

PROCESSES FOR ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

Many agree that the quality of decisions being made in schools and school districts is less than what it could be and the results are often marginal or end in failure. In most cases, the quality of decisions is dependent on the quality of the relationships that exist within the system. If relationships are built on open and honest dialog and trust, the quality of thinking will be substantially increased which will result in pertinent, well-informed knowledge being brought to bear on the issue. Only when there is a process that promotes collaborative, synergistic thinking where the knowledge base is fully and honestly shared, will the quality of the decision and the implementation of this decision achieve the results necessary for successful schools.

Study after study has resulted in recommendations for consensus decision making when choices are difficult and stakes are high. Public education, as a traditional system, is structured in ways that limit its ability to make decisions on complex issues through collaborative, synergistic thinking. To increase our ability to make meaningful decisions based on our collective knowledge, skills, abilities and thinking, the structure of the system must become more collegial and collaborative. Secondly, the system must adopt processes that are open, inclusive, and respectful. These processes must be understood and used appropriately throughout the system.

COLLABORATIVE CULTURE AS A SYSTEM

There is more than one way to establish and maintain a collaborative culture, but there are structural components of every collaborative culture that must be in place if the culture is to thrive. These components are addressed in the NEA paper “Establishing and Maintaining a Collaborative Culture.” A consensus decision-making model is one of these components. The Interest-Based Strategy process is the best process for making consensus decisions. The IBS process, if properly used, establishes an environment of trust and respect and provides the opportunity for collective thinking, where all stakeholders can share their knowledge, expertise and experiences on issues that impact teaching and learning.

THE IBS PROCESS

An Interest-Based Strategy Process is an informed consensus decision-making process based on the principles of focusing on issues, interests and options and not focusing on personality, positions or persuasion. The process depends upon presenting and understanding the content, context, interest and information to arrive at a desired outcome by considering interests and constraints rather than personalities and persuasion, allowing some to win and forcing others to lose.

The IBS process is a collaborative process. Collaboration is a relationship of mutual respect, shared philosophy, vision and values and the understanding of a common purpose. The IBS process allows all involved and affected by the decision the opportunity to share, know, understand and appreciate common interests, understand multiple perspectives, and value differences. This may come through direct participation or by exercising the opportunity to provide information, data, interests, options or critique through their stakeholder representative. The process sets the foundation for a consensus decision. It recognizes that the past did occur and that a better future may be achieved, and it gives legitimacy to values, expertise, knowledge and information from all stakeholders. Participants serving as representatives of a stakeholder group must understand the process, have the time available to complete the process, value consensus decision making and assist in the implementation.

The IBS process allows individuals, as well as the system, to develop innovative strategies and brings new practices and ideas into the culture.

PRINCIPLES OF IBS

The parties involved in an IBS process must understand and apply the following principles:

- Participants are required to focus on interests not personalities.
- Participants must use reason rather than power.
- Participants focus on interests and set aside positions.
- It is assumed that most effective solutions to a problem are reached when all affected parties or stakeholders are present and participate.

- Stakeholders are deeply involved in meaningful decisions and are committed to the implementation of the decision.
- Stakeholder groups are in a relationship with each other, and as those relationships continue, an environment of trust is established.

VALUE OF THE IBS PROCESS *(See Addendum II complete list at end of this document)

The IBS process is important because it provides an opportunity for participants to apply the collaborative, consensus decision process on resolving important and critical issues. The process honors the knowledge and diverse experiences that representatives of stakeholder groups bring to the process. As a result of the participation by multiple stakeholders, unintended negative consequences are minimized. The process builds ownership and a sense of responsibility for the implementation and success of decisions. It provides participants a broader understanding of the issues and how these issues impact the whole system. It establishes an environment where the participants can challenge their own views. It encourages risk taking and collective thinking. This enables the group to build on ideas resulting in consensus decisions supported by all stakeholders. Decisions, once implemented will result in practices that will meet children’s educational needs.

ADOPTION OF THE IBS PROCESS

Who will have the make the first step? Who will have the courage and confidence to make the first step? Who will be willing to recognize the other side has made a step? Who will initiate the conversation when considering establishing or re-enforcing a collaborative culture and using the Interest-Based Strategy process? Conversation is the starting point.

In most systems, the conversation will begin among representatives of one of the stakeholder groups in a purely internal communication. One of the groups must have the courage and confidence to approach at least one other stakeholder group. This may best be undertaken in informal contexts, the “walk in the woods.” The chief district administrator within the school district and the local association president may be the key leaders who will begin the conversation. Other leaders who may initiate the conversation are the leadership of the school board and the leadership of the principal’s association.

It is important to include leadership of parent organizations as you begin the conversation. They may be leaders from a district-wide or school-level parent organization. In many cases, community members may also be represented in the initial meetings.

There is another stakeholder group that is frequently overlooked, the support staff of a district. The leaders of this group may be situated to recognize potential links among the various stakeholders. However, the support staff may be overlooked as a source of leadership.

Once the first “clumsy” steps are undertaken, the conversations may unfold in multiple ways, but the leaders must recognize the steps have been taken in a new dance where common values and common interests are connected. Is the successful education of all children a common value? Is respect for all educators, regardless of their role within the system, a common value? Do the parties value a positive trusting relationship? Is there an agreement on the purpose of public education? Are there issues that could be addressed collaboratively through consensus decision making? Will our schools be more successful if we work together, building a synergistic relationship and consolidating the power that exists within every stakeholder group?

Establish an exploration team with representatives from stakeholder groups to identify common issues and interests. Decide if the Interest-Based Strategy process might be a way to address these common issues and interests. Together, build an information base that will help the parties develop common goals and expectations. Share the information that is available on creating and sustaining a collaborative culture as well as the information on the Interest-Based Strategy process with the exploration committee.

Explore the value of a collaborative culture within the district and school. Are all the leadership and representatives of all the stakeholder groups willing to commit to creating and maintaining a collaborative culture? The answer may not be readily available early on, but it is one that should continually be asked as the parties get deeper into the process.

It is important to develop an organizational plan as you move forward. Assess the landscape. The parties may use the IBS process as a vehicle to design an implementation plan. The parties may also consider developing a

compact of trust. A compact of trust may provide a common philosophy, guiding principles and implementation strategies. (See example of a Compact in supplementary materials).

It is very important for the local association leadership to keep the membership informed and engaged. Local association leadership should explore the value of collaboration and consensus decision making internally with the members of the association as well as with other employees of the district. The greater the chasms among the stakeholder groups, the more difficult and more important this communication is.

As leaders within the association, are we willing to take the risk with each other? Is the membership of the association going to support a more collaborative relationship between the association and the district, knowing that in the past the association has handled issues through more traditional methods such as collective bargaining and filing of grievances? This does not mean either party's leaves the contract outside the door. The contract or Memorandum of Understanding continues to be a living-working agreement

Does the leadership as well as the membership understand the value of collaboration and the consensus decisions reached through the Interest-Based Strategy process? Work internally with the association leadership and membership to build an understanding of the value of a more collaborative culture.

Are we willing to make a long-term commitment to each other and to the district for creating a collaborative culture and using the Interest-Based Strategy process for negotiations, problem solving and planning? What issues need to be resolved that could best be addressed collaboratively using the IBS process? Are we willing to de-demonize others? Are we willing to undertake reconciliation? Are we willing to seek information before reacting to rumors? Can we take steps along the continuum of trust?

Leaders of all stakeholder groups should make a commitment to each other as they look at the big picture. Think systems and long term even if the gains are small or if there are false starts. To assure success, the adoption and implementation of the process should be inclusive. When all stakeholder groups are committed to establishing and sustaining a collaborative culture and using the Interest-Based Strategy process, the district will be successful in moving forward.

STEPS OF THE PROCESS

IBS has six steps that help individuals and groups develop consensus on an issue, plan or issues related to negotiations. The first step, **STORY**, is the issue they wish to work on. What are the facts or perceptions that impact this issue? It requires the collection of information or data that will define exactly what this issue is.

The second step is **INTERESTS**. Why is this issue important? What would the value be to the parties once the issue has been resolved? “Interests are each side’s needs, desires, concerns, and fears. Such desires and concerns are interests. Interests motivate people. Your interests are what caused you to decide.” (“Getting to Yes,” by Roger Fisher and William Ury)

The third step is **OPTIONS**. What are the possibilities for resolving this issue?

The fourth step is **EVALUATION**. At this point, the parties weigh the various options or possibilities against the interests of the parties. What option(s) will best meet the interests of the parties?

The fifth step is to **COMMIT**. Has consensus been reached? Each person will need to agree with the “potential decision” before the decision is final.

The sixth step is **IMPLEMENTATION**. It is important a plan of action be understood, and the parties in the decision-making process agree to see the implementation phase through to a conclusion.

The last step of the process is **EVALUATION**. Each decision should be periodically evaluated to assure a successful conclusion, including weighing it against the interests.

FACTORS TO ASSURE SUCCESS

IBS is an important tool to use when building consensus and establishing relationships where trust is valued. It also provides a foundation for a collaborative culture. There are factors that should be in place for continued

success in problem solving, planning, creating and maintaining a collaborative culture. These factors include the following:

1. Participants serving as representatives of a stakeholder group must understand the process, have the time available to complete the process, value consensus decision making and be willing to support and assist in the implementation. In addition, stakeholder representatives as participants, should be individuals who:
 - Represent the constituents of a stakeholder group
 - Consider other perspectives and divergent information
 - Tolerate ambiguity as the situation unfolds
 - Have an understanding of the content area or be willing to learn to better understand the content area
 - Share the work and fully and openly engage in the process
 - Work toward building consensus
 - Commit to the implementation of decisions.

Training on process, dialog, collaborative leadership and relationships is a critical factor for the continual success of a collaborative culture. All persons should be trained in the Interest-Based Strategy process prior to using the process on complex or controversial issues. A minimum of two day's training is highly recommended. Seeking consensus solutions is such a change from voting on an option that time is needed by many to learn the process.

2. Outside facilitator(s) should be used when teams are using the IBS to resolve complex or controversial issues, in developing long term plans or in negotiating contracts.
3. Resources including space, financial support and release time are very important to the successful use of the process.
4. Communication is a key factor when using the Interest-Based Strategy Process. Communicate the decision, its purpose, benefits and the expected impact it might have on the system to all staff and all stakeholder organizations that might be impacted by the decision. The message should be developed by representatives of the stakeholder group who are participating in the process. Keep the community informed.

5. Implementation and evaluation of decisions are critical to the ongoing success of the Interest-Based Strategy Process. Assess the impact of the decisions on the school district as a system. Proactively safeguard the integrity of the process during implementation and evaluation.
6. Assess the policies and practices of the district to assure the changes required for implementing the decisions are supportive.
7. All group decisions must consider the relationship aspect of a problem and its solution as part of the information as they move forward.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES

There are a variety of engagement processes that provide the opportunity for building ownership, responsibility and commitment for all members of all stakeholder groups. As the district moves forward with maintaining the collaborative culture in the school and in the district, they may find one or more of these engagement processes as a valuable tool.

- **Appreciative Inquiry Summit**
- **Future Search, Building Common Ground Conference**
- **Focus Group**
- **School-Community Visions**

Please see a description of these engagement processes, how these processes are used and decisions that have resulted from using them. (Please see Addendum I)

RESOURCES AND RESOURCE MATERIALS

The NEA will provide resources to get you started. These resources include information and training materials on the Interest- Based Strategy process, Collaborative Leadership and Creating and Maintaining a Collaborative Culture. The NEA will also provide you with a list of trainers and facilitators who may be employed by the district.

ADDENDUM I

ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES

Introduction

Engaging individuals and representative groups or stakeholders in consensus decision-making brings great benefits to an organization school, school district and the community. Engagement processes is an important tool for dialogue; which is critical for building a collaborative culture through shared values and an inclusive learning environment. Engagement creates an understanding of what really matters in working with children through public education and with adults in reaching common goals.

The training and application of the consensus decision-building processes are critical to learning and sharing responsibility. These processes are used to build leadership as well as consensus on issues that impact children and adults. These processes create an environment of trust and respect for those involved. These tools bring experience, shared knowledge and skills into the decision-making process.

Listed below are some of the processes used by various local school districts and educational organizations to build consensus on important issues. These processes also provide districts with the opportunity to build a collaborative culture — the foundation for establishing schools as learning organizations.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES AND HOW THEY ARE USED

1. INTEREST-BASED STRATEGY PROCESS

Training and facilitation time will vary depending on the goals of the district, school or organization. (Recommended training time 12 to 15 hours)

The Interest-Based Strategy Process may be used for problem solving, long term planning and negotiations. It is a means of making consensus decisions in a collaborative manner. An Interest-Based Strategy Process is based on the principles of focusing on issues not on personalities, using data and reason to make decisions rather than

power, and focusing on interests not on positions. It emphasizes respect for the individual and his or her role within the system. Everyone is valued.

Interest-Based Strategy Process was used to reach the following decisions:

- Consolidation of Schools
- Establishing a new direction for curriculum development delivery, i.e. moving from junior high school to a middle school program
- Employment of a new district administrator
- Development of program outline and building outlay for new schools
- Determining the role of the principal for the 21st century
- Establishing multi-year calendars
- Developing district policy on various issues, i.e., Ethics on Testing, edibility standards and grading policy
- Assessment of school programs (i.e., art, music and physical education, 9th grade honors program, 7th and 8th grade athletic programs and special education programs
- Resolving conflict at the district and school level
- Establishing a proactive school behavior program
- Determining the priorities of new multi-million dollar increase for funding and expenditure school district budget (\$26.5 million or a 25% increase of new money).
- Negotiated agreements between employers and employees of school districts and education association
- Establishing long term planning of critical issues faced by districts including major capital projects and the designing of new school facilities.
- OTHER EXAMPLES BY REQUEST.

**2. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY SUMMIT
(Process time 12 to 16 hours)**

The Appreciative Inquiry is a way of looking at the components of the school district or an organization as a system in a proactive, constructive manner. Through a series of reflective activities that focus on positive experiences, representatives of stakeholder groups share knowledge and

experience, and build ownership and responsibility toward the future of the school district.

Appreciative Inquiry Summit has been used to:

- Value organizational achievements
- Establish a direction for the future
- Improve relationships
- Building consensus on long term planning.

**3. THE FUTURE SEARCH, BUILDING COMMON GROUND CONFERENCE
(Process time 15 hours)**

The Future Search process offers a community of stakeholders the opportunity to focus on various internal and external systems that impact their organization and develop a shared vision and long-term goals and strategies to achieve those goals.

Future Search Conferences have been used to:

- Develop multi-year school district programs and strategies for the implementation of these programs
- Focus on “At-Risk” children educational programs for the future
- Establish guidelines for a 10- to 30- year building program
- Develop strategies for passage of bond referendums
- Gather community recommendations on consolidation and closure of schools
- Build consensus on the future of the school district and strategies for designing new school buildings based on educational objectives.
- Strengthen the relationship between the school district and the community.

**4. SCHOOL-COMMUNITY VISIONS
(Process time 2 hours 15 minutes)**

The School-Community Visions program provides representatives of stakeholder groups, particularly parents and staff, the opportunity to focus on what really matters at the school level. Through dialog,

participants establish a shared vision: programs that will help them achieve their visions and responsibilities for the implementation of these programs.

School-Community Visions programs at the school level has been used to:

- Develop a shared vision
- Develop strategies and programs to support their vision
- Build collaborative relationships between the school staff, parents and community members.

4. FOCUS GROUP (Process time one to two hours per group)

The Focus Group interview provides participants with an opportunity to share their viewpoints. It is a means to gather data and information about a specific topic or issue. Focus groups are used to obtain the qualitative perspectives on a specific issue. The emphasis is to build an understanding of the issues and relationships (attitudes, feelings and values) to the district or organization. Training of facilitators for the focus group process is also available.

Focus group sessions have been used to gather community and district input on:

- Re-alignment of grade configuration
- Role of the role of specific educators (i.e., special educators)
- Long term capital construction programs
- Use of time
- School calendar
- Establishing district-wide common data collection and sharing system

LISTED BELOW ARE TOOLS THAT SUPPORT CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

I. DIALOG AND THE ESSENTIAL CONVERSATION (Training and process time 2 to 4 hours)

The Essential Conversation is a formal process for practicing and applying the art of dialog to complex issues, determining values and strengthening relationships. The essential conversation is critical to learning and leading in any organization.

Essential conversations:

- Provide knowledge for self and others
- Create an understanding of shared values, interests and needs
- Are critical in building relationships
- Build respect, trust and power
- Encourage collaboration
- Are the foundation for building learning communities.

II. MIND MAP (Process time 60 minutes to 3 hours)

A Mind Map is a picture or diagram that demonstrates the complexity of a system (school or organization). It provides data for analysis for determining the internal and external forces that impact the system and assists leaders to begin to build strategies around key leverage points.

III. COMMUNITY FORUMS (Process time 1 to 2 hours)

Community Forums provide stakeholders with the opportunity to enter into a dialog around important issues that impact public education. Key to success is providing every participant the opportunity to participate in a dialog around questions that focus on the goals or issues of the school district or organization. There is an understanding that stakeholders are equal partners throughout the process.

Community forums have been used as:

- Informational meetings
- Employment of a new district administrator
- Consolidation of schools
- Place to gather input on new school design and/or location.

Please note: These processes may stand alone or can be used in combination with other processes. For example, within the structure of a community forum, facilitators may use a mind map and the Interest-Based Strategy process.

Criteria for Success

This variety of engagement processes provides an opportunity for building learning communities through dialog and consensus decision making. While each process has its own purpose, many can be used in combination with others to achieve the desired objectives. These engagement processes are most effective when supported by the following criteria:

1. Values and interests of all stakeholders must be acknowledged.
2. Schools and school districts or other organizations must be perceived by the public as vital institutions. This demands that the district or organization's purpose be understood and its goals be worthy.
3. Employees of the district and citizens of the community or leaders and staff of an organization must be valued and vigorously engaged in meaningful ways.
4. Trusting relationships are critical to the success of the school district or organization.
5. Appreciation is an important component in determining a shared purpose, short- and long-term planning and the coordination of implementation of strategies relating to mutually established goals.
6. Engagement is an important tool for establishing learning communities within a learning organization. Each person's role is important to the outcome.
7. Philosophical Agreement may be an important tool that states the organization's operational profile (i.e. Baldrige).

If engagement processes are to be used, these questions should be explored:

1. What issue, concern or goal will be addressed?
2. What processes can provide the best vehicle(s) for engagement?
3. Who should be involved?
4. Who will do the invitation?
5. How will the district, school or organization encourage participation in the engagement process?
6. Will each person be willing to share the work?
7. Will each participant commit to support the process?
8. Will each participant accept ownership and be responsible for implementation of consensus decisions once an agreement is reached?

Leadership within school districts is transforming schools and the school districts from traditional, hierarchical systems into learning organizations by engaging all stakeholder groups. Districts continue to implement programs supported by research that outline basic practices necessary for becoming a learning organization. These districts are establishing an inclusive, risk-free collaborative culture within the district and community where dedicated and committed people are willing to share their knowledge, time and effort. The same principles apply to enlightened organizations.

For a more comprehensive description on engagement processes or training listed above, please contact:

**Jermitt Krage, Facilitator, Trainer and Facilitator
Learning Organization Engagement
jermittkrage@netzero.net
608-358-2071 (cell) 608-296-2179 (office)**

Website: learningorganizationengagement.com