

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Groups deliberating on a problem often resemble racers in competition. When groups forget to follow a problem solving method like the one in the sidebar, skip steps, or individual members run through the steps at their own pace, wise decision-making gives way to competition, confusion, and uneven participation. Outcomes suffer.

Racing in circles. Half way through a meeting, the high-powered CEO's of a multi-stakeholder alliance keep spinning around three subjects, mentioning, rejecting, and advocating for solutions all at once. By tackling all three issues before clarifying any one (step 1) and jumbling steps 2 and 3, this group delays orderly deliberation that would more quickly bring decisions on all three issues.

To head in a more productive direction, a member could clarify by saying, "ok, we've got three issues on the table; how about if we take the one related to building IT infrastructure first. Lynn, you said it before—can you state the problem in a nutshell?"

Winner takes all. Joe, a member of a client service team in an ad agency, thinks quickly and has a lot of experience. Soon after the problem of how to streamline workflow is raised (step 1), he presses for one solution (step 3). "This is the way it is always done," he says forcefully. Three members of the team drop out, colluding with Joe to by-pass step 2 and use a single criteria (Joe's sense of the right way) for step 3.

This team needs group guidelines that invite members to challenge each other and question group members' assumptions. They also might include a problem-solving model in their team charter, and take the time to practice using it. Then any member could say, "good idea, Joe; and let's stay with step 2 for awhile."

War or dialogue? In a manufacturing team, Chris restates (step 1) that the problem is a gap in the quality assurance procedure, and the group goes on to name three solutions (step 2). Then Fay and Moe face off, with each defending one idea while the third possible solution is dropped. Chris is confused.

And no wonder. Fay and Moe are using different criteria, but since they are not stating these, and other group members are not giving or asking for input into criteria selection, Chris loses track of the three possible solutions and feels cut out of the deliberative process. What *is* clear to Chris is that a war is going on.

Team members could be more intentional about their dialogue. Acknowledge each other's statements, paraphrase, and ask questions—including the simple step 3 question: what criteria are we using?

No follow-through. A public sector leadership council leaves a strategic planning retreat having decided (end of step 3) they will organize teams to drive strategic initiatives. The day ends without moving through step 4. Three months later no teams have been organized.

Group members could prevent this wasteful outcome by speaking up. "So, who is going to go what, and when?" By bringing attention and intention to a problem solving sequence and to dialogue, members help each other to contribute to excellent solutions.

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Problem-solving steps

- Step 1: What is the problem? An issue is on the agenda, or a member of the group brings up an issue, and discussion begins. Summarize this stage by restating the problem.
- Step 2: What are possible solutions? What might we do? Ideas are batted around, or formal brainstorming occurs.
- Step 3: How do we decide? What criteria will we use for selecting ideas? For example, what are advantages and disadvantages of each idea? (Examples of other criteria include: time and resource considerations, best customer service, solutions reflecting organization and team mission.)
- Step 4: What are the next steps? What has to be done to plan and implement? Who will do what, by when?

Leading groups

"Groups can tolerate only a certain level of ambiguity and chaos before a situation becomes dysfunctional."

(Robert Straus)

Facilitative leaders teach, model and support groups as they learn frameworks and behaviors that are at the heart of collaboration.