

Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

Module 6: Solutions for Mutual Purpose

A Professional Development Series offered by:
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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, it does not always unfold as “six easy steps to collaboration.”

However, each of these phases represents a critical component of effective collaboration.

Module 6: Solutions for Mutual Purpose

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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.
- 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, 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, 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 conversation 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 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 our 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 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.
- 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 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 the 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 the fifteenth suggestion or so. I can 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 at least a 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, so 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 integrated 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 in 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 suggestions 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, 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.



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 processes, 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 or unstructured fashion. In some cases, the group will almost immediately gravitate to a specific idea or cluster of ideas. It is obvious to everyone what makes the most sense, and participants are ready to move toward 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.
- 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 “**Win-nowing**” 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 five-to-seven 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 weigh the various comparisons. A sum of the weighted comparisons will often reveal the “best” option for implementation.

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?



Options/Interests	A	B	B	D	Score

Critical Questions to Ask When Bringing Specificity to Plan

It has been said that “the devil is in the details.” This is particularly true when collaboratively reaching agreements about challenging issues. At times, groups can 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 with her father when she was a child. 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, debated, and eventually agreed upon. Agreements may be documented 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?
- Is 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?

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

- Describe an experience you have had 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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