

Communications skills for successful collaborations

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Successful collaborations require people from different occupation groups, with different backgrounds, training, experiences and outlooks, to come together to create a cohesive group to work in unison on a common problem. Unfortunately, this is a difficult task when we bring with us old ways of handling problems and interactions.

I have been involved in many successful collaborations in more than 20 years of working on the issues of domestic violence and child abduction. Two of those collaborations are particularly useful in demonstrating successful communication skills. The first was working with the Chicago Police Department to respond to officer-involved domestic violence, starting in 1992, when no other police department in the country acknowledged the problem, resulting in a model response to the issue. The other was a four year effort to redraft the Illinois Domestic Violence Act (IDVA), resulting in one of the most comprehensive domestic violence statutes in the country. In addition, I will refer to other negotiations and collaborations I've been involved with.

1. **Separate the people from the problem**

Many people still see collaborations like union negotiations of past decades, where there are two or more sides who oppose another, seeking to win for their side. In this model, one group meets outside the collaboration meeting to decide the agenda, their accepted outcomes and “winning” tactics.

This often leads to treating the opposing side in a negative way and being unwilling to see the others' points of view and positions. Here are some suggestions for getting around this.

- a. **Recognize that you can be firm on your position and values but still treat the other parties with respect.**

If you are an advocate, you will remain firm on victim safety issues, for example, but that doesn't mean that you can't listen to the perspectives of others and try to understand their concern and issues. You will likely find that when we all come together to build a solution, it is often a better solution than the one initially proposed.

Example: From 1989 to 1992, I worked on a Task Force to rewrite the Illinois Domestic Violence Act. At the time I joined, the task force consisted of about 30 private attorneys and judges from around the state, and one other domestic

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violence person. Initially, we dv people were barely heard and definitely not trusted by the majority of people serving on the task force. They thought that we were zealots who didn't care about following the law. We thought that they lived in ivory towers, had very little "real" experience with survivors or the police, and were clueless about everything having to do with domestic violence.

Fortunately, we had a wonderful facilitator who kept the peace during meetings well enough and elicited each other views fairly enough that eventually we all came to understand the concerns and issues of the others and to develop trust that every one of us, who spent 4 hours together every 5th Saturday for 4 years, were there because we wanted to protect victims of domestic violence.

The outcome was that we had a stronger, more comprehensive law than we would have had if it was drafted entirely by the dv community or entirely by the legal community. And the fact that the task force was convened by the state bar, with representatives from many other local bar associations, meant that we were able to get the legislative package passed without the difficulty we would have had if the bill had been drafted by the dv community alone.

Moral of the story: If we are going to collaborate effectively, we need to understand that we come to the table from different places. That doesn't mean that we can't all learn to understand where we all come from and to create a new productive relationship going forward. Out of these discussions, we can create a better solution than trying to make the changes on our own.

b. **Assume that everyone has good intentions – at least until proven otherwise.**

Example: In the late 1980s, the Chicago Police Department was stunned when, over the course of about 18 months, 3 officers killed their wives and then themselves. A new Superintendent decided in 1991 to approach the problem of officer-involved domestic violence very seriously. In the first attempt to do this, they sought to fire an officer for beating his ex-girlfriend. As the Police Board hearing approached, the officer tried to pressure the victim into refusing to testify in an effort to save his job. She had been subpoenaed and told the officer that she would appear and testify truthfully. Three weeks before the hearing, the officer abducted the ex-girlfriend, took her downstate, shot her twice and hid her body. The department was rocked by this result. They thought they were doing the right thing and the victim paid the cost. They realized that they didn't understand domestic violence dynamics well enough but, at that time, they had such an adversarial relationship with domestic violence community, there was no one they could go to for help.

In 1992, I was working at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office as their Family Issues Specialist, dealing with policy and training issues regarding domestic violence and child abduction. I was assisting a city attorney who was

prosecuting another case before the Police Board where the abuser was making similar threats as the first case. She asked me if I would meet with two sergeants in Personnel who were working on these cases.

I was expecting an informal discussion with the two sergeants, the attorney and myself. Word had gotten around that I was coming and other decided to join us. When I arrived, I was introduced to the Legal Counsel to the Superintendent, the Commanders of Personnel and Legal Affairs, the director of the Labor Division for the City of Chicago, as well as several sergeants from Personnel and the Internal Affairs Division.

I started by doing a brief, impromptu presentation on the dynamics of domestic violence. Afterward, I told them that we were alone there and this was their opportunity to ask me all the questions they were afraid were stupid or offensive. The first question, asked by a sergeant from Personnel, was “Tell us about the pathology of battered women.” Definitely an offensive question. The meeting could very well have ended at that moment.

Instead, I took a deep breath and said “I think what you are asking about is why battered women stay.” I discussed the obstacles that battered women face in trying to leave, including the danger they face when they do. For the next half hour, I answered their questions. When the way the question was asked was offensive, I reframed the question before answering. I did this in a completely non-judgment manner. At the end, the Legal Counsel to the Superintendent told me that they knew they had a problem and they needed help and asked for my assistance.

We went on to create a task force that created this country’s first response to officer-involved domestic violence – still a model today. This would not have happened if I had not gotten their trust by allowing them to seek information without judging them for not already knowing the answers and not being able to ask questions in a politically correct way.

Moral of the story: We need to give people the space to learn and not expect them to have a perfect knowledge and sensitivity to the issue from the first meeting. If we give people the benefit of the doubt – by assuming good will – we give them the space to question and learn. When we made people defensive and afraid to question, we cut off opportunities for growth, and as in the case described above, cut off the opportunity for change.

c. Recognize that people have different styles of operating than we may have and that we can be more successful if we meet people where they are.

Example: In the mid-1990s, I was asked by City Hall to come to some meetings between a domestic violence program and a district commander. There had been two prior meetings that had led to great hostility on both sides. I soon learned

that the district commander was a good man who wanted to work with this group, but was lacking in the social skills that might have smoothed over the rough edges of this new relationship. While he supervised more than 300 officers and had no problem dealing with problems and issuing orders, he wasn't comfortable thinking on his feet in this kind of setting.

When he was asked to make changes in how the district handled domestic violence calls, he would often say "no" without explanation or discussion, even when the request was something that he might have otherwise agreed to. But once he made the decision, he refused to change his response.

After working with him for a while, I discovered that the best way of dealing with him was to explain the problem, discuss the options and give him time to work through the problem in his own mind. When approached like this, he was very cooperative. At one point, things had been going well for some time. Everyone was happy with the changes. The organizer from the DV program called me and told me that they wanted a particular change to occur. I suggested that they use the strategy described above and she agreed. At the next big meeting with the dv program, the police and community members, the organizer made the request to the commander without ever having discussed it, before the meeting or in the meeting. The commander said no, and having made that decision in front of his officers, he would not go back on it.

Afterward I talked to the organizer to ask her why she had approached this problem in the way she had. She said that she agreed with me that the best strategy was to approach him alone as we had discussed, but that the committee she worked with, who were still operating under the union negotiation style, wasn't comfortable with it and wanted to use the more confrontational approach. Seeing the results, they finally learned the lesson about first meeting someone in their own comfort zone to make requests and learning to accommodate the different styles and abilities of others.

Morals of the story: When your grandmother told you that we can catch more bees in honey than with vinegar, she knew what she was talking about. The people that we work and negotiate with are human beings with feelings and with flaws. You can always go confrontational when that style is needed, but you can't always back it off once you have.

2. Start with today

Groups coming together to work on a problem are often burdened with resentments about problems in the past. Blaming others for past failures is a barrier to moving forward. Start from today looking forward to solving problems, rather than staying mired in the past.

Example: In training police detectives, we are often met with resistance when we encourage them to seek felony charges in more domestic violence cases. They tell us that the prosecutor's office will reject the charges anyway so why waste the time preparing the case. When you talk to the prosecutors, they put the blame on the detectives for not properly preparing the cases before they are reviewed.

Both sides blame each other and there is no progress going forward from those positions. If the detectives don't properly investigate and prepare the cases, they don't have a chance of getting the cases approved. Their defeatist attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We counter that by not doing their job, we don't really know what the prosecutors would have done and can't hold them responsible for their decisions if the case was never brought to them.

Prosecutors are so busy blaming the detectives that they often don't make the effort to figure out how to make this a good case – whether that answer is more investigation or the prosecutors learning how to overcoming common problems in the less than perfect case.

Moral of the story: We need to stop the blame game. Stop talking about what has gone wrong in the past or who was responsible for that screw up. Start today to build a new response. Talk about how we want things to work. It isn't necessary to affix blame to solve the problem. But focusing on who is the blame will stop progress because it causes us to become defensive and closed to solutions.

3. Learn the role of each player

Distrust and misunderstandings often occur when participants in a task force or committee – or two colleagues working on a case – don't understand the role of the other. Communication is improved when the parties take the time to express to others what they do and why they do it the way they do.

Example: On the CPD task force, we decided at the first meeting to take the time to build a strong foundation before getting into the actual work. We also made a commitment to meet once a week for the first 5 weeks to accomplish that without delaying the process for long. For two weeks, I presented on domestic violence. For the remaining 3 weeks, department personnel took the time to explain what their role was in the disciplinary process. This gave us incredible insight into a complicated system and that paid dividends throughout the process.

Moral of the story: Some of our distrust of others in our collaboration comes from misunderstandings about what they do and why they do it the way they do. We often think that they are making decisions we don't like merely because they are insensitive or uncaring. Often there are good reasons for the positions that they or their agencies have taken. We can't effectively advocate for them to change their position if we don't

understand their reasoning. Taking the time to allow each participant to explain their roles can save a tremendous amount of time later.

4. Bring people into the process early

It is our natural tendency to exclude people or groups we don't like or who disagree with us. When a problem requires a commitment from others, they are more likely to get involved and stay involved if they are given the respect of being brought in early. Bringing a person into the process late conveys disrespect and a lack of trust and those feelings are likely to be returned by the new person.

Example: The CPD task force consisted of various people in the department who played a role in dealing with officer misconduct, the R&D folks, the attorney for the city that prosecuted the cases before the Police Board, and myself. We made a decision early on that having the Fraternal Order of Police, the union for police officers, involved would slow us down. While it is true that it would have taken much more time in the beginning to have them present, even if for a portion of the meetings, it would have made for a smoother transition when we implemented our plans and it might have given us some insight into how to create a stronger response. Instead, the FOP declared war on us and turned every little issue into a huge obstacle. Much of that could have been avoided if we had brought them to the table at some point early in the process.

In addition, we had at least one defense attorney sit on the IDVA task force at all times. This attorney often raised issues that we had never considered, making the final product a better one. If we had avoided having the defense bar present, we would not have discovered the problems until after the bill was introduced and it might not have passed on the first time out.

Moral of the story: No one likes it when they are handed “the solution” to a problem when they feel that they should have had input into the process. They aren't going to trust that you've made the right decisions when you didn't even invite them to the table. You want to invite them early to gain their buy-in but also because you will have richer solutions.

5. Listen actively

We often don't hear what is said when we assume that we know what the person will say or we assume bad motives or ill will. Actively listen to what is said. Try to understand what the person is saying and why they feel the way they do. If you think that they are incorrect, you can't begin to charge their position if you haven't first understood what their position is.

6. Don't search for the single answer

We often come into a group process having already decided what the outcomes should be and think that there is only one answer to the problem. It is often the case that actively working together to solve a problem brings about a better, more comprehensive solution to the problem.

7. Build working relationships

Don't limit your interaction to meetings. Work with other members to solve individual problems. The more you work together successfully, the more understanding each will have with the other and the more trust that will be developed.