



Talking it out works -- for anyone and everyone

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Judy Saul / Guest Column

When most people think about the Community Dispute Resolution Center, they probably think of mediation: two, three, four people talking through their differences with the help of a professionally trained volunteer mediator. That makes sense, since mediation is the single most-utilized service the center provides. However, some disagreements or decisions involve many more people — sometimes hundreds. Handling these group discussions involves particular skill and sensitivity. Though not as widely known for this service, the center is well-versed in running meetings and creating processes that serve a group's specific needs or goals through its multi-party facilitation services.

Bringing in a facilitator can increase effective communication and encourage more diverse feedback. It brings a wider cross-section of stakeholders into a conversation and helps organizations — like churches, government agencies, businesses, schools and neighborhoods — engage people in giving input into decisions that need to be made by those in charge. Whatever the number of people involved or the purpose of the group, a facilitator helps keep its objectives in sight and its process on track.

This is where the adage "there is one person smarter than anyone, and that is: everyone" certainly applies. Successful implementation of a plan is easier when affected parties have a voice in shaping the plan. Since each individual brings his or her unique experience and perspective, the presence of many voices, when integrated skillfully, can enrich a deliberation, increasing the possibilities considered and, often, improving the outcome.

A recent example: organizers of a meeting that was already planned asked the center to jump in and facilitate. More than 80 residents of a nearby town came to talk about the use of sludge on the fields of one multi-site dairy farm owned by a local family. Because the center's facilitators were running the meeting, residents and organizers could participate fully without worrying about how the time was being used or if everyone would be heard.

While this particular conversation resulted in a positive outcome for all involved, sometimes it is simply the act of having the guidance of a facilitator that can make the critical difference when facing difficult issues. When a meeting is well-run, it allows

individuals the chance to say what they want to say, and the room to listen to the concerns of others. In this way, participants learn that disagreements need not always be accompanied by bad feelings. Even if a resolution is not immediately apparent, good facilitation can open the door to improved communication and a greater willingness to continue to work together over the long term if need be.

The center's facilitators can also help design and implement a process that will best address a group's defined goals. When conflict within a work team began affecting the bottom line, a business owner turned to a Community Dispute Resolution Center facilitator for assistance. The facilitator met with the owner and each member of the team. She then proposed a series of meetings, each with a carefully structured agenda, that allowed the team to surface their problems and develop strategies for addressing them that fell within agreed-upon parameters.

Facilitators also worked with the staff of the Finger Lakes National Forest a few years back to constructively integrate recommendations from the community for the forest's land management plan. Monthly meetings were open to the entire community, so careful planning helped newcomers understand not only the overarching process and goals, but the agenda for each particular meeting as well. Facilitators suggested ways to introduce necessary environmental and regulatory information and include many voices in ways other than just a one-person-at-a-time queue.

We'll be helping out again, at 5:15 p.m. Tuesday, March 4, when, as part of the center's series of 25th anniversary celebrations, we'll host a community conversation on land use in Schuyler County that we're calling "Facing the Challenges of Growth Together." If the idea of facilitation is appealing, come out and see it firsthand.

The evening will allow that county's residents to think about life in their county, the land use issues they face, and what they would like to see as the county grows and changes. Many county officials and local agencies will be present to participate in the conversation and to take the information back with them as they consider ways to effectively plan for growth. Whether or not you live in Schuyler County, all are welcome to join us and observe a large group of people constructively discussing difficult issues. Talk works — for communities and organizations as well as for individuals.

Editor's note: Community Dispute Resolution Center's monthly column will appear on the last Friday of each month in 2008. To suggest a column topic, contact Judy Saul (contact information below) or Andrew Tutino, The Journal's opinion editor, at atutino@ithacajournal.com or 274-9213.

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