identify proactive "what if" strategies to apply when planning for implementation of a shared plan.

Module 1:

Collaboration and Conflict

Module 1: Collaboration and Conflict

Collaboration is a term that is used frequently in communities and organizations. It is used so commonly that we too often assume a shared understanding of this complex relationship. Collaboration is easy when those working together interpret a situation the same way and draw similar conclusions regarding appropriate courses of action. It becomes much more complex when we experience inevitable conflict while jointly attempting to address complex issues. Peter Senge states:

"In great teams, conflict becomes productive. The free flow of conflicting ideas is critical for creative thinking, for discovering new solutions no one individual would have come to on his own."

In this module you will:

- Explore the purpose of collaboration in the pursuit of mutual purpose,
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- Review the essential elements of an effective process of collaboration.

Collaboration and Mutual Purpose

When defining a concept, the first place you often go is the dictionary. Collaboration is defined in this context as:

- to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor;
- to cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected.

The term, collaboration, is often used with little thought to its purpose or true value. We are often expected to collaborate in diverse contexts and with people we may or may not know. In some case we are even mandated to collaborate as a requirement for meeting policy or organizational expectations. However, this expectation is rarely sufficient to raise our level of interaction consistent with the true intent and values of mutual gains collaboration. At times our efforts at collaboration do produce increased learning and understanding, helping us to address our specific challenge(s). However, too often we leave feeling frustrated, as our expectations for the time spent are not met.

So why collaborate? Teams must address this question at a fundamental level in order to achieve the potential benefit. In his book, Leading in a Culture of Change, Michael Fullan writes:

"It is one of life's greatest ironies: schools are in the business of teaching and learning, yet they are terrible at learning from each other. If they ever discover how to do this, their future is assured.

In the book, On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities, Mike Schmoker, reporting on the work of Judith Warren Little, writes:

"that true learning communities – like the one in Johnson City – are characterized by disciplined, professional collaboration and ongoing assessment. This is the surest, most promising route to better school performance, and the reasons are compelling".

Roland Barth, in an article entitled "Relationships in the School House" describes four types of relationships observed while working with school. They are; Parallel Play, Adversarial Relationships, Congeniality, and Collegiality. In describing the characteristics of Collegiality he writes:

"Famous baseball player Casey Stengel once muttered, 'Getting good players is easy. Getting them to play together is the hard part.' Schools are full of good players. Collegiality is about getting them to play together, about growing a professional learning community,

When I visit a school and look for evidence of collegiality among teachers and administrators – sign that educators are 'playing together' – the indicators I seek are:

- Educators talking with one another about practice.
- Educators sharing their craft knowledge
- Educators observing one another while they are engaged in practice
- Educators rooting for one another's success."

There is no lack of evidence in the literature as to the value and importance of collaboration to learning improvement. However, at a more fundamental level, why do we choose to collaborate? The following describes the basic rationale for this choice:

- There is an issue about which we need to make a decision and in which we both/all share a stake in the outcome.
- The choice we face is this; do we pursue an outcome for this issue independent of one another (in isolation) or interdependently with one another (in collaboration)?
- We choose collaboration when we believe that the potential exists for both of us to achieve better outcomes by working together than either of the outcomes we could achieve by working independently. This is referred to in the literature as achieving mutual gain or mutual benefit.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of collaboration:

- As you reflect on these initial thoughts on collaboration, what stands out to you as most significant or resonates most deeply with you?
- Describe a time when you collaborated effectively around some objective or initiative. What most contributed to the success around this experience?
- What did you contribute to this effort? What did others contribute?
- Identify current situation in which you are experiencing frustration in your efforts at collaboration.

Conflict and Collaboration

In the quote in the introduction, Peter Senge implies that conflict is potentially something to be sought out and surfaced. He identifies it as a place of possibilities, where we will find opportunities for creativity and innovation. It this is true, then, why do many demonstrate a significant aversion to conflict? The simple answer is that many don't feel safe when engaging in conflict.

A review of the literature identifies the basic elements of interpersonal conflict based on the work of Social Psychologist, Morton Deutsch. These include:

- People (two or more),
- Interact and Perceive (this can be verbal or non-verbal),
- Incompatible Difference Between or Threats to,
- Resources, Needs, and/or Values,
- Resulting in a Behavioral Response from the Parties (Point of Conflict)
- Which will either Escalate or De-escalate the experience of Conflict.

In this model the source of conflict could be said to reside between our ears. It is experienced within our interpretation of differences of opinion or perspective as threatening and dangerous. In her book, "The Last Word on Power", Tracy Goss introduces the notion of the "Universal Human Paradigm". The model is structured as follow:

- There is a way things "should" be.
- When they are that way, things are right.
- And when they are not that way, there is something wrong with me, with them, or with it.
- And we need to fix it!

Or, stated in another way:

- In any discussion where we are experiencing differences of opinion, there is obviously a "right" and a "wrong" answer.
- From my perspective it is obvious that I am right.
- Given that we cannot both be right, then you are obviously wrong.
- In the context of the Universal Human Paradigm, it is my job to fix this discord by convincing you that I am right and you are wrong.

It is our propensity to fall into this paradigm that compromises our effectiveness at collaboration. We become polarized in our positions and our thinking and behavior becomes focused on **defending** our perspective. Very little effort, if any, is directed at understanding the thinking of the person whom we now see as our adversary. In order to learn effective strategies for conflict engagement, we must challenge this paradigm.

The value in conflict is not found in fixing it, but rather in acknowledging and understanding the differences. While we often state as a core value, our respect for diversity of opinion, this respect is often absent from our challenging conversations.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of conflict:

- Describe your experience with the "Universal Human Paradigm" in the context of collaboration. What does this paradigm make impossible?
- Describe the range of situations in your own life where this paradigm shows up.
- Describe a collaborative experience where you were able to operate outside this paradigm. What did you and others do to achieve this shift in orientation?

Collaboration as a Process of Shared Learning

In the book, Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, the authors, Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler, describe a conversational context in which we:

- Have differences of opinion,
- The stakes are high, and
- We are experiencing strong emotions.

They go on to state:

"Each of us enters conversations with our own opinions, feelings, theories, and experiences about the topic at hand. This unique combination of thoughts and feeling makes up our 'personal pool of meaning'. This pool not only informs us but also propels every action.

When two or more of us enter crucial conversations, by definition, we don't share the same pool. Our opinions differ. I believe one thing, you another. I have one history, you another."

When we are threatened by these differences of opinion, we quickly attempt to resolve the threat by arguing who has the "correct" pool of meaning. A conversation of collaboration, on the other hands seeks to merge our diverse pools of meaning into a deeper, shared pool of meaning. This, by no means assumes that we are now in agreement on everything. In reality, we will find things on which we agree, things on which we remain individually and collectively unsure, and things about which we will fundamentally disagree. This is a typical experience when discussing complex issues.

In the book, Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together, William Isaacs comments on three types of conversational structure; debate, dialogue and discussion. The word debate, at its root, means to beat down. Your goal is to win the argument by "beating down" the position of your opponent.

Dialogue, he says,

"is about exploring the nature of choice. To choose is to select among alternatives. Dialogue is about evoking insight, which is a way of reordering our knowledge – particularly the taken-for-granted assumptions that people bring to the table.

Discussion is about making a decision. Unlike dialogue, which seeks to open possibilities and see new options, discussion seeks closure and completion. The word decide means 'to resolve difficulties by cutting through them."

The value of dialogue for groups and teams is that it creates a process of shared thinking and learning out of which emerges new possibilities. Returning to the quote by Peter Senge at the introduction to this module:

"The free flow of conflicting ideas is critical for creative thinking, for discovering new solutions no one individual would have come to on his own."

What fundamentally creates value in collaboration is our ability to engage in conversations of shared learning. It is where we experience the value in diversity of opinion.

A fundamental task of any group or team tasked with a complex problem is to engage in shared learning.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of conversational structures that support collaboration and shared learning:

- Identify and describe examples of group conversations you have had characterized as debate, discussion, and dialogue.
- What contributed to the structure of each conversation? By intent? Unintentionally?
- What were the qualitative differences for you in each of these experiences?
- In your experience, what contributes to a group's ability to engage in dialogue and shared learning?

Essential Elements of and Effective Process of Collaboration

The following are critical elements of a collaborative decision-making process along with a brief elaboration of each stage.

- Preparation
- Identifying the Issues
- Exploring for Interests
- Options for Mutual Gains
- Solutions and Follow-Through

Preparation

Negotiations theorists posit that any effective negotiation is built on 70% of your time spent in preparation. The following questions are designed to initiate our thinking as we prepare to engage in a process of collaboration:

Substantive Preparation:

- What are the issues?
- What are the required or expected outcomes?
- What information is needed to engage effectively in this conversation?
- What are your interests/needs/objectives? Their interests/needs/objectives? Those we share in common?
- What are possible outcomes based on hunched interests and mutual gains?

Procedural Preparation:

- Identify commitment to mutual purpose and mutual benefit.
- Identify commitment to mutual respect.
- Establish shared guidelines for the group:
- Timelines
- Norms
- Meeting Structures
- Facilitator

Emotional Preparation:

- Commit to self-management and personal responsibility.
- Commit to sharing responsibility for success of group.
- Who is the situation call me to be?
- Who am I committed to being?
- How will I engage “at-integrity”?

Identifying the Issues:

Given all the time spent in preparation it is essential that teams take time at their initial meeting to clarify their purpose and the issue(s) to be addressed. This includes:

- Introducing the issue(s) from each participant’s perspective.
- Beginning to unpack and acknowledge the potential complexity of the issue(s).
- Exchange pertinent information.
- Turn the focus to the future.
- Develop an Agenda: What do we need to explore and understand more fully?

Explore for Interests:

Just because you can name the issue does not mean that you understand it. During this phase you:

- Address what really is at the heart of the issue(s).
- Deepen group understanding of individual interests.

- Search for shared interests.
- Identify common ground
- Approach exploration with a balance of advocacy and inquiry
- Engage in dialogue that supports shared learning.

Options for Mutual Gain:

Brainstorm ideas with the potential of meeting as many common and shared interests. This may include such things as:

- Agreeing that we can generate ideas without necessarily being committed to them.
- Developing multiple options. (think outside the existing box)
- Evaluating options against interests and standards.
- Selecting option(s) based on evaluation against shared and individual interests.

Solutions and Follow-Through:

Just because we have a tentative agreement does not mean we are done. Too many plans fail in implementation because we have not worked out the details. It is essential that we take time to bring specificity to our plans and agreements. This may include:

- Clarifying the option(s) we have selected for moving forward.
- Developing a durable plan of action for next steps with specificity; Who?, What?, When?, Where?, How?, What if?.
- Identifying a process for evaluation.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your share understanding of the process for supporting collaboration:

- What are your initial thoughts as you reflect on the framework?
- When have you experienced examples of this framework in action? What was the outcome?
- Where do you see application of this model in your area of responsibility or influence?
- Where is one context in which you would commit to introducing this process?
- What steps will you take for implementation?

Module 2:

Starting with Self: Preparation

Module 2: Starting with Self: Preparation

The only person I really have any control over is me. An essential characteristic of those skilled in effectively engaging conflict is self-awareness and self-management / self-regulation. What are my personal beliefs and experiences with conflict? What do I do when I perceive someone has a perspective different than my own? When do I find myself defending my perspective and pushing my solution as the "right" answer? Stephen Covey, in his book, The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness, shares the following quote:

"Between Stimulus and Response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our growth and our happiness." -Viktor Frankl

It has been my experience that for many of us our default response when engaging conflict is often less than helpful. Our choices in this context will determine whether we escalate or de-escalate conflict. The engagement of conflict has two potential outcomes. Engagement has the potential to erode all trust and social capital. Engagement of the same conflict has the potential to build trust and social capital while creating a context of shared learning, innovation and creativity. Self-awareness and self-management then become critical to our effectiveness.

In this module you will:

- Identify "styles" for engaging conflict along with the pros and cons of each,
- Increase personal awareness of your current "way(s) of being" when engaging conflict,
- Expand your capacity for seeing conflict as a context for possibility, and
- Be introduced to a structure for preparing yourself to engage effectively when conflict is likely to surface.

What is my Conflict Style?

Most of us have developed a "way of being" when confronting conflict. While, in many cases, our response is situation specific, we tend to have a "default response" or style. While the literature identifies a range of models for reflecting on this construct, this is not about differentiating a "right style" from a "wrong style". For the most part, one can identify both pros and cons of just about any style. The point is that our ability to be intentional in our conflict response is dependent on our level of self-awareness as to what we tend to do in a given situation. In fact, much of preparation occurs in the context of increasing our capacity for personal reflection and self-awareness. It is about developing and practicing mindfulness.

In the book, Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High introduced in Module 1, the authors state:

"As people begin to feel unsafe, they start down one of two unhealthy paths. They move either to silence (withholding meaning from the pool) or to violence (trying to force meaning in the pool)".

They go on to say:

"Silence consists of any act to purposefully withhold information from the pool of meaning. It's almost always done as a means of avoiding potential problems, and it always restricts the flow of meaning. Methods range from playing verbal games to avoiding a person entirely. The three most common forms of silence are masking, avoiding, and withdrawing".

"**Violence** consists of any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control, or compel others to your point of view. It violates safety by trying to force meaning into the pool. Methods range from name-calling and monologuing to making threats. The three most common forms are controlling, labeling, and attacking".

In the book, Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together, introduced in Module 1, William Isaacs introduces a schema for describing an unfolding conversation. In his model he describes what he refers to as "Fundamental Choice Points," in which the behavioral choices participants make in the context of these fundamental choice points will influence the structure of the subsequent conversation and their ultimate experience of each other. When engaged in a conversation where there are differences of opinion, strong emotions and important issues at stake we initially engage in "deliberation". This means to take careful thought, to reflect or to weigh out. In other words, we think about what is being said. In the context of this deliberation participants tend to make one of two choices; **suspend** judgment or **defend** their point of view.

Suspending judgment starts with awareness that I am making a judgment about your point of view. I choose to dis-identify with this judgment in order to "listen without resistance". My goal is to more deeply understand your thinking and point of view.

When describing the choice to defend, Isaac says:

"The word defend comes from roots that mean "to ward off an attack." This is a billiard ball model of conversations. In a discussion people see themselves as separate from one another. They take positions to put forth arguments and defend their stakes".

A third, and well-known model for reflecting on conflict style comes from the work of Kenneth Thomas. He proposes a two-dimensional model for assessing conflict style based on assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness is the extent to which an individual works to satisfy his or her concerns while cooperativeness, the extent to which an individual works to satisfy the other persons concerns. From this model he proposes five different styles of conflict engagement. They are:

- Competing: described as being assertive and uncooperative. When competing an individual is more focused on addressing his/her concerns, sometimes at the expense of the other person meeting their needs. The competing person will often use any resources available to win.
- Accommodating: is described as unassertive and cooperative. It is considered the opposite of competing and is sometimes described as self-sacrificial. When accommodating the individual neglects, his/her concerns in order to meet the needs of the other person.
- Avoiding: is described as both unassertive and uncooperative. In this case the individual does not pursue his or her objectives nor those of the other. In many cases there is a denial of the conflict.
- Collaborating: is both assertive and cooperative and is fundamentally the opposite of avoiding. In the context of collaboration, the parties seek to find solutions and make decisions that address the concerns of all involved. In this case the parties are committed to achieving mutual gain or mutual benefit for all involved.
- Compromising: is seen as moderately assertive and cooperative. In this case the parties are looking for expedient, mutually acceptable solutions that may only partially meet the objectives of those involved.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of conflict style.

- Where do you typically find yourself on the silence/violence continuum? What triggers you from one to the other?
- In what situations do you find yourself defending yourself? In what types of situations are you more likely to suspend judgment?
- What conflict contexts prove most challenging for you? Which of the five styles described above might be considered your default response?
- Reflect on the five styles of conflict engagement described by Thomas and identify three pros and three cons of each.

Conflict as a Context for Possibility

In Module 1, we introduced the notion that "the free flow of conflicting ideas is critical for creative thinking, for discovering new solution no one individual would have come to on his own". This potential, it would seem, is too rarely experienced by teams and groups. When asked to define and/or describe their experience of conflict, people will often use such descriptors as stressful, exhausting, futile, scary, dangerous, polarizing, etc. When asked to describe life without conflict one will often hear responses ranging from peaceful to stagnant and boring.

The point is that conflict is neither good nor bad; it simply is. As stated earlier, at the heart of conflict is a "perception of incompatible difference or threat" to our resources, needs or values. It is how we **interpret** these differences that create our experience. It could be said that our experience in conflict is embedded in the stories we tell ourselves about the situation or the people with whom we are engaged. Even the language we as professional use to describe the experience reflect these stories. We talk about conflict as something to be managed or resolved. We see conflict as something to be fixed so that we can get on with things. We too often see conflict as what stand between us and our objectives.

Recently a new term is surfacing that I believe more accurately reflects a shift in our thinking. As an alternative to Conflict Management and Dispute Resolution, one is beginning to hear the term Conflict Engagement. This begins to hint at the potential that exists if and when we choose to not avoid conflict but rather to engage the perceived differences with an expectation of possibility.

If, at a fundamental level, it is our beliefs about, and orientation to conflict which create our experience, what is our choice? How do we impact what is often a deeply embedded belief system? At the heart of preparation is a shift in orientation to a conversation in which we have found ourselves stuck. For example, it is a shift from:

- Certainty to Curiosity: How would a better understanding of your point of view expand my perspective on the situation?
- Debate to Exploration: Rather than argue between our two current perspectives, let's expand our shared understanding of the issue(s) at hand.
- Simplicity to Complexity: My hunch is that this issue is more complex than we are willing to admit. Rather than engaging in simplistic, binary thinking, let's acknowledge and engage the complexity.
- Either/Or thinking to Both/And thinking: Polarizing around the issue is not useful if we want to achieve mutual gain or benefit. Let's expand our range of options.

Increasing our effectiveness in the context of conflict is not simply about learning new skills or strategies. While this is essential and will be addressed in subsequent lessons, these skills and strategies must be built upon a shift in who we choose to be in these challenging situations.

Models for reflecting on this choice can be found in the emerging field of coaching. Coaches assist people to increase awareness of how choices related to their personal way of being, impact their achievement of their goal or objective. One paradigm is found in the distinction between **being "at effect" or "at cause"**.

When operating "**at effect**" we feel powerless and helpless in the face of some act, circumstance, condition, and/or person. We often seek out others agreement about how bad things are, and about how we are really doing the best we can. A colleague of mine refers to this as "recruiting third party warriors" to our view of a situation. We take fewer and fewer risks, content to just try to get through another day without being a really big victim. What runs our lives are our conversations? These conversations focus on what we cannot do because of the actions of another or the situation as opposed to what we can do.

When operating, "**at cause**", we do not spend a lot of energy estimating how things got to be the way they are, who is to blame, or who happens to be right or wrong. Rather, we focus on effective action toward mutual purpose. We are more concerned with having a situation or relationship work than the reason it will not. The responsible person does not approach the situation or relationship as though something is wrong, rather that there is something missing. There is a belief that the actions we choose to take will influence a situation and can move us toward a satisfactory outcome. We take responsibility for achieving what we are committed to both in the relationship and the situation.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of conflict as possibility.

- How and where were your beliefs about conflict formed?
- How do your beliefs about conflict serve you in collaboration and teaming?
- In what ways do your beliefs about conflict not serve you well?
- What assumptions are these beliefs built on?
- What are you committed to creating around your capacity for engaging conflict?
- What specific action(s) might you take to become more “at cause” in challenging conversations?

Becoming "At Integrity" with a Commitment to Mutual Purpose

This module is designed to support intentionality when preparing to engage a conversation in which conflict is likely to surface. Lawrence Susskind, negotiations theorist and practitioner, has said that when preparing to negotiate, 60-70% of your overall time should be spent in preparation. Fundamentally preparation is about bringing our i**ntentions**, **speaking**, and **actions** into alignment. We are said to be "at integrity" when this is the case and "out of integrity" when out of alignment in one or more of these areas. Being "out of integrity" does not mean that we lack, or do not value integrity. It basically means that we are currently "not walking our talk" and that if we want to increase our effectiveness and build trust, we need to take action that bring our commitments, actions, and speaking into alignment.

When preparing to engage challenging conversation it is useful to focus our attention in three areas:

- Personal Preparation
- Substantive Preparation
- Procedural Preparation

Personal Preparation takes place in the context of self-awareness and self-management. It is about owning responsibility for choices and bringing them into alignment with commitments. It is about assessing your orientation to the conversation and intentionally shifting it when appropriate. This was once described to me by a mentor as "shifting from judgment and fear, to curiosity and compassion".

Some questions to support this reflection are adapted from the book, Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High:

- What is our purpose for having the conversation?
- What am I committed to?
- for myself?
- for others?
- for this relationship?
- How do I bring my behavior in line with these commitments?

Substantive Preparation focuses on the content of our conversation. Too often people enter challenging conversations with a set of assumptions regarding the purpose and objectives for the meeting. We are often unclear as to what the "real" issues are. We are also unclear as to our real interests around the issue(s) in addition to having no real clue as to what is important to the other person. In addition, our perspective may be tainted by "stories" others have shared with us regarding the situation.

Some questions to support substantive reflection and preparation include:

- What are the issues?
- What is my story? What assumptions am I operating from?
- How might I test these assumptions?
- What are my interests? Theirs? Common?
- What information is needed to engage the conversation intelligently?
- What are possible options based on interests and mutual gains?

Procedural Preparation focuses less on the "what" of the conversation and more on the "how". What agreements might we want to make prior to engaging the issue(s) that might support our effectiveness? When choosing to engage particularly challenging conversations we might want to talk about "how" we might proceed before actually proceeding.

Some questions to support procedural reflection and preparation include:

- How do we maintain a positive tone?
- How will we maintain safety?
- How do we sustain our commitment to mutual benefit and gain?
- Do we need to clarify shared expectations?
- Logistics: Time. Location. Who needs to participate in this conversation, etc?

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of effective preparation for engaging conflict?

- Identify a challenging conversation you have had recently in which you were insufficiently prepared.
- What was the outcome?
- What was missing based on what has been shared in this module?
- Identify a challenging conversation that you and/or your team is anticipating.
- What will you do to prepare to engage this conversation with maximum effectiveness?

Module 3:

Listening for Understanding

Module 3: Listening for Understanding

When experiencing conflict, what many people most want, and need is to be heard and understood. How often we hear, "They are just not listening to me", when taking requests for mediation. Have you ever experienced the people with whom you are engaged in conflict repeating themselves? This is often an indication that they do not believe they have been heard.

In the book, Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, the authors introduce the notion of "conversational stance" when engaging conflict. When taking what they refer to as a "telling stance" participants frame the conversation as follows:

- You see the situation differently than I do.
- I know that I am right.
- We cannot both be right. Therefore . . .
- You must be wrong.

Once we have adopted this structure, the goal of the conversation is to "tell" everyone else where they are wrong, and to "tell" everyone why we are right.

The alternative to a "telling stance" in their model is a "learning stance". In a learning stance we choose to frame the conversation as follows:

- It is a given that when engaging challenging conversations, we are always operating from a different set of experiences and perspectives.
- Given that the issue(s) we are addressing is/are complex, let's not waste our time arguing whose perspective or experience is right or of more value.
- Let's commit to having a conversation that will create a deeper, shared understanding.
- It is our belief that out of this deeper, shared understanding will emerge options and possibilities we haven't even considered.

A key characteristic of a learning stance is curiosity. Listening is essential to support curiosity.

In this module you will:

- See listening as more than just something to "do", but as a way of "being present" in a conversation,
- Understand five critical reasons for listening,
- Learn specific strategies for both attending and responding as a listener, and
- Practice the skills introduced.

It's about both "doing" AND "being" when Listening

Many have participated in training focused on the skill of Active Listening. There is significant value in training of this nature, and we will focus more specifically on development of this skill. However, before doing so, it is important to identify two critical dimensions of effective listening. Let me explain what I mean.

Often, when introducing the notion of active listening in a professional development context, a participant will raise their hand and state something like, "Oh yeah I know what that is. I hate it when people do that to me". When asked to explain, they typically describe someone who has learned to "do" active listening while not really understanding what it means to "be" an active listener. In many cases the person has learned a basic formula for responding which encourages letting the speaker know you are listening with a statement such as: "So you're feeling _____ (name the emotion) because _____ (state the reason)." While, at a fundamental level, this may be a perfectly appropriate response, it is often perceived as disingenuous when delivered in this formulaic fashion. In other words, the listener is perceived as just going through the motions.

A second experience described is of someone listening just enough to hear the flaw in your reasoning or when they have identified their point of disagreement with what you are sharing. Once this happens you can almost see this person disengage from the conversation. While their eyes may still be on you, behind those eyes they are busy preparing a rebuttal to what they have heard.

The impact of these same words can shift when delivered by someone who is truly engaged in "being" an active listener. In this case their listening and responding is driven by a deep commitment to understanding and learning. They are not simply going through the motions. They are listening from a place of mutual respect and curiosity. They are listening from a desire to learn. They are listening from a true commitment to understanding. They have shifted from a "telling stance" to a "learning stance" as described in the introduction to this module.

In Module 2 we introduced the notion of shifting your orientation to a challenging conversation from:

- certainty to curiosity,
- debate to exploration,
- simplicity to complexity, and
- "either/or" thinking to "both/and" thinking

It is this shift in orientation that is essential to move from doing active listening to truly being an active listener. This is where time spent in preparation can significantly change our way of engagement in the conversation.

Fundamentally it is about bringing our listening into integrity with our commitment to collaboration and mutual purpose. As we shared in Module 2, we are operating "in integrity" when our intentions, actions, and speaking are all in alignment. When asked to describe the value in collaboration, many will quickly state the value found in diversity of opinion. In fact, many groups and teams will identify respect for diversity of opinion as a core shared value. My experience, however, is that this is true only until the diversity shows up. Basic civility appears to go out the window with the arrival of diverse opinions about high stakes, complex and often emotional issues.

Listening respectfully for understanding is essential to collaboration and mutual purpose. This is not about agreement or disagreement. It's about listening in order to expand our thinking and our understanding. It is about listening such that we expand our "shared understanding". It is about listening in such a way that we leverage our individual thinking into shared thinking.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your understanding of "being" an effective listener:

- Describe a time when you felt listened to and understood. How would you describe the experience?
- Identify a situation when you have found yourself "doing" active listening. What was the impact on the conversation?
- Describe a situation when you found yourself "being" an active listener? What difference did it make in the conversation?
- What contributed to your ability to make the shift?

Why listening is so important

We have identified, what might be considered, a number of more philosophical reasons for engaging as an effective listener. While these are essential, let's now identify some more pragmatic reasons for developing this skill. In the book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey identifies the habit of "seek first to understand, then to be understood", as a characteristic of personal effectiveness. In his book, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, Peter Senge introduces a process from the work of Chris Argyris called "balancing advocacy and inquiry". What do these concepts mean in practice?

In a conversation committed to mutual purpose around a shared issue, some fundamental things need to occur.

- I need to understand the perspective(s), understanding, objective(s), need(s), interest(s) around the issue held by the other person(s) - Inquiry
- I need to share my perspective, understanding, objective(s), need(s), interest(s) around the issue - Advocacy
- We need to jointly clarify and understand where we share interests and where we might have interests separate, and yet not necessarily opposed, to each other – Advocacy and Inquiry
- We need to create options that, to the greatest extent possible, will meet both our shared and individual interests - Balance

When pursuing mutual purpose, mutual benefit, mutual gain, we commit to decisions and solutions that we will both find acceptable. For this to happen I choose to understand what is important to you in addition to advocating what is important to me. I choose to be curious. I choose to listen for learning and understanding.

You may have noted that I started the process focusing attention on understanding of the other person. This takes us to "seeking first to understand, then to be understood" (Covey). This represents a fundamental choice when engaging a challenging conversation; do I advocate my perspective first or seek to understand the perspective of the other person?

In the introduction to this module I introduced the distinction between a "telling stance" and a "learning stance". When sharing this distinction, I often hear; "Okay, I get this and see the value. But what if you are dealing with someone who ALWAYS takes a telling stance?" I appreciate this question because it represents the opportunity to "be at cause" versus "at effect" in the conversation. In this case I choose to model what I want. I take a learning stance. I "seek first to understand". I listen and I stay in this stance until you know that I have heard and understand what you have shared. Only then are you ready to potentially take a learning stance and hear my perspective. Choosing to listen first is fundamentally a way for positively influencing the structure of the conversation. It is an opportunity to be "at integrity" with our commitment to collaboration

There are also a number of additional reasons sited in the literature regarding the importance of listening. While I have alluded to many of these let me identify and clarify them specifically.

- Listening to the other person and sharing your understanding of what has been shared lets them know if they have been heard. People want to be heard and understood. They will often continue to repeat themselves and advocate their perspective until they know they have been heard.
- Listening and responding allows me to clarify if what I understand you to be saying is, in fact, what you intended to communicate.
- As I listen to you and provide feedback as to what I am hearing and understanding it facilitates your ability to share what is most important to you. For example, upon hearing my feedback you might say, "Yeah, that is what I said, and it is not really what I meant. Let me try it again."
- Effective listening can defuse emotion. People will often ask, "How do you deal with angry and hostile people?" My typical response is, "listen to them". In my experience people have often escalated the anger and hostility because no one is listening to them. While working with at-risk adolescents, I learned the impact genuine, compassionate listening can have defusing a tense situation.
- Listening encourages us to slow the conversation down. For many who struggle with not having enough time, this may seem counterproductive. My experience is that we spend a lot of time generating solutions to problems that we have not taken sufficient time to fully understand. We then wonder why our plan does not meet our objectives. A favorite quote states; "Sometimes you need to slow down in order to go faster".

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your understanding of the importance of listening to collaboration?

- In what types of situations do you find it easiest to be an effective listener?
- In what types of situations do you find it most challenging to be an effective listener?
- Describe a situation in which you were involved where participants demonstrated effective listening. What became possible for the group? What was the group able to achieve that might not otherwise have been possible?
- Where, specifically, are you committed to improving effectiveness with this skill? What action will you take to achieve this improvement?

The Elements of Effective Listening

Effective listening has two dimensions; Attending and Responding. This distinction is found in the early work of social scientist, Robert Carkhuff, when describing listening in the context of a helping relationship.

Attending refers to those things we do in support of our ability to really pay attention when listening to another. We have already identified a number of shifts in our thinking and orientation that support this. For example, the shift from a telling to a learning stance increases our capacity for curiosity and will assist to increase our focused attention. In addition, there are a number of behavioral indicators of attending. Carkhuff identifies five:

- Eye Contact: Am I looking at you when you are speaking? While recognizing that there are cultural ramifications for this behavior, it is essential that I be looking at and observing you to some extent as you share.
- Squared Shoulders: Have I oriented myself appropriately to you physically or have I assumed a posture that may have you questioning whether you really have my attention?
- No Distractions: Am I attempting to multi-task while I listen? Am I thumbing through my papers, grading assignments, or playing with my pen? Current brain research says that we are unable to multi-task effectively. If I really need you to hear me and you are attempting to multi-task, what does that tell me about your interest in, and respect for, what I have to share.

In a counseling context, Carkhuff identifies two additional behaviors that, while possibly less essential, are worth considering.

- Feet on the floor: When I sit leaning back, sometimes with my legs crossed, I may be conveying a more relaxed, possibly less caring level of listening. While there is nothing wrong with being relaxed, is it what is needed to convey my commitment to understanding?
- Leaning slightly forward: When I really want to focus my attention, I may actually lean into the conversation and become very focused on you, what you are saying, and how you are saying it.

It is worth stating again that these are not simply behaviors that we "do" in order to make it look like we are really listening. These behaviors are in service of both the speaker and the listener. In service of the speaker they convey that what is being shared is important and that I am putting all my attention into understanding what you need me to understand. In service of the listener, these behaviors position me to be receiving and processing all that is being shared. The ideas that people share are not only conveyed by their choice of words. We must also be attuned to body language, tone of voice, facial expression and vocal inflections. Communication consists of words (7%), tone of voice (35%) and body language (58%). If I really want to understand what you are sharing, I must focus both on what you are saying in addition to how you are saying it.

The second dimension of effective listening is Responding. Fundamentally, a person does not know if they have been heard until you tell them **what** you have heard and **what** you now understand. Saying something like, "Yeah, I hear you", or even "I hear what you're saying", while well intentioned is insufficient for our purposes.

Responding is about creating a feedback loop. When you share an idea with me it is said that you have "intent". In other words, you intend to influence my understanding about some issue. You encode this intent in language, verbal and non-verbal, and convey it to me. I decode the message by interpreting the language, both verbal and non-verbal and reach some understanding of what you are saying. The fundamental question is to what extent the impact of your message on me (my interpretation) matches your intent.

In a review of the literature you will often five distinct types of responding identified in support of effective listening. These include:

- Encouraging: is not technically responding. It does convey listening by encouraging the speaker to continue sharing or to say more about what is being communicated. It is a response that says, I am tracking you and I really want to hear more of what you have to say.
- Restating: may be considered classic active listening. In this context you, the listener, restate, in your own words, what you understand. It is not parroting. It is paraphrasing. More importantly it is processing what has been shared, framing it in language that makes sense to you in order to assess your understanding of the speaker's intent.
- Reflecting: focuses on the emotional elements of what is being shared. It has been shared earlier that challenging conversations are characterized by differences of opinion, high stakes and strong emotions. In many difficult conversations it is not sufficient to respond to what is being shared. It may be equally important to acknowledge the emotional content of the message.
- Reframing: is less about responding to what is being shared explicitly and more about acknowledging what is being shared implicitly. For example, it has been said that "embedded in any complaint is a request". When listening to someone share their frustration about circumstances one can restate the content of the complaint and/or reflect the emotions being conveyed. This is often appropriate. One can also highlight the implied, request, need, or interest that is somewhat "hidden" in the complaint. The person speaking may be so focused on what is not working that they are unaware of what might work or what they need. Reframing holds this up to them for consideration. It has the potential to shift a conversation from negative to positive and past to future.
- Summarizing: takes a lot of information that has been shared and summarizes the key, salient points in a succinct manner.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions and activity to increase your understanding of the importance of Attending and Responding?

- Where are you challenged when attending to another person?
- How do you currently demonstrate appropriate and effective attending?
- What do you do that impacts effective attending?
- What are your strengths when responding?
- Where are you most challenged when responding?

ACTIVITY: Practice

- Break into dyads or triads. In dyads you have a speaker and a listener. In triads you have a speaker, listener, and observer.
- Identify a topic about which to share. (e.g. My strengths and challenges with the skill of listening.)
- Speaker will share their thoughts with listener. Listener will respond with skill of active listening shared earlier. LISTENER WILL NOT ASK QUESTIONS. LISTENER WILL NOT SHARE ANYTHING ABOUT THE TOPIC FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE.
- Engage in 3-4 interactions. Listener will end by summarizing.
- Debrief experience. Provide feedback on the experience. Observer in triads shares observations.
- Switch roles.

Module 4:

Sharing your Perspective

Module 4 - Sharing your Perspective

We stated earlier that effective collaboration is contingent on the ability to "balance advocacy and inquiry". In the previous module, Listening for Understanding, we focused on supporting inquiry. In this context our energy is primarily focused on understanding what the other party wants and needs to have understood. We shared from the classic, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey where he encourages us to:

"Seek First to Understand...Then to be Understood"

Engagement in collaboration that is committed to mutual purpose and mutual gain requires that we also be able to advocate our interests in relationship to the shared issue(s). This, at times, can be experienced as the most challenging aspect of a difficult conversation. Too often the person to whom we have been listening experiences the sharing of our perspective as a rebuttal to what they have been sharing. We want to share our thoughts in a way that increases shared understanding rather than arguing the veracity of our individual perspectives.

In this module you and your team will:

- Learn the keys to creating safety in a challenging conversation,
- Learn to sort facts, interpretations, and interests
- Identify strategies for sharing perspective in a way that makes it "easier" for the other person to hear, and
- Know when to "loop back" to listening in order to continue to balance advocacy with inquiry.

Creating Safety While Sharing Your Perspective

It is my experience that many who are uncomfortable with conflict are also uncomfortable requesting what they need or sharing what they think. The assumption too often is that by initiating a request or sharing a divergent opinion, we run the risk of seriously upsetting the other person. Depending on the nature of our request it might be perceived as a criticism of that person and serve to upset the relationship. There is also the risk of having our request denied, our opinion ignored and the subsequent conflict that may develop. Maybe it is just easier not to ask or share. The outcome just seems too risky.

The question we too often face is this; "Is this **context safe**, and is this a **safe person** with whom to share my needs, thoughts, and ideas?" At a basic level we engage in a cost/benefit analysis. What are the risks of sharing my perspective on this topic? What is possible, or what are the potential benefits of putting forth my ideas? While these questions may be valid, our analysis of the situation does not always provide a complete or accurate understanding of the situation. We too often focus on the risks and lose sight of the potential benefits.

Asking the question, "Should I share" may be appropriate. However, the fundamental question needs to be, "how do I put forth what I need to share in a way that will make it easy for the others to hear, understand, and respond?" There are a number of basic and yet very effective strategies that will support our success in this phase of collaboration.

In Module 2 we introduced the notion of shifting our overall orientation when engaging a potentially challenging conversation. One shift suggested was from "either/or thinking" to "both/and" thinking. When engaged in either/or thinking we can quickly become polarized around the notion of one of us being right and one wrong. As a result, we tend to adopt a defensive or adversarial posture and spend little time in joint exploration. We believe that there is room for only one perspective on the table; ours. Shifting to "both/and" thinking breaks this paradigm. "And" is inclusive in that it seeks to hear from and explore the multiple perspectives around what is typically a complex issue. "I want to hear and understand your perspective AND I want to add my perspective." I am sharing my perspective, not as a rebuttal to your point of view, but in service of our shared learning and understanding.

All of this is in service of our primary objective for collaboration. We choose to collaborate because we are pursuing a shared objective and are committed to an outcome that will be beneficial and acceptable to all. In the book, Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High this is referred to as a "Commitment to Mutual Purpose". The authors advocate the value in stating this commitment at the outset of the conversation as a foundational element for creating safety. When parties recognize that we are seeking a mutually acceptable outcome, they are more willing to drop their defensiveness and begin a joint exploration of the issue(s).

While this commitment sets the stage, it does not make the conversation easy. We still may be talking about significant issues around which there are often strong emotions. It is essential, therefore, that we maintain civility and respect in the conversation. A question identified above asks, "How do I put forth what I need to share in a way that will make it easy for the others to hear and respond?" Both what we say and how we say it are critical. We will learn more about this in the next section. Suffice it to say at this point that we want to share our perspective in such a way that it neither negates nor disrespects the other person or their ideas. In summary, we are always looking to maintain a conversation that is safe and supports our ability to fully explore the issues.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of putting forth your perspective in challenging conversations:

- In what contexts do you find it most difficult to share your perspective?
- Describe a situation when you experienced a conversation where people were able to openly share and discuss divergent points of view? What contributed to the success of this conversation?
- What do you need to feel safe sharing your perspective with those who may disagree with you?
- What can you do to increase the likelihood that people will share openly their ideas with you?

Differentiating Fact and Interpretation, Position and Interest

The previous section focused primarily on how we will share our perspective. Our goal is to share our perspective in such a way that it is easy for the other to hear, understand and respond. In this section we will focus more on what we will share. We will focus our strategies on a couple of key distinctions, facts/interpretation of facts, and positions/interests.

Let's start with differentiating facts from interpretation of facts. Chris Argyris, business theorist and a key thinker around the notion of Learning Organizations developed the "Ladder of Inference" as a model for explaining how people process information and make meaning. Visualize a ladder as we start on the first step in our process of making meaning out of experience:

- At the base of the ladder: We start with data and experience. We are experiencing our world almost as a camera would see it.
- First rung: We select certain data and experience to pay attention to. We cannot possibly attend to everything, so we are selective. Our selection is influenced by our past, our expectations, our values, etc.
- Second rung: To the data selected we add meaning. This is a critical shift from facts (actual events) to creating interpretations of facts.
- Third rung: Assumptions are formed on the basis of the meaning we attach to the events.
- Fourth rung: Conclusions are drawn as to what this means for me.
- Fifth rung: Beliefs are adopted or reinforced
- Top of the Ladder: We act on these beliefs, the results of which becomes the foundation for new experiences and data.

This model clearly delineates the point at which we move from fact (data and experience) to interpretation of fact. Some additional things to consider in looking at this model include:

- The time it takes to get from the ground to the top of the ladder may only be nanoseconds.
- This is not meant to discourage us from making assumptions about events because that is impossible.
- An assumption is basically an untested hypothesis or a hunch.
- The critical point to become aware of is when our interpretation of the facts become, for us, the facts. At this point we shed curiosity and take on certainty. We are no longer interested in what else might be important to understand. We know what the real story is.

How often when sharing your perspective are you sharing it as fact? How often are your "facts" simply your interpretation and understanding of a situation? How often do we become committed to our interpretation such that we are unwilling to acknowledge and explore the perspective of another? It is essential that we are clear both to ourselves and with those to whom we are sharing, when we are describing facts and when we are sharing our interpretation of the facts.

The second distinction to make is between Positions and Interests. Roger Fisher and William Ury, in the paradigm shifting book, "Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In", provide an elegant structure for understanding what needs to be done. The model in a nutshell looks like the following:

- When we come together to make decisions around difficult "Issues" we typically bring our "Positions" to the conversation.
- Our Positions usually include our perspective (interpretation) on the issue(s) along with our preferred solution(s).
- As stated in previous lessons, when Positions are perceived as compatible there is no problem. However, when our Positions threaten each other, we open ourselves to the potential "dark side" of conflict. This is where self-awareness and choice become critical.
- The choice is between defending our Positions or suspending judgment and seeking to understand the "Interests" driving the Positions of each of us. In this context, where a person's Position expresses "what" they want, their underlying Interest are "why" this is important to them.
- A wise and effective decision is not found in a compromise between our Positions but rather in a solution that meets as many of our shared and independent Interests as possible.

In the context of this model the question when sharing is, am I sharing my position or my underlying interests (needs, values, objectives, etc.). Sharing our Position is similar to sharing our interpretation; it leaves little room or inclination for broader exploration. We become committed to these proposed solutions as if they are the truth or facts that must be defended or advocated at all costs. Fundamentally the conversation is most productive when we are focused on advocating and inquiring into our underlying interests.

When balancing advocacy and inquiry we are seeking to develop a shared understanding of a situation. The questions we are seeking to address jointly include:

- What is the current situation? (Facts)
- What does the situation mean to us? Individually? Collectively? (Interpretation)
- What are we working to accomplish in this situation? Individually? Collectively? (Interests)

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of the distinctions between facts/interpretation and positions/interests.

- Identify conversations you have been in where lack of shared understanding of facts/interpretation of facts and positions/interests was problematic?
- Identify and describe a current situation where you see evidence of this confusion.
- Describe examples of the "Ladder of Inference" at play.
- Identify a current difficult conversation in which you may be involved. Where might you be confusing facts and interpretation of facts? What are equally viable alternative interpretations to the facts as you see them?
- Identify a current difficult conversation in which you may be involved. What are the issues at the heart of this conversation? What position have you adopted regarding the issues? What are your interests?

Additional Strategies: What then do I share?

In the previous section we identified some critical distinctions between facts and interpretation of facts and between positions and interests. The questions at this point could be, "Okay, I understand the distinction and what does this look like? What do I share when putting my perspective out there?" The answer is, all of it. Once again, the critical consideration is in the "how" of sharing.

When sharing in the context of facts and interpretation of the facts, it is essential that I share both if you are truly going to understand my perspective. I want to start by sharing the data and/or facts that are informing my perspective. I may want to describe specific observable events or behaviors that have drawn my attention. Again, it is critical that we delineate that which we can observe from our interpretation of it. There is no judgment attached.

To this we add our interpretation of what these events or behaviors mean to us. It is at this point that the "how" becomes most critical. I am sharing my interpretation as a hunch. As a hunch it has not become fixed in my mind as fact but remains open to discussion. I am sharing in such a way that says I am open to consider alternate interpretations. I am open to the possibility that I may have misinterpreted a situation or that a radically different interpretation might make more sense. Fundamentally I am open to learning.

What does this look like? In a meeting with a parent I might describe a significant change in a child's behavior on the playground. I might share behavioral data that indicates a significant increase in aggressive behaviors by the child. I might then state that it is now obvious (interpretation) that we as a team need to review the issue of medication for this child. By using the word "obvious" I have elevated my interpretation to the level of fact about which I have adopted a high degree of certainty. I dare you to argue with me.

An alternate approach would start the same way. I would share the same behavioral data from my playground observations. I might then propose one possible interpretation of the behavioral change as being related to an issue of medication. I would pose this as a question, a hunch, a point for additional exploration, not a fact. I would then open the question to the team to explore what additional plausible explanations there might be. In asking this question we might find out about changes in the home routine or even additional evidence that supports our hunch. Our goal is to share our perspective in such a way that it invites an on-going shared exploration of the issue.

When framing our sharing in the context of positions and interest it is equally important that we share both. It is critical in a conversation for collaboration that we identify our common and independent interests. This exploration, which we will cover in more detail in the next module, is critical to our capacity to achieve mutual gain or benefit from the conversation. Our interest will become the criteria by which we evaluate a range of possible options.

So, what role do our positions play? Is taking a position bad? The answer depends on how you hold the position. If the position, which tends to include your proposed solution, is proposed as the only viable solution then it becomes problematic. Your attention shifts to advocating your position while loosing sight of the more important interests. If, on the other hand your position is held as one possible option, then it may be helpful. There is nothing wrong with bringing and sharing potential solutions in the conversation. It is when you become more committed to your solution than mutual gains collaboration that it becomes problematic. It stifles the creative conversations that might emerge if we are open with curiosity to new learning. Fundamentally we are seeking to create a conversation of shared learning

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following suggestions to increase your understanding what to share when sharing your perspective in a challenging conversation.

- Identify and describe meeting where you might have confused the sharing of facts and interpretation of the facts? What specifically did you say?
- Identify alternate ways in which you might have shared this information using the strategies identified above. Practice with a partner
- Identify and describe meeting where you might have focused your sharing on advocating your position while not identifying your interests? What specifically did you say?
- Identify alternate ways in which you might have shared this information using the strategies identified above. Practice with a partner
- What insight has surfaced for you from this practice?
- What action might you take to increase your effectiveness?

Some Final thoughts on Sharing your Perspective: Asking Permission and Looping Back

We have used the habit of "Seek first to understand...then to be understood" proposed by Stephen Covey as a framework for this module. Two questions often arise at this point in the discussion:

- When do I know when it is time to shift from listening to sharing?
- What do I do if the other person starts arguing with what I am sharing?

Let's take these one at a time. I believe that I have sufficiently heard and understood (Seek first to understand...) the perspective of the other person. I will then summarize what I have heard (Active Listening) and ask the person if they believe that I am "getting" what it is they want and need me to understand. If they say no, I might ask them to share specifically what it is that they do not think I understand. I will then summarize my new understanding and repeat my previous question; "Am I "getting" what you need me to understand?" If they say yes, then it is time to make the transition to sharing my perspective (...then to be under understood).

This transition is brief and critical. I ask permission to share my perspective. I ask; "Would you now be willing to hear my thoughts and perspective on this issue?" I might couch this request in a restatement of my commitment to mutual purpose. "In sharing my perspective, I am not intending to rebut your point of view. I am interested in adding my perspective to yours in an effort at creating a deeper, shared perspective". You cannot force someone to hear your perspective. You can influence their willingness to hear by making it their choice, maintaining a commitment to mutual purpose and engaging respectfully.

This takes us to the second question; What if the other person starts arguing with what I am sharing? Despite all our best efforts the person may perceive our perspective as a rebuttal and again begin advocating their point of view. At this point I have a choice. We talked about these choices in module two. I can go on the defensive with fairly predictable results. I can also loop back into listening (seek to understand) for what it is the person wants to make sure I understand. I acknowledge this more completely understand and then return to advocating my perspective. This is not a linear process. We are in essence seeking to weave our individual perspective into a shared, integrated perspective. We are in essence taking our individual stories and weaving them into a single shared story. We will continue to expand on this notion in the next module.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following suggestions to increase your understanding of the transition from listening to sharing and integrating our stories:

- When you are sharing your perspective, what behavior in others tends to move you to defensiveness?
- What are the indicators you have experienced that tell you the conversation is moving from collaborative to argumentative?
- What strategies have you used to bring the conversation back in line with mutual purpose?

Module 5:

Exploring Issues to Understanding Interest

Module 5: Exploring Issues to Understand Interests

Just because we can name a problem or challenge does not mean that we fully understand it. Too often we generate solutions to problems before we have fully clarified our shared and individual objectives and needs related to the issue(s).

In the previous module we introduced the work of Roger Fisher and William Ury. Their paradigm shifting book, "Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In", provides an elegant structure for understanding what needs to be done to fully unpack and resolve an issue.

- When we come together to make decisions around difficult "Issues" we typically bring our "Positions" to the conversation.
- Our Positions typically include our perspective on the issue(s) along with our preferred solution(s).
- As stated in previous lessons, when Positions are perceived as compatible there is no problem. However, when our Positions threaten each other, we open ourselves to the "dark side" of conflict. This is where self-awareness and choice become critical.
- The choice is between defending our Positions or suspending judgment and seeking to understand the "Interests" driving the Positions advocated by each of us. In this context, where a person's Position expresses "what" they want, their underlying Interests express "why" this is important to them.
- A wise and effective decision is not found in a compromise between our Positions but rather in a solution that meets as many of our shared and independent Interests as possible.

An essential skill for getting at these deeper interests is the ability to ask good questions. All too often our questions at this point are focused on identifying the flaw in the other person's thinking or are seeking to find a quick and easy solution to the problem. Once again, it is not possible to generate effective solutions to a problem that we do not fully understand. Full understanding is achieved when we can articulate both our shared and individual interests.

In this module you will:

- Understand the correlation between the questions asked to the conversation experienced,
- Learn strategies of "Intentional Inquiry" where questions are asked in service of a conversation of shared learning,
- Differentiate different types of questions for different purposes, and
- Practice generating powerful questions.

The correlation between the questions asked to the conversation experienced

The exploration phase in a process of collaborative decision-making is crucial and yet often overlooked or given only cursory attention. In the early stages of the conversation we typically have only a preliminary understanding of the issue(s) based on our initial sharing of information. The questions we choose to ask will be critical to our ultimate outcome. Too often our questions shift the conversational focus to a specific solution or plan of action. "Now that we know what the problem is, what should we do?" becomes the focus of our attention.

There is a fundamental decision to be made at this point in our conversation. Will we generate questions in service of divergent thinking or convergent thinking? Will they expand our shared understanding of the issue(s) or will we begin to look for a quick and readily accessible solution? It has been said that the conversation we have is determined by the questions we ask. What we ask, the spirit in which we ask it, how we ask... will invite certain responses and discourage others.

In general, questions focused on divergent thinking are intended to increase our shared thinking and understanding of an issue. They are designed to take the conversation into a deeper understanding of the complexity of a subject. They are questions that push the conversation beyond the known into the unknown. Questions intended to support divergent thinking focus on increasing our awareness of alternatives, encourage open discussion, are designed to gather diverse points of view, and facilitate unpacking the logic of a problem.

The Public Conversations Project (now Essential Partners), a dialogue facilitation group, shares the following thoughts on questions in their workshop entitled "The Power of Dialogue: Constructive Conversations on Divisive Issues":

"The questions we ask have real effects" (Michael White). "Our questions are fateful" (David Cooperider). The very act of asking questions influences people. Acts of asking and answering alter experience and generate possibilities for further experiences. Questions are statements of the questioner's beliefs, interests, commitments and they are acts that have effects on listeners, even before they are overtly responded to. Questions develop and are responded to in specific contexts that have power to shape meanings, invite or discourage curiosity and openness, restrict or expand possibilities for action."

"What we focus on expands; attention gives life" (David Cooperider)

They share the following distinctions for correlating types of questions with types of conversations. For example, a question may seek to:

- Elicit facts or Generate experience
- Elicit positional speaking or Elicit personal experience
- Challenge the other or Explore the other's perception
- Determine the other's knowledge or Invite the other's collaboration and beliefs
- Elicit a problem focus or Elicit a focus on skills and strengths and desired outcomes
- Elicit history or Elicit imagination (e.g. future dreams and hopes)

They go on to advocate for asking questions in support of shared learning that are designed to:

- Create openings where there are closings, surface something that feels fresh and new;
- Express curiosity about someone's experiences and perspectives, passions and strengths;
- Promote reflection and new thinking;
- Promote collaborative, side-by-side relationships.

For some, this may increase a sense of discomfort and frustration. Many of us are problems solvers and our goal is to make a decision and agree to a plan of action as quickly as possible. We are very busy, time is a limited resource, and we have lots to do. Our questions are too often oriented to convergent thinking. The focus becomes evaluating alternatives, summarizing key points, sorting ideas into categories and arriving as quickly as possible at a general conclusion or decision.

This fundamentally compromises our ability to achieve one of the key values of collaboration; leveraging our individual thinking into shared thinking so as to generate new and innovative thinking. More often than not challenges we are facing are not simple or complicated but complex. They will not be solved with technical solutions but require the adaptive work of shared learning.

DISCUSSION: As a group engage in the following activity to increase your understanding of what makes a "good question"

Individually:

- Think of a question that you have used in your work, once or regularly, that you believe is a useful and "good question".

Or

- Think of a question that you have been asked that caused you to engage in significant reflection and possible change.

As a group: Take turns sharing

- Briefly describe the context in which you ask the question.
- What is the question and how do you ask it?
- What happens when you ask the question? What impact does it have? What kind of thinking does it generate?
- What do you believe makes it a good question?

As a group: From this conversation, summarize some characteristics of a good question.

Intentional Inquiry: Asking questions in service of a conversation of shared learning

In Module 3, we introduced the notion of "conversational stance" described by Stone, Patton and Heen in their book, Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. You will remember that they differentiate between what they refer to as a "telling stance" and a "learning stance". The stance we take has a significant impact on the quality of our conversations. Our stance will fundamentally determine the line of inquiry we pursue and the types of questions we ask.

In a book entitled, Change Your Questions Change Your Life, author Marilee Adams introduces a strategy she calls "QuestionThinking". She refers to it as a "system of tools using questions for vastly better results in almost anything you do". This reinforces the correlation we just introduced between the questions asked and the quality of our conversation. Questions make up a significant part of both our internal and external dialogue and therefore have significant impact on the way(s) in which we engage our world and each other. Adams states that, "questions drive results. They virtually program how we behave and what kinds of outcomes are available."

Adams distinguished between two different paths of engagement which she refers to as the "Learner Path" and the "Judger Path". Each path is characterized by different types of questions. For example, when choosing the "Judger Path", you are inclined to ask questions like:

- What's wrong with them?
- What's wrong with me?
- Why are they so stupid?
- How do I fix this?

Judger questions are often couched in automatic reactions, are blame focused, and see things in a win/lose context. This takes us back to the "Universal Human Paradigm" introduced in Module 1 that says:

- There is a way that things "should" be.
- When they are that way, things are right.
- And when they are not that way there is something wrong with me, with them, or with it.
- and we need to fix it.

In contrast, when choosing the "Learner Path", you are more likely to ask questions like:

- What happened?
- What's useful?
- What do I want?
- What can I learn?
- What is the other person thinking, feeling, needing, wanting?

As in the distinction between a Telling Stance and Learning Stance, the options of Judgers Path and Learners Path are a choice. Who am I committed to being in this conversation? What choice will have me most at-integrity with my intentions? Learner questions are born out of thoughtful choices, a commitment to mutual purpose and mutual benefit. They are questions driven by the curiosity of the Learner's Stance.

We introduce the term, Intentional Inquiry, as a method of asking questions with purpose in mind. By this we do not mean questions meant to manipulate the conversation or to coerce a specific outcome. Rather the inquiring person intends to inspire reflection and new thinking. The term intentional used here is significant. Questions in this context becomes tools by which we "unpack an issue", "dive more deeply into an issue", and create a deeper shared understanding. Building on the tool metaphor, we know that different tools do different types of work. For example, if you are building a house, you would not use a framing hammer (large, heavy, and leaves a waffle pattern in the wood) when doing the fine finish nailing on cabinets. In the same way, different questions do different types of work in a conversation. The list below provides examples of this.

A. BROADENING QUESTIONS

- are encouraging and non-threatening,
- invite further discussion,
- are useful for beginning a session or opening discussion, and
- give the respondent latitude in what information s/he chooses to share.

Examples:

- "Tell me more about that..."
- "What else happened?"
- "What happened next?"

B. CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

- help gain understanding of a term or concept, and
- move from the general to the specific.

Examples:

- "What do you mean by 'always, every, never'?"
- "What does 'unreasonable' mean to you?"
- "What don't you understand?"
- "Who specifically doesn't care?"

C. EXPLAINING QUESTIONS

- help gain understanding of the respondent's reasoning, and
- encourage reflection by the respondent and understanding by the questioner.
- HINT: Ask these as an option to asking "Why?

Examples:

- "How did you expect this to turn out?"
- "What leads you to that conclusion?"

D. EXPLORING QUESTIONS

- help gain understanding of the other person's interests, assumptions, fears, expectations and priorities, and
- help shift the respondent's thinking to what s/he is trying to accomplish.

Examples:

- "What concerns you about...?"
- "What do you most want me to understand about ____ that you don't think I understand?"
- "What is the best/worst that can come from this?"

E. CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

- challenge a person's line of reasoning,
- create a shift or change in a person's position or point of view, and
- "gently" challenge incongruities in a person's behavior, position, interests, etc.

Examples:

- "What do you suppose would happen if the press reported that?"
- "You say you're interested in my suggestions, but I notice you turn away when I start to talk. What's going on?"

F. BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS

- generate alternatives or options, and
- develop new ideas.

Examples:

- “What is one thing you could do to accomplish that?”
- “How else might that be done?”

G. CONSEQUENTIAL QUESTIONS

- reality test a possible situation,
- explore the outcome of a choice or behavior, and
- examine the consequences of a decision.

Examples:

- “How does that suggestion meet your criteria for fairness?”
- “What would that be like for you?”
- “What would happen if you did?”

When asking questions, it is helpful to keep the following in mind.

- How intentional and thoughtful are you when asking questions?
- Why are you asking the question you have chosen?
- Why have you chosen now to ask that specific question?
- What do you want that question to do?

ACTIVITY: Dilemma Exercise (borrowed from Essential Partners)

This exercise asks you to divide into small groups, then to take on each of four different roles, successively those of speaker, questioner, scribe, and throughout, that of listener. You will have a chance to experiment with questions and notice the effects of specific questions on your perspective and your feelings.

- Small Group Formation: Divide into small groups. We will specify group size. There are four roles in each group: speaker, questioner(s), listener, scribe.
- Preliminary Reflection: Pause for a moment and think of a dilemma or challenge you face about which you would like to achieve greater clarity. It could be a situation at work of at home, something that is alive for you, but not something you'd feel uncomfortable sharing with people in this group. Do not begin the speaking part of this exercise until each of you has an idea of what you will talk about when it is your turn.

  Decide who will speak first, then the person to the left of that person will become the scribe.
- The Sequence
  - The first speaker speaks: The designated speaker provides the group members with a brief description of his/her dilemma or challenge. The speaker says what the dilemma is, specifies why it is a dilemma for him/her, and tells some specific details, a description of how he/she experiences the dilemma. No one's dilemma will be named of discussed in the large group when it reconvenes. When the speaker is finished speaking, pause while the questioners formulate their questions.
  - Other group members listen: As the first speaker describes his/her dilemma, listeners remain silent but engaged. It might be useful to jot some notes about what the speaker says or to not specific language that the speaker uses in the description.
  - The questioners inquire: After a few moments of preparation, each of you including the scribe, as you are ready will ask the speaker one or more questions about the dilemma.
  - Speaker focused objectives of your questions: To ask questions that may open a door for speaker that wasn't open before, to expand or clarify the speaker's conception of the dilemma or challenge (NOT to solve the problem).
  - Questioner focused objectives for your questions: To experiment with questions and inquiring stances that are less familiar to you than those you usually rely upon. (Try varying the content, form, tone, and intention from your more usual questions.)
  - Questioners, as a group, ask 8-12 questions or until the speaker says "enough". Create pauses between your questions.
  - To consider: Take care not to pose questions that are:
    - Likely to convey judgement about the speaker in relation to the dilemma,
    - Likely to convey a suggestion for solving the dilemma, or
    - Likely to leave the speaker more stuck or self-blaming.
  - The speaker responds to the questions silently, in the privacy of his/her head. Answer them silently to the extent that you are interested in the answers. Take any pauses you need between questions. Feel free to signal questioners to slow their pace. Notice how you feel as you hear and respond silently to each question. What does it touch in you? What does it evoke? Where does it move you? How, if at all, does it shift how you see your dilemma. What effect does the question (and how it is asked) have on how you see and feel about the question-asker?

ACTIVITY: Dilemma Exercise - *continued*

- Other group members respond to other's questions silently. As you listen to people's questions to the speaker, note the effects that hearing the questions have on you. What do they move in you? What do they bring up for you? How do the questions affect what you make of the speaker's story? What you make of the speaker? How do they affect your own thinking about other questions you might ask? You will have a chance to share your reflections on these questions when the large group reconvenes.
- The scribe records. The person to the speakers left becomes the scribe. As scribe, you track the questions and write them down. Write as legibly as you can. When the questioning has ended, give the list of questions to the speaker. Ask for pauses or repeats if you need them. Make sure you get key words, even if you miss a few bits and pieces.
- Stepping back from the experience (in silence)
- Speaker task: Note the impact of the questions on you. When the scribe gives you the list of questions you have been asked, pause and think about the effects that the questions have on you and how you consider your dilemma; how you feel about yourself; where they moved you in relation to your challenge and if so, how.
    - Questioner task: Reflect on your intentions and assumptions. What assumptions and intentions did you have for asking each question you asked? What impact did you imagine the question would have?
    - The speaker speaks again. You, the speaker, now have up to 3 minutes to share your reactions to and effects of some of the questions you responded to silently. Do not necessarily speak to the effect of every question; comment only on those that had effects that you want mention. You are still not answering the questions; you are only saying how hearing them and responding to them silently affected you.

Module 6:

Solutions for Mutual Purpose

Module 6: Solutions for Mutual Purpose

As we come to the sixth and final module it is important to acknowledge that we have been describing what can be a sometimes messy and complex process. Suffice it to say that it does not always unfold as "six easy steps to collaboration". However, each of these phases represents a critical component of effective collaboration.

The Interest-Based approach described in the previous module is often referred to as a Mutual-Gains Approach. It is based on a belief in the potential for people working effectively together toward a common purpose, to achieve outcomes that exceed what either party could achieve independently. Our goal at this point is to:

- Generate multiple options with the potential for mutual benefit,
- Evaluate the options against our interests and any additional standards that may apply,
- Choose an option or combination of options that we believe have the greatest potential, and
- Bring sufficient specificity to our plan so that we can move forward with implementation.

In this module you will:

- Revisit and create a deeper understanding of the process of Brainstorming,
- Identify a range of strategies for effectively sorting through options,
- Identify critical questions to ask when bringing specificity to a plan, and
- Identify proactive "what if" strategies to apply when planning for implementation of a shared plan.

Brainstorming: Revisiting the key concepts

In the previous module we focused on structuring conversations that will expand and integrate our thinking such that new learning is possible. This process is facilitated by applying intentional and thoughtful inquiry to our diversity of experience and perspective. We differentiated between divergent and convergent thinking and underscored the value of conversations that have the potential for taking us outside our comfort zone and into the realm of new possibilities.

We are now at a place in the process where we will intentionally shift from divergent thinking and begin a process of convergent thinking. This shift in the conversations can occur in a couple of different ways. In some conversations we will reach a point where we believe that we have "exhausted" our joint exploration of the issues and are ready to begin an intentional shift into looking at options for moving forward. In some cases, we are operating within time constraints and we will move to bring closure to the conversation in order to meet procedural, legal and/or regulatory timelines. In other conversations participants will begin to see new possibilities and options emerging from the exploratory conversation. You may begin to hear comments such as, "well you know based on what you have been saying, it seems to me that we might consider...". The conversation begins shifting almost organically into new and emerging possibilities. As this begins to happen, it is important to note the shift and assess the group's readiness to move forward. Marking this transition might include:

- Summarizing key points, new learning, and general conclusions
- Identifying both shared and independent interests, and
- Assessing the readiness of people to move into Brainstorming.

Just as in the previous phases of this process it is important to remain intentional with our commitment to mutual purpose and mutual benefit. It is easy to spot the "finish line" and rush through this phase. To do so is to lose the potential benefit of all our joint work up to this point.

In a small text entitled, The Memory Jogger: A Pocket Guide of Tools for Continuous Improvement and Effective Planning, by Michael Brassard and Diane Ritter, the purpose of Brainstorming is:

"to establish a common method for a team to creatively and efficiently generate a high volume of ideas on any topic by creating a process that is free of criticism and judgment."

There are two important things to note in this description. The first is the idea of creating a "high volume of ideas". Too often Brainstorming ends when we have identified the most logical, and obvious four or five possibilities. We do not allow for time to become creative and explore less obvious but potentially valuable ideas. A professional facilitator once shared with me that it was his experience that the really creative ideas came after about the fifteenth suggestion. I could not remember the last time I was in a group that generated even ten options for consideration.

The second is the idea of a process free of criticism and judgment. This is critical to the effectiveness of the process. Nothing can put a damper on creative thinking faster than the premature negative evaluation of emerging thinking.

Brassard and Ritter go on to state that Brainstorming:

- Encourages open thinking when a team is stuck in "same old way thinking".
- Gets all team members involved and enthusiastic so that a few people do not dominate the whole group.
- Allows team members to build on each other's creativity while staying focused on their joint mission.

Brainstorming can be practiced in both a "structured" and "unstructured" format. In a structured format'

- A brainstorming question designed to focus engagement is stated, agreed upon, and posted for everyone to see. It is important to take the time to make sure everyone agrees on and understands this prompt.
- Each member takes turn sharing ideas. Suggestions are shared one at a time and not judged or criticized in any way. Questions may be asked for clarification purposes such that the intent of the suggestion is understood by everyone.
- As ideas are shared, they are written down and posted for everyone to see. It is important that the one recording the suggestions uses the exact language of the person making the suggestion.
- Participants continue to make suggestions until all ideas have been shared. It is important to allow time for silence. Do not assume that silence is an indicator that all ideas have been shared. There will be necessary times of silence and reflection as we move from the obvious suggestions into ideas born out of our conversation of integration and shared learning.

The process for unstructured brainstorming is the same as described above with the exception that ideas can be shared at anytime and without any particular order. Some additional things to consider when structuring this phase of the process include:

- The creation of a break between the exploration phase of collaboration and brainstorming. There is value in giving participants time to "step away from the table" and process what they have heard and learned. In some cases, people can be instructed to use this time to begin formulating creative suggestion for addressing the issue(s) explored.
- Many of us have experienced groups that use unstructured brainstorming. A potential downside to this method is that it reinforces those who may quickly identify options and penalize those who may need more time for processing and reflection. In addition, it gives a certain amount of power to the first responder. Depending on power dynamics in the group, the first person to respond can have a significant impact on subsequent sharing.
- Experience has shown that some groups will make the transition to Brainstorming and then "hit a wall" when asked to begin suggesting options. When this happens, it is often indicative of some significant and yet unexplored issue. It often indicates the need to go back into the conversation for exploration and further explore aspects of the issues not yet sufficiently understood.

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of Brainstorming:

- Identify a time when you experienced Brainstorming as particularly effective.
- Describe the context for this experience.
- What contributed to the effectiveness of the experience?
- What became possible in the context of this process?
- In your experience what most supports effective Brainstorming?
- In your experience what are the barriers to effective Brainstorming?
- What might you do to improve Brainstorming processes in which you are involved?

Strategies for effectively sorting through a range of options

If we have been successful in our exploration and brainstorming process we are faced with a list of possible options. It is now time to shift the conversation to more convergent thinking in which the task is to begin sorting potential options into categories, evaluating alternatives, and arriving at some general conclusions. This can be done in a structured our unstructured fashion. In some cased the group will almost immediately gravitate to a specific idea or cluster of ideas. It is obvious to everyone what makes most sense and participants are ready to move towards implementation. In other situations, we may move through a series of steps designed to support the sorting and evaluation of ideas.

First of all, it is important to review as a group, the criteria that will be used to judge each option. Typically, these criteria will include:

- The shared and individual "Interests" identified in the exploration phase of this process.
- Any industry, regulatory or legal parameters that participants recognize as relevant to this decision, and
- Any other standards that the group might have adopted in relationship to this decision.

The following are three examples of strategies used by groups to systematically sort through a range of possible choices:

- The first process, referred to as "Winnowing" involves sorting ideas with potential from those that have no possibility for implementation or to which no one is committed. Winnowing literally means to separate the wheat from the chaff or the "good" from the "bad". It is a quick way to eliminate ideas that are not worth pursuing.
- A second process is referred to "Multi-voting". Many of you have participated in a large group process in which you are asked to place colored dots next to your top choices. In this way a group or team can identify the idea or cluster of ideas to which there is the greatest level of commitment. This will often result in 5-7 options that the group is willing to consider for implementation.
- A final process involves creating a "Matrix" by which you evaluate each option against specific interests and/or standards. In most cases some form of Likert Scale is applied to weight the various comparisons. A sum of the weighted comparisons will often reveal the "best" option for implementation.

Options/ Interests	A	B	B	D	Score
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of the evaluation process:

- In your experience, what typically happens at this stage of a process of collaboration?
- Share examples of effective strategies you have experienced for sorting through a range of potential options or choices.
- How might you individually or as a group improve in this area?

Critical questions to ask when bringing specificity to plan

"The devil is in the details". This is particularly true when collaboratively reaching agreements about challenging issues. Groups can, at times, experience a somewhat false sense of security at this point in the process. They have been engaged in what, at times, has been a difficult conversation and yet they have experienced new learning and achieved a deeper shared understanding of complex issues. They have reached a tentative decision for moving forward and may be tempted to bask in their success, agreeing to work the details out later. While there may value in taking a break, do not assume that the work is done.

A colleague tells of fishing as a child with her father. She would get so excited when she felt a tug on her line that she would yell to her father to "get the camera!" He would share in her excitement but encourage her to "fish it all the way to the boat". In other words, you haven't caught a fish until it is in the boat. This is also true of agreements. You do not really have an agreement until you have worked out the details and created sufficient specificity that you can move to implementation with a sense of potential success. It is important to ask and answer the critical questions of:

- Who? Who is going to do it?
- What? What exactly are they going to do?
- When? When exactly will this be done?
- Where? Where exactly is this going to take place?
- How? How are we going to do this? What exactly is going to be necessary for successful implementation?
- What if? What happens if the unexpected happens? What do we do if we experience a barrier to implementation?

The answers to these questions will be discussed and debated and eventually agreed upon. Agreements may be document with specific language agreed upon. At this point there remain a few critical questions to be answered by the group. These include:

- Does the overall plan make sense?
- It what we are planning realistic? While it may be challenging, is there a likelihood of success?
- Have we covered all that we set out to cover?
- Are there any loopholes?
- What steps will be taken to move to implementation?
- Who needs to be informed of and/or enrolled in our plan?
- How will we continue to communicate during the implementation of the plan?
- How will future problems and challenges be addressed?

DISCUSSION: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of specificity and implementation:

- Describe experience you have attempting to implement a plan of action for which there was a lack of specificity.
- Describe what happened.
- What was needed to achieve greater clarity and specificity regarding implementation expectations?
- Where do you find yourself most challenged with this phase of the process?
- How might you individually and/or collectively achieve improvement in this area?

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