

The Art of Connecting

How leaders can bridge agreement gaps in a group.

By Claire Raines and Lara Ewing

IT'S NATURAL to feel uncomfortable when you lead a group that has a history of conflict or controversy, or when you anticipate that conflict is likely to emerge in the group. Thankfully, we have found two principles that can help build a bridge between factions. By clarifying intentions and searching for similarities within your group, you can help members bond around common purpose. We've found that the strength of that initial bond creates an atmosphere of respect and appreciation, making it safe for group members to explore highly controversial issues and air strong differences.

Building that bond begins with drawing the group's attention to common ground, especially common intentions, early in the meeting. You may choose to acknowledge the differences first, but be sure to lead the focus on what they share. For example, you could say: "I know you've had a hard time coming to agreement about how to launch the campaign and the specific action plans that will lead us to the result we all want. Feelings ran pretty high about those differences in your last meeting. It's important to remember that we are committed to achieving the same objectives. The passion with which we differ is only a reflection of how deeply we are dedicated to this common purpose. Keeping that in mind, how can we work together to accomplish our goals?" From there, develop a list of working agreements—ground rules for the discussion—that will help the group air differences while maintaining respect and goodwill.

In *How Great Decisions Get Made*, Don Maruska recommends extending an invitation to explore hopes. He

writes, "Many groups are hopeless. They don't lack potential, but they do lack clarity about what's truly important to them. This deficiency blocks group members from engaging with one another, discovering effective solutions, and working together effectively. You can turn around any troubling group situation by asking participants two questions: What are your hopes for the meeting? and Why are they important to you?"

By taking that approach, Maruska deftly turns the group's attention away from specific positions on issues and toward the purpose of the meeting or project. Once the group members find common ground at the more general level, it's easier for them to agree on the specifics.

Maruska's strategy capitalizes on the power to seek alignment rather than agreement. Yasuhiko Genku Kimura, former Zen Buddhist priest and founder of Vision in Action, believes that the future of the world is dependant upon our ability to work with one another to pursue common hopes through differences in beliefs and point of view. "Alignment is congruence of intention; whereas agreement is congruence of belief. People who differ in their beliefs can align in their intention, turning their diverse points of view into a common asset. No more do we need, nor can we afford, the usual politics of agreement versus disagreement, which is subverting the integrity of human unity and endangering the future."

Gaining alignment in a group requires the facilitator to take a third-person perspective, staying above the squabble of differing opinions to see the parties' common intention. Occasionally, the situation seems to call for even stronger measures. We've been asked to lead groups in which key stakeholders were so polarized that even the idea of holding a meeting was objectionable to them. In that case, it is necessary

to do some prep work before the meeting. One strategy is to set up a conversation with the "negative thought leaders," so they can share their perspectives. We have found that their views add vital information to what we already know. In fact, we often ask them to help design the meeting or give us ideas that we can incorporate into our approach. During these conversations, we keep these principles and thought patterns in mind:

There's always a bridge. I can find ways to connect with this person.

Curiosity is key. I wonder what her perspectives are on the issue. What experiences has she had that has her feeling so strongly that she doesn't even want to be in the same room with people who feel differently?

What you assume is what you get. She has good reasons for how she feels. She's well intended.

Treat each individual as a culture. She may have a unique take on this issue or there may be personal reasons unrelated to the topic that are motivating her.

Don't attach strings. I'll extend the offer of listening, honoring her perspective, and taking responsibility for bringing that perspective into the room. But I don't assume she'll do the same for me or for others in the group.

Clarify your intention. I want to find out what she needs in order to participate. I want to discover enough about her perspective that I could represent it well in the meeting, even if she decides to decline the invitation to attend.

Notice your own reactions. If I continue to think of her as a fly in the ointment, a "negative thought leader," it will stand in the way of building a relationship with her. I have to shift this. Clearly, she's someone who brings vital pieces of the puzzle into the room. I'll redouble my commitment to search for her positive intention and give her the benefit of the doubt.

Search for similarities. What does she have

in common with other members? Where's the common ground? How can I lead the conversation from the level of specific—and opposing—positions to the purposes or intentions that she shares with other group members?

In our experiences, it possible for the group to have a meaningful conversation that leads to breakthrough. But that requires group leaders to truly listen to members and incorporate their input into the meeting. By establishing rapport and helping members connect, we can help groups communicate effectively.

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