Part 1: Social dimensions of interagency collaboration

Neil Simon, BS, MA

From the locals:

“Well, it looks like we’re going to have to work with the state and feds more closely!”

From the feds:

“Well, now that we have those people, we have to provide for them. Jeez! I wish they could take care of themselves better and know what they want. And I wish they would stop changing their minds!”

From the state agency:

“We can’t seem to make anyone happy! Everyone wants different things in spite of all we do for everyone.”

How many times has this scene, or a similar one, taken place? When various agencies try to work together, many things seem to get in the way. Much progress has been made in the area of emergency management and response, including agencies working together collaboratively. Unfortunately, we have gotten a great deal of experience recently through events like Katrina, Rita, the New Hampshire flooding, and many others—all of which point out that we still have a ways to go. The most critical factor for successful interagency work is the ability for groups of people assigned to work together to accomplish their goals. The “social system” of each agency—the way each organization uniquely works—is often a major impediment to the overall group’s ability to work together.

We have much experience working together in a “command and control” environment. In a classic command and control situation, such as with fire, we know that the on-scene fire chief is the “one.” He or she calls the shots and takes the responsibility for the final outcome. But, what if a situation is not a “command and control” one? What if the situation calls for various groups or agencies to work closely together in a collaborative manner? How is that different? How do you organize the interagency workforce? What type of “social contracts” among the agencies needs to be developed? What sort of preparation needs to be done before such collaborations are routinely successful?

This article is the first in a series to explore the “people factors” that need to be addressed when agencies attempt to work together in a collaborative environment.

WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

Often, organizations that try to work together begin by selecting certain individuals from the different organizations, placing them in a room, and giving them a set of specific goals to meet. This traditional approach often leads to the situation where someone within this initial group is appointed leader (or
chooses to take control) who, through his/her particular approach, is responsible for the success of the overall group. This is the common way of “getting the job done.”

The objective in interagency collaboration is for the various organizations to work closely together, share resources (knowledge and information, tools, and technologies), and achieve a better result than can be achieved by any one organization working alone. This type of collaboration, however, needs to be handled differently than the more traditional approach outlined above. If we want different outcomes, we need different approaches.

A successful collaborative approach requires developing organizing principles to help the new organization come together and organize itself to achieve its desired goal(s). In addition, group members need to create a structure in which to function that equitably supports and engages all the affiliated groups.

Fundamental to a successful collaborative experience is the ability for all involved to openly share information that will assist with the achievement of the outcomes. In order for this to occur, the collaborators need to create an environment of trust. Trust is creating reliable, credible, and consistent bonds and communications with individuals so behavior can be predicted. Each individual and organization must gain from the collaborative relationship. Without these fundamental factors, the foundation for a successful collaborative relationship can not develop.

By themselves, these above statements are nothing but pleasant platitudes. So how do we make them happen? How do we create this environment of trust? How do we create this spirit of collaboration and fair play? The number one challenge in any collaborative endeavor is that of communication. A very useful tool to overcome this challenge is something called “dialogue.”

THE BASICS OF “DIALOGUE”

Introduction to “dialogue” as a technique for improved communication

A singular technique or tool called “dialogue” has emerged, which addresses a fundamental communication need of organizations. In today’s world, “good” communication is required for the success of any organization. But communication involves much more than simply talking; it involves perception, comprehension, and understanding of an explicit communication event and its concurrent, clarifying feedback.

The “dialogue” technique is a means for improving our understanding of a communication event. “Dialogue” is defined as a genuine, authentic, and open interchange of ideas. In contrast, “discussion” is seen as competition, whereby the “debater” attempts to convince the “audience” that “I’m more right than you.”

| Table 1. Comparison between dialogue and discussion |
| Dialogue | Discussion |
| Individuals take the time to compare their assumptions about what it is they think and believe. | Individuals have an opportunity to debate and express their view and philosophy. |
| Opens individuals in the organization to one another and allows for divergent thought. | “Pits” one against others and creates convergence of thought. |
| People are open and sharing. | Strategic, planned talk designed to prove a point. |
| Purpose involves gaining a greater understanding of a problem and exploring the deeper concepts and assumptions underlying an issue. | Purpose involves finding the best, strongest, most “politically correct” concept that will be accepted by the communication targets. |
| Seeks to reveal, in constructive ways, any lack of continuity of thought in the logic process. | Seeks to strengthen concepts without exploring them as part of a “system’s thought.” |
| Systemic and process oriented. | Task and detail oriented. |
Both “dialogue” and “discussion” need to occur within an organization for it to be successful. But, a balance between the two helps in optimizing this success. Table 1 offers a comparison between “dialogue” and “discussion.”

Individuals who practice “dialogue” find that they begin to observe the processes of people engaged in communication. These processes relate to an overall “nature of thought.” By studying communication as a process, we can begin to appreciate the difference between the act of thinking and actual individual thought “outputs.”

The process of “dialogue” leads to an interactive exchange of perceptions and beliefs around common issues. “Dialogue” enables core beliefs to surface and causes us to analyze the differences between one’s self and others. It also challenges us to look at the assumptions from which we live and navigate our lives. The process of exchanging information and underlying beliefs helps clear the “fuzziness” of thought, while providing us with opportunities to explore information in multiple ways.

The successful use of “dialogue” creates an ability to deal with issues in many ways and to appreciate the ways other people utilize facts and beliefs. As members of the group appreciate each other in this deep, meaningful way, there is an alignment of concepts and a higher probability for success.

**PRINCIPLES OF “DIALOGUE”**

There are several principles involved in the “dialogue” process. The following is a review of these basic principles as they apply to the business world.

*Getting the “group” to function as a “team”—the concept of alignment*

In order for a group to accomplish its intended goals, the group must have a set of common issues that act as a glue, making the group cohesive. If the group is cohesive, a focus is often created. This focus pulls the group together, and if a process of “dialogue” occurs, balanced with “discussion,” a common direction emerges and individuals’ energies harmonize.

“Dialogue” assists in the development of a common purpose, a shared vision, and creates an environment in which people begin to complement each other’s efforts. By utilizing the “dialogue” process, members do not sacrifice their personal interests but instead contribute to the effort of the whole team.

*Creating the foundation of the team process*

“Dialogue” allows the team to choose a desired outcome. “Dialogue” and its inherent benefits creates an environment in which individuals can tap and capitalize on the diversity of its group; it utilizes the potential of a multitude of thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.

By going through the process, members “connect” with one another and a relationship evolves. This relationship then yields a level of trust between members. As people get to know one another, (how they think, act, reference material, etc.) they can quantify and depend on a contribution from each member’s particular point of view (i.e., structural, experiential, analog, and digital). A complementariness can be developed, which is manifested in team behavior and “team intelligence.” This “team intelligence” is more profound than an individual or ruling group view.

*Fostering creative exploration*

In learning “dialogue,” we learn to listen deeply to another while putting our own views aside. Engaging in “dialogue” fosters creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, an exploration that is predicated on trust, care for one another, and the feeling that all contribute equally. In order to experience “deep listening,” we have to suspend our own views and “tune in” to the other person’s “frequencies.” This tuning in, even if only momentary, allows for personal growth and appreciation of another’s “way.” This appreciation creates an empathy and sensitivity within the group so members relate to each other more significantly and work more closely as a true team.

There are three conditions the group must meet in order to have effective “dialogue”:

1. Members must be willing to share assumptions with the group and be willing to observe, listen, and question in a non-defensive manner. An underlying trust develops during this process.
2. Each member of the group must be perceived as an equal, a colleague, an equally contributing partner, regardless of title or formal “rank.”

3. The investment of the partners must be one of equal giving and taking (sharing). Risks must be taken (getting rid of the fear), and there must be a willingness to entertain new and different concepts and theories (suspension of judgement).

Sustaining the “dialogue”

A retraining process is often required to assist groups in achieving the state of “dialogue.” Until trained, an independent facilitator needs to assist the group. The facilitator is responsible for developing a set of “dialogue” norms and rules for the group and, once done, contracts with the group to make sure they maintain the “dialogue” process.

The facilitator must focus on assisting people with owning their behaviors, how they work, and their underlying assumptions. The facilitator is the “keeper of the process” and should avoid becoming an active part of the “dialogue.” The facilitator is the tactful enforcer who maintains the “dialogue” focus.

CONCLUSION

In practice, much of the above may seem like common sense. However, it is very important that you have some knowledge of the skills outlined above to ensure your capabilities as a team member and effective leader. The benefits of practicing these skills will assist greatly in the development of a truly collaborative team.

Neil Simon, BS, MA, Managing Partner, Incident Mitigation LLC, Southfield, Michigan (njsimon@incidentmitigation.com).

REFERENCES

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