



Affiliate Link

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Boards Have No Choice: Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution Is A Must

by Gerri King

We bring to every communication, our backgrounds, temperaments, experience, gender socialization, our role in our nuclear families, history with one another, our projections and what happened that day. It's actually amazing that we get along as well as we do.

As though the above does not complicate communication enough, our culture has adopted a number of myths.

If there is conflict about a so-called "little thing," it is probably representative of something much bigger.

Myth • Conflict is inherently negative. On the contrary, without conflict we wouldn't invent, change or create a thing.

Myth • Conflicts should not exist. If we normalize our differences, we're less apt to judge ourselves for our diversity.

Myth • People's values can be changed by force. Not possible. They are altered through patience and education. The fear of changing values stems from the recognition that altering one value may cause the questioning of everything people hold dear.

Myth • Resolution styles are usually compatible. We tend to assume that, because we share goals and a mandate, we are all compatible and that others are feeling the way we would be feeling in the same situation. In fact, boards have a responsibility to bring diversity to the table so that all perspectives are represented.

Myth • People know their body language. Sixty-five percent to 85 percent of communication is through

body language and we are the least knowledgeable people on the planet about our own because there is no way to see it.

Myth • Small things are not worth addressing. If there is conflict about a so-called "little thing," it is probably representative of something much bigger. The seemingly small issue may just be an easy vehicle through which to express a larger frustration.

Myth • It takes too much time to deal with our differences. The next time you ask if you have time to address an issue, ask if you have time not to—time taken now will save a great deal of time down the road and may repair relationships.

So, what do we do? We've often been taught to deal with conflict in two ways: (1) Avoid it, at all costs! This may work in the short run, but not over time. (2) Attack.

When people are attacked, they only have three possible responses: (1) Attack back. (2) Flee, either physically or psychologically. (3) Give in. None of these alternatives supports respectful, honest and productive communication.

A Creative Conflict Resolution Process

First, everybody has to agree that they want to find a mutually satisfactory resolution and to use a process and setting that's comfortable for all. The more the setting encourages equal power, the better the conversation and the easier the resolution process.

Second, almost every issue inspires both emotional and logical reactions. Problems arise when trying to solve the emotional aspect logically and the logical aspect emotionally. While remaining connected emotionally,

we don't have to understand each other's emotions, nor do we have to share them. We merely have to acknowledge that the other person is experiencing them. That is the height of empathy and nothing will move folks toward a solution faster than to feel understood and as though others care.

Third, everyone must have a chance to tell her or his story. It's important that each person works hard to understand each of the perspectives (through "active listening" and "shared meaning") because that is what provides the frame of reference for the conflict. From where each person sits, her or his point of view makes all the sense in the world.

Everyone should be encouraged to speak in "I" messages rather than "You" messages—as in "I really want to hear what you're saying, but I shut down in the presence of yelling" rather than "You are awful for raising your voice."

Fourth, everyone then cooperatively develops and implements solutions. When there is intent to focus, listen and appreciate other's points of view, mistakes are easily forgiven. Trust is not based on perfection, but on effort.

Is it hard to do? You bet. But what's the alternative? In the case of boards, there is no choice but to work very hard at managing conflict and engaging in effective communication. Of all board mandates, this ranks among the most important.

Gerri King, Ph.D., social psychologist and organizational consultant, is a nationally and internationally recognized speaker and seminar presenter on conflict, change, teambuilding and managing organizations. Gerri is a founding partner of Human Dynamics Associates, Inc., a 29-year-old consulting and counseling firm in Concord, NH.

Survey results are in!

Thank you to everyone who responded to our recent *Affiliate Link* survey. Your input helps us determine what to include in future issues. Some suggestions included:

- ✓ Provide information about Affiliate Group Services Program (AGSP) offerings
- ✓ Provide details about who does what at LGC (see other side)
- ✓ Help groups achieve their goals
- ✓ Provide support for building strong boards (see article above)

We welcome your input and hope you'll continue to provide feedback!

Did You Know?

Back issues of *Affiliate Link* are available on the LGC Web site at www.nhlgc.org. Click "About the LGC" on the left menu, then select "LGC Newsletters."

New Hampshire Local Government Center Contact Information:

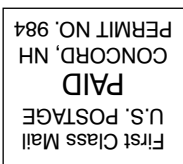
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Our Mission: To provide programs and services that strengthen the quality of member governments and the ability of their officials and employees to serve the public by being a catalyst for dialogue and action, an advisor on problems, a provider of benefits and risk-management services, an educator/trainer in skills and a resource for information.

Affiliate Link is a quarterly publication of the New Hampshire Local Government Center (LGC) for board members and officers of LGC's affiliate groups. For more information about LGC's Affiliate Group Services Program, contact either Director of Communications Eleanor Baron by phone at 800.852.3358, ext. 137 (e-mail at ebaron@nhlgc.org) or Communications Manager Jeni Eldridge at ext. 118 (e-mail at jeldridge@nhlgc.org). For more information about LGC, visit us online at www.nhlgc.org.



NH Local Welfare Administrators Association

Communication challenges come with the territory for local welfare administrators. The individuals they serve are often in a state of crisis, experiencing a range of emotions from fear and helplessness to anger. "Our job is to offer assistance to help get them back into a stabilized position," says Keith Bates, president of the New Hampshire Local Welfare Administrators Association (NHLWAA).

New Hampshire law requires local governments to provide assistance to individuals that request it, and it is the role of the welfare administrator to provide that support in a timely and responsive manner. In many small communities, the local official charged with the role of welfare administrator is not a trained social worker. Successful outcomes hinge on the ability to make good referrals to connect individuals with appropriate resources to access the help they need.

NHLWAA provides training, resources and support to individuals serving their communities in this capacity to help them cope with the unique challenges inherent in this role. The Association partners with the New Hampshire Local Government Center (LGC) to co-host a full-day workshop each June, providing an overview of the laws governing local welfare and topics that impact the welfare community. Periodic meetings include presentations and case studies, which offer opportunity for learning from peer experience. Upcoming presentations include an IRS session

offering tips to assist clients with filing taxes and a Legal Aid session highlighting the ongoing fight against pay-day loans and other ill-advised financial choices that lock individuals into impossible situations.

NHLWAA has hosted sessions at LGC's annual conference for many years, enabling them to reach a broader municipal audience. The Association hosted three sessions at the 2007 conference, which included an update on the state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program; a career guidance session designed to arm administrators with resources to steer recipients toward entering the workforce; and an overview of a new software program to help gather more detailed statistics. Bates advocates moving toward a uniform software system enabling communities to more readily compare information and identify trends.

Bates notes a phrase attributed to LGC Government Affairs Counsel Judy Silva that has become a mission-statement for welfare administrators: "In the end, if the person is still in harm's way, you haven't done your job." NHLWAA is dedicated to supporting the local officials that provide protection for those in need.

For more information about the NHLWAA, contact Keith Bates at 603.610.7260 or e-mail kebates@ch.cityofportsmouth.com.

Meet the Affiliate Group Services Program Team



AGSP Team Members. Front row, left to right: Audrey Bentley, Erin Batstone, Ashley Monier, Regina Mitchell and Judy Glendinning. Back row, left to right: Judy Pearson, Christian Pearsall, Eleanor Baron, Stacy Koscielniak, Jeni Eldridge, Sandal Keeffe, Jennifer Dauphinee, Tom Philbin and Laurie Tumasz.

Have a question but not sure who to contact? Here is a list of Affiliate Group Services Program (AGSP) offerings and the LGC staff contact for each. If in doubt, Christian Pearsall or Jeni Eldridge can guide you in the right direction. We look forward to serving you in 2008!

BOARD OF DIRECTORS SUPPORT

Bylaws review

Eleanor Baron, Director of Communications
ext. 137, ebaron@nhlgc.org

MEMBERSHIP, DATABASE AND MAILING SERVICES

Membership reports

Christian Pearsall, Affiliate Group Services Coordinator, ext. 104, cpearsall@nhlgc.org

Dues payments, membership data

Judy Pearson, Program Associate
ext. 153, jpearson@nhlgc.org

Membership data and mailings

Jeni Eldridge, Communications Manager
ext. 118, jeldridge@nhlgc.org

GRAPHIC DESIGN SERVICES

Logo design, newsletters, conference materials

Stacy Koscielniak, Graphic Design Coordinator
ext. 144, skoscielniak@nhlgc.org

Membership directories, brochures and flyers

Christian Pearsall, Affiliate Group Services Coordinator, ext. 104, cpearsall@nhlgc.org

Conference materials, membership directories

Jeni Eldridge, Communications Manager
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WEB DESIGN SERVICES

Web design, maintenance and hosting

Audrey Bentley, Communications Data Specialist, ext. 117, abentley@nhlgc.org

EVENT MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Conference planning

Erin Batstone, Event Planner
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Conference room scheduling and catering

Ashley Monier, Event Planning Associate
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FINANCIAL SERVICES

Tax returns, general ledger entries, financial statement preparation

Judy Glendinning, Accountant
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Accounts payable, financial reporting

Regina Mitchell, Jr. Accountant
ext. 151, rmitchell@nhlgc.org

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Accounting practices and controls

Tom Philbin, Accounting Manager
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Accounting practices and controls, nonprofit guidance

Sandal Keeffe, Deputy Director/CFO
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Checkbook reconciliations

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New Hampshire Local Government Center Affiliate Groups

Association of NH Public Employer Human Resource Administrators

Fire Instructors and Officers Association of NH

Granite State Rural Water Association

Municipal and Governmental Law Section of the NH Bar Association

NH Association of Assessing Officials

NH Association of Conservation Commissions

NH Association of Emergency Medical Technicians

NH Association of Fire Chiefs

NH Association of Housing Authorities

NH Association of Regional Planning Commissions

NH Association of School Business Officials

NH Building Officials Association

NH Cemetery Association

NH City and Town Clerks' Association

NH Coalition for Community Media

NH Economic Development Association

NH Excellence in Education

NH Fire Prevention Society

NH Government Finance Officers Association

NH Health Officers Association

NH Library Association

NH Library Trustees Association

NH Local Government Information Network

NH Local Welfare Administrators Association

NH Municipal Management Association

NH Municipal Secretaries Association

NH Planners Association

NH Public Works Association

NH Public Works Mutual Aid Program

NH Public Works Standards and Training Council

NH Recreation and Park Association

NH Road Agents Association

NH State Firemen's Association

NH Tax Collectors' Association

NH Water Pollution Control Association

Northeast Resource Recovery Association

Tri-State Association of School Business Officials

Working Dog Foundation

Organizations listed in red indicate participation in the Affiliate Group Services Program.