

Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

Module 1: Collaboration and Conflict

A Professional Development Series offered by:
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Module 1: Collaboration and Conflict:

The ability of people with diverse experience and perspective to collaborate to mutual purpose is essential to the successful implementation of the IDEA. This is particularly true with the development of an IEP/IFSP. The original designers of this process believed that children are best served when parents, educators, service providers and agencies work together to provide coordinated systems of care.

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Collaboration is easy when we happen to 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 pro-

ductive. 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 purpose 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
- 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

We are often expected to collaborate in diverse contexts and applications with people we may or may not know.

In some cases, 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 to a level consistent with the true intent and values of mutual-gains collaboration.

The term, collaboration, is often used with little thought to its purpose or potential value.

At times, our efforts at collaboration do produce increased learning and understanding, helping us to address our specific challenge(s). But 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.

Consider the following ideas:

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 his article “***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 — signs 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 plenty 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 interdependent 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 an objective or initiative. What most contributed to the success around this experience?
- What did you contribute to this effort? What did others contribute?
- Identify a current situation in which you are experiencing frustration in your efforts at collaboration.

Conflict and Collaboration

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

Morton Deutsch, social psychologist, identifies the basic elements of interpersonal conflict. 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 conflict.

The source of conflict could be said to reside between our ears. It is in 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 follows:

- 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.

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 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 our respect for diversity of opinion as a core value, 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.
- 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.

In his 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.

He says:

Dialogue 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.’

When we are threatened by these differences of opinion, we quickly attempt to resolve the threat by arguing who has the “correct” pool of understanding. On the other hand, a conversation of collaboration seeks to merge these two diverse conversations into a deeper, shared pool of understanding. By no means does this assume 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 state when discussing complex issues.

The value of dialogue for groups and teams is that it creates a process of shared thinking and learning out of which emerge 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 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:

Negotiation 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 inferred interests and mutual gains?

Procedural Preparation:

Identify commitment to mutual purpose and mutual benefit.

Identify commitment to mutual respect.

Establish guidelines for the group:

Timelines

Meeting Schedule

Plans for effective meetings

Facilitator

Emotional Preparation:

Commit to self-management and personal responsibility.

Commit to sharing responsibility for success of group.

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 is really 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 goal of meeting as many common and shared interests as possible. 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) by correlating them to our 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 has been said that the problem is less with reaching agreement in IEP meetings and more about implementation of what we have agreed to. 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, and how.
- Identifying a process for evaluation.

Discussion: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared 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?
- What is one context in which you would commit to introducing this process?
- What steps will you take for implementation?





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