

Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

Modules/Objectives

A Professional Development Series offered by:
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Modules/Objectives

An essential characteristic of effective people in any community or organization is their ability to engage successfully in critical and difficult conversations. Successful implementation of the IDEA requires a diverse group of individuals to engage in challenging conversations around complex issues. As educators, this is essential to our core objective of improving student learning. Roland Barth, in an article entitled “Relationships in the School House,” states:

One incontrovertible finding emerges from my career spent working in and around schools: The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the **character and quality of that school** and on **student accomplishment** than anything else.

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.

1. Collaboration and Conflict:

A capacity essential to the successful implementation of the IDEA is the ability of people with diverse experience and perspective to collaborate for mutual purpose. This is particularly true with the development of an IEP. 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.

Collaboration is really 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 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 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.



2. Starting with Self: Preparation

It has been said that “the only person I really have any control over is me.” 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 experience that our default response when engaging conflict is often less than helpful. **Morton Deutsch**, Social Psychologist, says that our

choices determine whether we escalate or de-escalate conflict. Self-awareness and self-management then become critical to our effectiveness.

In this module, you and your team will:

- Identify “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.
- Be introduced to a structure for preparing yourself to engage effectively when conflict is likely to surface.



3. Listening for Understanding

When experiencing conflict, one thing 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.

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

- 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,” 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 “personal pools of meaning.”
- Given that the issue(s) we are addressing is/are complex, let’s not waste our time arguing whose “personal pool of meaning” is the “right” one.
- Let’s commit to having a conversation that will create a “deeper, shared pool of meaning.”
- It is our belief that out of this deeper, shared pool of 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.
- Practice the skills introduced.

4. Sharing your Perspective

It has been said that 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 the 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 gain requires that we also 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. 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 and/or argumentative. We want to share our thoughts in a way that increase our shared pool of meaning, 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.
- Know when to “loop back” to listening in order to continue to balance advocacy with inquiry.



5. Exploring Issues to Understand Interests:

Just because we can name a problem or challenge, 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 their 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 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 of each of us. In this context, where a person’s position expresses “what” they want, their underlying interest is “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 and 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.
- Practice generating powerful questions.



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.
- 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 a plan.
- Identify proactive “what if” strategies to apply when planning for implementation of a shared plan.





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