Managing Conflict: In the Boardroom and Beyond

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Assertion:

We are influenced and shaped by a number of factors including:

1) The decade in which we were born
2) The place and culture of our birth
3) The values and practices of adults of influence
4) Family systems
5) Race, ethnicity, gender, age of parents
6) Socio-economic realities
Essentially, the only instrument we bring to the helping process is ourselves. Hence, the more self aware we are the more present we can be in the helping exchange.

Paraphrased from comments by Virginia Satir
Qualities Of Effective Commissioners

- Human presence
- Empathy
- Empathizing with yourself
- Respect
- Authenticity
- Flexibility
- Mutual participation
- Leadership
If a new commissioner or new staff person for a commissioner was being added to next week, apart from the technical skills to perform their tasks, what qualities would you be seeking in this person, especially as it relates to managing conflict?
Proposition:

Commissioners Serve Many “Publics”:

Other County Commissioners
County Leadership
Departmental Leaders
All County Staff
Community Agencies
The Public Served by County Programs
For County Commissioners

- Commissioners have many “publics”
- Organizational / systems barriers can limit options
- “Values” conflicts are predictable and on-going
- Open meeting laws restrict some contacts and discussions
Therefore:

County Leadership Staff will almost always experience tensions as they consider their publics. That can lead to:

- ambivalence
- diplomacy
- ambiguity
- perspective
- micro situations
- context
- second guessing
- conflicts
- the need for an internal compass
Appreciative Inquiry Assumptions

- In every system, some things work well.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- People have confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about the past.
- It is important to value differences.
More – Appreciative Inquiry

- The language we use creates our reality.
- County governments are heliotropic: (botanical term – plants lean toward the sun).
- Managers, workers and the public lean toward the source of energy whether positive or not.
- Outcomes should be useful.
- All steps are collaborative.
Show Up
And Choose To Be Present

Pay Attention
To What Has Heart And Meaning

Tell The Truth
Without Blame Or Judgment

Be Open To Outcome
Not Attached To Outcome

Angeles Arrien
It’s Impossible To Not Communicate

Silence Is One Of The Most Powerful Communication Tools We Have

Understanding is More Important Than Agreement
Two Principles

- If Something Is Unmentionable, It Is Also Unmanageable
  
  Folk Wisdom

- Not Everything That Is Faced Can Be Changed, But Nothing Can Be Changed Until It Is Faced

  James Baldwin
The direction in which you look will determine what you see.

HOW things are handled is often more important than WHAT happens.

The antidote to violence is conversation/communication.
Civility has two parts: generosity, even when it is costly, and trust, even when there is risk.

Civility creates not merely a negative duty not to do harm, but an affirmative duty to do good.

Stephen Carter
Listening Means Listening.

Many People Do More Preparing Than They Do Listening

Listening, Really Listening, Requires One To Pay More Attention To What The Other Person Is Now Saying Than To One’s Response
Further Perspectives:

- Communication/Conversation is an antidote to violence...verbal, physical, or the failure to compromise

- Either / Or thinking and talking, if dominant, allows no space for both / and thinking and talking
Perspective On Anger

Anger Is Often A Secondary Emotion, Preceded By A More Primary Emotional Experience

Listen For Messages Beneath The Messages
(Meta-communication)
Suggestions:
Responses to ANGER

Take a deep breath, relax as much as possible
Respectful listening will often defuse anger
Listen for more than anger; ask questions that get before the anger, things that may have precipitated the anger
Communication

- Communication is contagious. When others are agitated or angry, speak slowly, softly, strongly
- Don’t escalate
- Avoid character comments
- Ask how you can be helpful
- Communicate your bottom lines
Communicating About Change And Distress

- Information tames fears
  - Information gives a sense of control
  - Communication gives permission
  - If you don’t talk, people fill in blanks
  - Communication helps with future fears, plans, or concerns
- Listen with empathy
- Don’t interrupt too quickly
- Revisit and re-communicate
- Be patient
Things That Influence Distress

- Threats – safety, income, health, those we love, image or reputation, future
- Timing – time of day, time of life, state of our lives
- Ambiguity – situations that are “clear” are often easier to address than those that are ambiguous
- Perceived capacities
- Perceived support
More Reasons for Behaviors

- Overwhelmed by life circumstances
- Lack knowledge about county services
- General suspicion of government
- Poor previous experience with county services
- Limited social skills
- Personal temperament – demanding, talkative, negative
## Positive Wording

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Words</th>
<th>Positive Alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>Situation, issue, concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>What I/we can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot</td>
<td>What I/we can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s not my job</td>
<td>Although not my usual, let me assist you to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’ll have to…</td>
<td>Can I get you to…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our policy says</td>
<td>While I’m unable to… what I can do is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Systems - Perspectives

Basic Principles

The Whole Is Greater Than The Sum Of Its Parts

Every Part Of A System Affects And Is Affected By Every Other Part Of The System

Interdependence / Interrelated
More – Systems

- **Intra - Within County Units Or Within The Whole County System**

- **Inter - Between Systems: Differing Counties And With Other Systems, e.g., Non-profit, Voluntary, Political, Religious**
Work Place Resiliency Factors

- An environment of incentives and rewards
  - Staff members are accessible/available
  - Workers walk the talk
  - Match between "service" behavior and colleague behavior
  - An environment of high expectations...for everyone
  - Workers are involved in decisions that affect them
When You Run Into A Delay, Change, Or Loss

- Explain – Tell Them What You Can
- Tell Them You Know This Is A Difficult Time For Them
- Tell Them You Hope They Will Hang In With You And The Team
Commissioners Get The Heat For:

- Failure To Communicate
- Failure To Prepare For The Future
- Failure To Lead (Can Include Shared Leadership)
- Failure To Be Compassionate
- Failure To Honor The Past While Moving To The Future
Raising Issues

When to raise issues:

1. When something is affecting me or my work as a commissioner to the degree that it is interfering with quality.

2. When my working relationship with someone is being or will be adversely affected unless we deal with it.

(In both cases, the issue is of sufficient impact that you cannot lay it aside and go on with your usual work.)
Raising Issues:

- HOW??
  - Directly
  - Quickly
  - Respectfully
  - Privately
  - Clearly
  - Personally (Speaking for oneself)
Conflict – A Definition

CONFLICT INVOLVES COMPETING STORIES
Neither is right or wrong, but each story is constructed by OUR ways of:
- Taking in information
- Interpreting information
- Making conclusions
- Weaving these together in a stable story
Conflict Occurs When Two Or More People Differ And At Least One Of Them Thinks It Matters
HOW WE RESPOND TO CONFLICT

Escalation

Underground

Constructive
Two Kinds Of Conflict

- **Task conflict** - about facts, process, how to do things in the best way - **essential** for good decision-making, **destructive of good relations unless addressed**

- **Emotional conflict** - about feelings, anger, jealousy, fear - **common, occurs easily, destructive of good relations unless addressed**
"The Pinch Theory"
A Model for Clarification and Negotiation of Group Leadership Issues

Gathering agenda, sharing, clarifying expectations, building cohesion and ownership

Role clarity for leader and members
Commitment

Stability
Productivity
Confidence

Crunch choice point

Pinch choice point

Stalemate or power struggle

Disruption of shared expectations

renegotiating group purpose and expectations under duress

resentful reconciliation

premature termination

termination or referral

anxiety, resentment, blaming, guilt

ambiguity, uneasiness

Suggestions

- Listen And Practice Curiosity
- Clarify Roles – Who Does What, Whose Job This Is
- Commitment To We / Our
- Recognize Difference Between What And How
- Expect And Practice Civil Discourse
What Are Your “RED” Flags?

- What sorts of situations are hard for you for whatever reasons?

- What behaviors or words get to you?

- What erodes your ability to do good work?
Responses

- Awareness
  - Acknowledgement - Name
  - Process
  - Limit Setting
  - Letting Go
  - Grieving
  - Practicing Self-care Daily
  - Tend To Personal Relationships
  - Cultivate Your Internal Supervisor
Managing Distress

- Address the elephants in the room
- Encourage people’s best during these days
- Balance compassion and accountability
- Keep a focus on worker performance, not on their behaviors or speed of adjustment
- Don’t personalize anger at the “system”; represent the best of the “system”
Suggestions

- Accepted What They Could Not Change, Changed What They Could
- Manageable Pieces/Steps
- Realized: Bad Things Happen To Good People
- Used Creativity
- Healed Themselves By Helping Others
- Did Not Allow Bitterness To Consume / Define Them
- Hopeful Visions Of Future
- Drew On Spiritual Resources
For more information:

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For further support and/or counseling, contact The Sand Creek Group:
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