CREATING COLLABORATION OUT OF CHAOS:
USING CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESSES TO BRING DIVERSE GROUPS TOGETHER

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Introduction

Today, our political leaders model a common approach to conflict resolution. Our political leaders typically use the 'compromise' approach to resolve complex problems, including political disagreements.

Compromise is a process that brings two or more sides of an issue together to reach a conclusion that is generally somewhere just short of what either side wants. The fundamental premise is that each side has a solution. The compromise process aims to select those segments of each solution that both sides can live with.

The basic premise behind the two-party system is that the compromise approach will bring a balance to the final outcome, resulting in the most fair result possible. However, what is often overlooked is that compromise is not the only option for bringing diverse opinions and perspectives together. Nor is compromise necessarily the best approach for most situations. The possibility of a better solution is especially evident when dealing with complex and critical issues such as those related to the environment.

In debates about environmental issues, people often need to be brought together to consider new assumptions and new possibilities and to agree upon new outcomes. This kind of dynamic requires going beyond compromise and looking to the different approaches to the resolution process itself.

This report explores five different approaches that are available for resolving differences of opinions and points of conflict. Each approach offers unique opportunities and benefits. For the most complex and diverse discussions, including environmental debates, a formal approach that involves collaboration may be needed. The Collaborative Process that Dovetail Partners utilizes for group facilitation and problem solving is outlined in this report.

Background

Diverse opinions and perspectives are a potential source of creativity. The ability to incorporate new ideas and a broad array of interests into the solutions of complex problems is critically important. Achieving this can be difficult and may require new approaches, well-designed formal processes, and attention to the composition of problem solving teams.

There are five different approaches to resolving differences of opinions or conflicts. These variations are *avoidance, cooperation, compromise, competition,* and *collaboration.* Although these terms are often used synonymously, doing so is incorrect.

Understanding the differences between these approaches and their benefits, and recognizing the appropriate times to use each, are critical to resolving problems between and amongst diverse groups. In fact, the more diverse the opinions, the more formal and thoughtful the conflict resolution approach must be. The idea of five different approaches may seem to contradict our current model of seeking compromise as the single approach in many situations. However, there are situations when a different conflict resolution approach is likely to be the most beneficial. The following is a brief discussion of the nature of each approach and the situations where they best apply.

The Five Conflict Resolution Approaches

Avoidance is defined as "the act of keeping away from." [1]   The decision to avoid conflict is basically a decision about timing rather than the permanent evasion of an issue. The *avoidance approach* suggests that the resolution is being postponed to a later date. To a certain extent, avoidance is a strategic maneuver to postpone discussion until a more favorable time. This approach makes sense when there is a high level of risk involved, e.g. physical or emotional, such that individuals involved in the conflict need a cooling off period or an opportunity to seek a safer environment. In addition, avoidance is appropriate when one or more parties can use the time to gather more resources such as information or data, or to put information in a more accessible format such as graphs, slides or a summary report to ensure that the future discussions are more effective and constructive. The avoidance approach is not a permanent solution, but rather an intermediary step that can be used in conjunction with any of the other four approaches.

Cooperation is defined as "an act or instance of working or acting together for a common purpose or benefit." The *cooperative approach* to conflict resolution generally refers to situations where the other parties adopt one side's solution over another's with limited tweaking or adjustment for the betterment of all. It is a form of yielding for the common good. The use of cooperation is the best approach when: a) it is clear that one solution is better than the other; or b) when either solution is equally likely to work, and when c) any combining of attributes is likely to degrade the benefits of the solution. Cooperation is particularly common in situations where a level of expertise is required for effectively solving the challenge – such as a plumber deciding on plumbing issues; a marketer providing a solution for a marketing problem, or a forester developing a forest management plan. A cooperative approach is often a subcomponent of other approaches. For example, different sub-committees within an organization may create resolutions within their respective specialties based on cooperation, and then another conflict resolution approach is used to bring those diverse solutions together and to address disagreements. In the example of a forest management plan, foresters, wildlife biologists and recreation management specialists may all develop components of the plan that are later reconciled. The cooperative approach is also valuable when issues require complex solutions. In these situations the components of the solution may be interwoven in a way that any change in the parts disrupts or dramatically degrades the whole.

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[1] Definitions are adapted from the American College Dictionary, Random House, New York.

Compromise is defined as "the settlement of differences by mutual concessions; an adjustment of conflicting claims, principles, etc., by yielding part of each." Inherent in this definition is the recognition that each side must lose something for the process to be successful. Thus, it is not uncommon for both parties to feel unsatisfied by the outcome. In fact, there is an old saying that "you know you have a fair compromise if both parties are still mad." Compromise is also described as the "milk toast" solution that everyone can live with but few like. Compromise is the model of conflict resolution we tend to see most often. The approach is often used effectively in situations where there are a number of non-linked components that can be resolved independently. Thus, at the governmental level we often end up with the "pork barrel process" where each view represented gets to add its own piece to the overall pie in order to get a successful vote on the overall bill. Compromise is least successful for complex and critical issues. The compromise approach often works poorly when there are more than two perspectives or the possible solutions include a wide range of options that are interrelated. In environmental conflicts the compromise solution is often dissatisfying. For example, if a company is planning a construction project and environmental groups are seeking protection of critical habitat for an endangered species at the proposed site, neither side is likely to be satisfied with getting only half of what they are asking for.

Competition is defined as "rivalry for the purpose of obtaining some advantage over some other person or group, but not involving the destruction of such person or group." The competitive conflict approach involves differing factions working to persuade or convince others of their position's relative merit. This approach can work well when an individual position is based on unique skills, training, or experiences that provide a high likelihood of a positive outcome. With this approach, preservation of individuals and/or subgroups is a priority. The goal is not winning at the expense of others, but for the benefit of the whole. To some extent competition is the opposite of cooperation. _The key to cooperation is in knowing when to yield, and for competition it is in knowing when to persevere._ For example, when a forester is preparing a forest management plan for a private landowner, both parties have relevant knowledge, unique skill, and experiences to contribute to the process. The two may cooperate where specific individual skills best apply and compete over key decision-making points where both have strong positions. For example, the landowner may yield to the forester's expertise in identifying plant communities and calculating growth and yield information, but the landowner may debate strongly with the forester about planning details such as the year in which a harvest will occur.

Collaboration is the fifth approach to conflict resolution. Interestingly, the term collaboration is often misunderstood and confused with "cooperative." In fact many definitions of the word "collaboration" include the term "cooperate" and the more general concept of "working together." One of the best definitions of "collaboration" in the context of conflict resolution is from Wikipedia, which defines 'to collaborate' as "the process by which people with different ways of seeing the world interact to learn from each other to get better at whatever they are trying to do."[2] Inherent in this definition,

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[2] Source: Wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaborate

and critical to collaboration, is the assumption that out of the collaborative process a group achieves something greater than its members could achieve individually. Thus collaborative processes are sometimes illustrated by the equation $1 + 1 = 3$.

Collaboration is extremely valuable in the solution of complex problems (e.g. environmental ones). The process seeks to incorporate the best of each possibility and to build off that process to achieve something unique. Collaboration is particularly valuable when group creativity is needed. Returning to the forest management planning example, if a forester and a landowner are the only two parties involved in the process then a combination of cooperation, compromise, and competition may work well. However, if additional family members and other stakeholders are also asked to contribute to the planning and decision-making a collaborative approach may be needed. *The more complex the problem and the more varied its possible outcomes, the more important a collaborative process becomes.*

Formal Collaborative Processes

Collaborative behaviors within a group do not happen accidentally. The collaborative skills of the individuals involved can significantly enhance outcomes, as can training of the facilitator in charge of steering the process. Beyond the characteristics of the individuals, good collaborative processes are also formalized to ensure that every perspective and primary need is considered and incorporated into the final outcome.

We are rarely taught collaborative behaviors or processes that allow for collaborative behaviors to occur. In general we are taught to "find a problem and solve it." In fact, in business and work situations, whether purposely or through experience, we are often taught that we progress up the ladder of success by putting our nose to the grindstone and bringing solutions, not problems, to our bosses (sound familiar?). Yet, problem solving is often iterative and time consuming, as it is based on the concept of identifying the biggest impact rather than the critical driver. In addition, actions tend to be linear as decision makers prioritize and focus on singular activities sequentially. A collaborative approach is more effective for engaging multiple, simultaneous actions.

Today, the truly successful have learned that what creates success is not what they know, but how they bring people together. Bringing people together, in a way that results in combined knowledge and instincts, leads to better decisions than what any one person could come up with individually. Many people have natural collaborative traits; some have even had collaborative training.

There are a variety of formal collaborative processes. Regardless of which one is used, the concept of a good formal collaborative process has at its heart the old adage "measure twice, cut once." Dovetail Partners has adopted a collaborative group process based on

the work of William S. Stockton, Ph.D, Patrick O'Brien, and the Mobius Model[TM3].
O'Brien has facilitated groups for over twenty-five years using this approach, and
Stockton conducted extensive personal conflict resolution research in developing it. The
structure of the Mobius Model provides an excellent guideline for the development of
multi-group collaboration. Sometimes this approach is represented as a wheel (Figure
1.). The process includes six steps that are followed in a positive direction (clockwise).

Figure 1. The Six Steps to the Collaborative Process
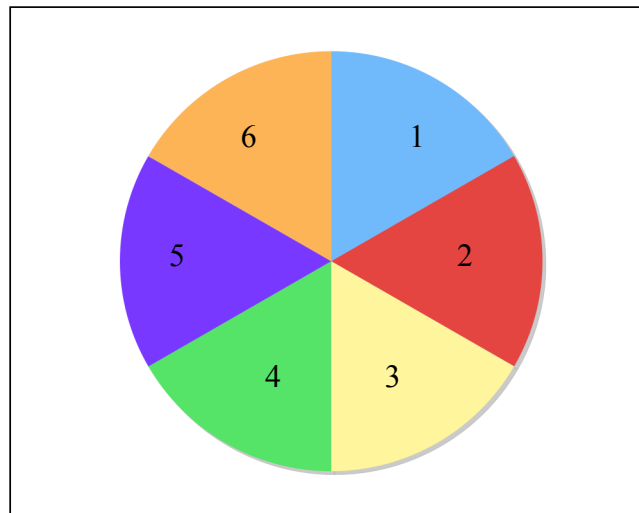
There are six basic steps to the *collaborative process*.

1. *Assessment* of the situation for mutual understanding,
2. Identification of *possibilities*,
3. Group *commitment* to certain possibilities,
4. Development of a plan (*Ability*),
5. Selection of champions (*Responsibility*), and
6. *Evaluation* of progress and/or success.

Although this process may seem similar to traditional business models, the devil is in the
details. The emphasis in collaborative processes is less on the plan portion (steps 4-6)
and more on the incorporation of diverse opinions into the assessment, idea creation, and
commitment stages (steps 1-3).

An emphasis on the first three steps is used to ensure inclusion of differing perspectives
in the final plan. By spending additional time coming to a mutual, shared understanding
of the broader needs of the varying groups, new possibilities arise that would not
otherwise show up, including the potential to gain commitment from diverse participants,
trust and respect for the process and greater happiness with the end result.

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[3] *The Mobius Model: A Guide for Developing Effective Relationships in Groups, Teams and
Organizations,* Demarest, Ph.D. Herdes, Stockton, Ph.D. and Stockton, Ph.D
http://www.mobiusmodel.com/

As a lead-in to the above discussion it was suggested that we are taught (and strongly encouraged!) to find a problem, then fix it. In the context of the collaborative process this would basically suggest you assess a situation to figure out the most likely major problem (step 1) and then create a plan to fix the problem (step 4), the action step. Often we even precede the second part with an assumption of who is going to fix it (step 5). So, problem solving as often practiced, progresses from a partial step 1, to step 5, and then to step 4. In essence, we frequently skip the critical steps of exploring all the possibilities and addressing everyone's individual concerns. How often have you seen a "solution" implemented, only to quickly realize it isn't addressing the entirety of the problem? How often have you seen "solutions" fail because one or more team members hold back and resist implementing the plan? The key to good collaborative processes is in thoroughly, and orderly, facilitating progress through each step.

Dovetail Partners Collaborative Group Process

Step 1 – Assessment
The key to the assessment step is in the questions asked. The goal of this step is to develop a broad understanding by all parties of the various perspectives represented. Thus, what may be assessed as a positive for one party may actually be a negative for another. Contradictions in the assessment are valuable and not judged. The questions asked to assess the situation are based on the outcome(s) desired. In many business situations the analysis is based on questions regarding strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and/or threats. In collaborative processes the questions need to be more specific. Stockton's terminology is helpful here in that he suggests forming questions around the terms "present" and "missing", as in "what's present that contributes to the success of this collaboration (e.g. to save the critical habitat?) or "what's missing that if it were present it would increase our likelihood of success?" In the assessment process there can be considerable discussion with questions of clarification, but no judgment or debate about the veracity of an individual's response. The goal is to free people to express their opinion and perspectives without fear of evaluation or judgment.

It is imperative that the assessment process be thorough and complete before proceeding. Experience suggests that, in dealing with difficult issues, it is better to start by defining the positive attributes (i.e., brainstorming what is "present" first). People have generally already spent a significant amount of thought about what is wrong, and little on what is working. The other key is the art of turning a discussion about what is wrong into a clarification of what is missing. As an example, in a workplace conflict related to employee attendance, people might say what's wrong is "Suzy is always late." While what is actually missing might be: respect for our time, a watch, a closer day care center, or flexible work hours. The key is in taking the time to come to a shared understanding of all sides of an issue and, perhaps, competing priorities.

Step 2 – Possibilities
Another term that is used in the process is "possibilities." This step in the process involves identifying all of the available options. The development of possibilities can be a fun and creative process. Some groups may have difficulty with this step and two approaches for developing the discussion are often recommended.

The first approach is that the group can simply *brainstorm every possibility* they can imagine and list them. Again, this needs to be accomplished without judgments - for example, don't worry about how much a given possibility might cost! Being nonjudgmental is even more important in creative processes. Unique and different approaches are often exactly what are needed, so the facilitator and the participants in the discussion want to do nothing to hinder their development.

A second, more structured approach to the development of possibilities is to simply take the list of "missings", prioritize them as to potential contribution to the project, and *then consider the possibility that each of those key concerns could be addressed or made "present."* Remember, the terms "present" and "missing" are used in the questions of "what's present that contributes to the success of this collaboration?" and "what's missing that if it were present it would increase our likelihood of success?" The brainstormed list of answers to the question about "what's missing" is the list from which the "possibilities" are drawn. The group may be asked to pick a certain number of key "missings" or the group may "vote" on priorities from the list. The result of this process becomes your list of possibilities. To extend the example related to employee attendance in the assessment section above, one possibility that arises out of the sample "missings" might be that the company could establish an on-site day care center.

Step 3 – Commitment
Commitment is the most neglected stage of the collaborative process and perhaps the most important to group situations. Commitment is about each individual agreeing that the issues surfaced are ALL important and that the ensuing process will address all concerns and lead to a solution that will meet everyone's needs. One tool that is valuable in this step is to define goals for what success looks like for each possibility. In some cases these are called "conditions of satisfaction," in that each individual can have a unique condition(s) under which the possibility is successful. For example, consider a simple business issue where a company decides that one solution to getting more customers is to hang a new sign in front of the facility. In this example, a new sign becomes one possibility. To get commitment, the conditions of satisfaction expressed by concerned individuals in the organization might include:

     Operations person – sign must not hinder truck entry and exit
     Marketing person – sign must portray information that attracts the right customer
     Owner – the sign must accurately present the image of the company
     Controller – the sign must come in within existing budget
     Human Resources – the employees should get some input on the new sign

Each of these conditions is not mutually exclusive but simply respects the needs and perspectives of the individuals. By clarifying these needs at this stage you create the greatest chance of success, eliminate the iterative process that is so common today, and *shorten the time to a successfully completed project*.

The final action in this step is for each person to formally commit to the possibilities you have chosen. The question they are responding to is: "if these conditions of satisfaction are met are you willing to commit to these possibilities?" If someone isn't willing then you need to go back, investigate what is still missing for them or what other conditions of satisfaction are necessary for the current possibilities. You continue until you have a group of possibilities everyone can commit to.

A brief note on what commitment looks like – you are not asking people to declare they love every aspect of the different options. What you are seeking is commitment that their primary needs are met, and that none of the other components conflicts directly with those needs. Thus, in the above sign example, the controller might live with a sign he or she doesn't particularly like as long as it comes within budget and the marketing people love it.

Like the previous steps, gaining commitment relies on participants being non-judgmental. If group trust is well established, people will be able to express the conditions that are needed to gain their commitment and the process will be able to proceed. Also, in some cases people need time to commit; that is they may need to digest the discussion or seek input from other respected parties. It is reasonable to allow some defined time period for commitment to occur.

Step 4 – Ability
Ability is the step that defines the actions of the group. This step defines the what, when and where of the activities necessary to meet the conditions of satisfaction laid out in the previous step. In general this is the part of the process that is most familiar to participants as it represents traditional planning. In most cases this step seems to take the least time. People are very good at figuring out what to do once a problem(s) is clearly defined.

Step 5 – Responsibility
Responsibility is the process of assigning the actions identified in the Ability step. To use another old adage, the responsibility step is where "the rubber meets the road." This is the point where you attempt to pick champions for the different action items. It is here that you find out how committed people really are, and whether or not you may still have missed some possibility or condition that someone has neglected to mention. Again, it is important that the group or facilitator not get frustrated if something is missed and steps need to be retraced. It is precisely for this purpose that you follow a structured process in order to provide multiple opportunities for diverse individuals to bring out their opinions and perspectives. *A good rule of thumb is that you cannot assign action items to individuals that were not present during the process.*

Step 6 – Evaluation

The evaluation of progress and recognition of success is critical to the entire process. In many cases the evaluation process will lead to a new assessment, and this is part of the reason why the process is illustrated as a wheel (Figure 1). It is extremely valuable during the evaluation step to identify the critical measures and indicators of success that will be used to measure progress toward the goal of the collaborative process. These indicators will vary considerably depending on the topic and may include sales targets, attendance goals, growth rates, investment yields, or other measures.

The Group You Choose Impacts Your Solution

When trying to resolve complex problems through collaborative processes, it is important to ensure early in the process that all critical stakeholders are present to represent their concerns. All involved individuals also need to commit to participating proactively and positively in the process. The role of the facilitator is essential in engaging all individuals in the process. Facilitators should be experienced in using a collaborative process and able to work objectively with the participants and the discussion topic. To strength the facilitator's effectiveness it is also very important to establish ground rules with new groups. These ground rules should define the role and actions for the facilitator and also ensure an individual's feeling of confidentiality and fair representation. All participants need to agree to the ground rules, examples include: people agree to show up on time for meetings, meetings begin and end on time, and defining what a quorum looks like. It is also valuable to agree there will be no retribution for things said during the process.

In previous Dovetail articles[4] it has been pointed out that the very nature of a group can determine outcomes. Thus the selection process for choosing individuals for inclusion in a "team" is very important. In general, the best outcomes result from the broadest involvement of stakeholders and the widest range of viewpoints. In general, it is best to err on the side of inclusion. It is also valuable to proactively ensure diversity. Too often groups of similar minded individuals get together and develop highly predictable outcomes based on the nature of the group. If new outcomes are sought, new associations must be developed.

Conclusion

Perhaps the key to resolving complex problems, including environmental debates, lies less in the weight of the evidence on one side of an issue, less on what a side has to give up to get most of what they need, and *more* in the use of a process that is inclusive of all sides of an issue. Perhaps in this case the process is as important as the problem. Formal collaborative resolution processes, such as the process described in this report, offer a positive inclusive approach to resolving these complex problems. The collaborative approach is a clear alternative to the compromise approach that dominates decision making today.

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[4] *Implementing Diversity; Avoiding 1 + 1 = ...1: Benefiting from Gender, Age and Personality Differences* http://www.dovetailinc.org/DovetailComm0306.html