

Working Together to Achieve One's Goals: Some Strategies for Success

“Our freedom, our pluralism, our dispersion of power all invite healthy conflict as various groups and individuals pursue their diverse purpose. The reconciling of such divergent purposes is one of the tasks of the leader....In a world characterized by multiple, interacting systems, substantial rewards flow to leaders who have mastered the bargaining arts.”

- John Gardner, *On Leadership*

According to long time public servant and thinker John Gardner, the bargaining arts can range from an “I win/you lose” to a “we both win” approach. The former may be appropriate for some situations. However, it may not be the best approach to nurture a long-term collaborative working relationship.¹

Those seeking public office at the local level generally do so because of goals and objectives they want to achieve for their community. Successfully achieving those long term objectives is critical to one's ability to serve the public. Thus, finding ways to work together effectively becomes a critical component to success and lays the foundation for continued collaboration on future issues.

This resource offers a starting point for understanding strategies of working together to achieve one's goals.

Related Resources

Getting to YES: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In, Roger Fisher and William L. Ury, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.

Getting It Done: How to Lead When You're Not in Charge, Roger Fisher, Alan Sharp, John Richardson, Harper Collins, 1998.

Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes. Jeffrey Cruikshank and Lawrence Susskind, Basic Books, Inc., 1987.

Dealing with an Angry Public: The Mutual Gains Approach to Resolving Disputes, Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field, The Free Press, 1996.

On Leadership, John W. Gardner, The Free Press, 1990.

Getting Things Done: Working Effectively to Achieve Results, David Landis, Instructor. CSAC Institute for County Excellence, January 2012. (www.csacinstitute.org/)

Working with Others to Get Things Done

Numerous experts and books² about negotiating strategies offer insights into the benefits of collaboration and alternatives to the “I win-you lose” negotiating approach. Sometimes referred to as seeking “mutual gain” or “principled negotiations” these strategies are “...explicitly designed to produce wise outcomes efficiently and amicably.”³

Strategies for Achieving Mutual Gain Results⁴

Experts recommend several key inter-related strategies for mutual gain results. They are:

- Separating the people from the problem;⁵
- Focusing on interests, not positions; and⁶
- Inventing options for mutual gain.⁷

The advantage of these strategies is that they tend to produce outcomes that benefit a broader range of interests and groups and help to nurture relationships that can endure over time.

Separating the People from the Problem

“Negotiators are people first. A basic fact about negotiations, easy to forget in corporate and international transactions, is that you are dealing not with abstract representatives of the ‘other side,’ but with human beings. They have emotions, deeply held values, and different backgrounds and viewpoints; and they are unpredictable. So are you.”

- Roger Fisher and William L. Ury, *Getting to Yes*

If the food in a restaurant arrives at the table tasting too salty or the wine has soured, it is not the fault of the server. Considerate diners don’t blame the server when they send the food or wine back to the kitchen. The same principle applies to the individual with whom one negotiates, whether it is a colleague on the same governing board, a member of a neighborhood group or an individual representing a company proposing a project within the jurisdiction.

The authors of *Getting to Yes* observe, “A working relationship where trust, understanding, respect and friendship are built up over time can make new negotiations smoother and more efficient.” This is similar to recognizing the importance of civility in public agency deliberations and relationships.

Asking “Why?” to Understand the Problem

The importance of understanding the problem at hand by asking “why” may be the most critical step in any effort to solve that problem or reach agreement on a solution.

Consider the story of two men quarreling in a library. One wants the window open and the other wants it closed. They bicker back and forth about how much to leave it open: a crack, halfway, three quarters of the way. No solution satisfies them both. Enter the librarian. She asks one why he wants the window

open: “To get some fresh air.” She asks the other why he wants it closed: “To avoid the draft.” After thinking a minute, she opens wide a window in the next room, bringing in fresh air without a draft.⁸

Asking “What is the problem you are trying to solve?” enables one to focus on the roots of the problem. This helps leaders look at the issues from many angles and devise possible win-win approaches.⁹

Listening Carefully¹⁰

Active listening is an ingredient in any interpersonal relationship. It takes on an added dimension when it provides opportunities to move one’s own goals forward. Listening carefully does not necessarily mean one agrees with the other party. Rather, it signals an interest in learning more and of understanding the “why” and history behind a position.

For example, active listening that is part of asking “why” may shed light on why residents in an underserved neighborhood are angry over a street widening project in a capital improvement plan. Or it may help understand why a fellow elected official is upset about the proposed date for a city council retreat. By respectfully probing for the “why” and listening carefully to the responses, one may be able to identify the reason behind the positions. The neighbors may be concerned about the safety of their children from the increased traffic and the council colleague may be upset because the retreat date selected conflicts with a long planned family reunion.

To be effective, of course, active listening must be genuine. Combining it with a quest to understand the context or “why” of a position can result in powerful insights that may lead to a reasoned, mutually beneficial solution.

Respecting the Process

Some observers liken negotiations or the process of working together to find common ground to a ritual or a dance. Respecting the process signals respect for the time and effort the parties put into the process. In some situations, reaching agreement too quickly may be perceived as a lack of respect for the process or the other parties’ interest in working through the issue. Taking the time to work out a mutually agreed upon solution validates the time everyone spends participating in that process.¹¹

Other Thoughts to Consider

Characteristics of a Good Negotiated Settlement

Some experts offer the following four key characteristics of a successful negotiated settlement.¹²

1. **Fairness:** Did the participants in the process perceive it to be fair? A process that is open to modification to respond to new concerns or information generally will be viewed as fair.
2. **Efficiency:** A fair agreement may not be acceptable if it takes longer to achieve than is warranted by the problem. Was the resolution worth the trouble?

3. **Wisdom:** The search for a wise decision or settlement requires collaborative inquiry, one that breaks down a complex problem into a series of mutually agreed-upon pieces.
4. **Stability:** Will the agreement endure over time? Even if the participants view it as fair, efficient and wise, to be effective, a resolution must be stable over time.

Decision-Making Transparency

Remembering the importance of transparent decision-making is critical when working towards a win-win solution. Public agency decision-making is different from the way individuals or private businesses make decisions. This difference is fundamental to the purpose and objectives of those decisions. The guiding principle must always be what best serves the public's interest.

Remembering potential legal and ethical constraints also is important when working to find a mutually agreeable solution.¹³ In seeking to find wise solutions, one does not want to inadvertently overstep what the law allows. For example, current law limits the number of elected officials who may discuss an issue outside of a meeting for which the public has received notice.¹⁴ Fair process considerations may require a public hearing before a final decision can be made.¹⁵ Thus, consulting with the agency's legal counsel is a good first step.

Consider that You May Be Wrong¹⁶

Being open to new ideas and information, including the possibility that one's perspective may be wrong, is the sign of a good leader. This applies whether it is learning about and accepting new information that might change one's prior understanding of the issue or working through an issue with the other stakeholders and coming to a different conclusion.¹⁷

Principled Leadership

Some experts suggest that principled leadership – that is, leadership based upon “doing the right thing” – includes ephemeral qualities that are hard to define. These are qualities “...we value above and beyond their ability to generate profits or votes.” They include:

- Decency,
- Respect, and
- Compassion.

Attributes of leaders also include:

- Integrity,
- Honesty, and
- Trust.

These leadership qualities contribute to successful relationships that can benefit the community and help achieve the objectives one set out originally in seeking public office.

About the Institute for Local Government

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association.

For more information and to access the Institute's resources on local government basics, visit www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics.

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Note: Sections in the California Code are accessible at <http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/>. Fair Political Practices Commission regulations are accessible at www.fppc.ca.gov/index.php?id=52. A source for case law information is www.findlaw.com/cacases/ (requires registration).

¹ *Getting Things Done: Working Effectively to Achieve Results* and *Getting Things Done: Working Effectively to Achieve Results*, David Landis, CSAC Institute for Excellence.

² Examples include: *Getting to YES*; *Dealing with an Angry Public: Breaking the Impasse*, and *Getting Things Done: Working Effectively to Achieve Results*, David Landis, CSAC Institute for Excellence.

³ *Getting to YES*, pp. 10-11.

⁴ Numerous authors offer thoughtful ideas about integrated strategies for negotiating win-win, mutual gain results. Although providing detailed steps for negotiation strategies is beyond the scope of this tip-sheet, it does offer tips about two key elements of any strategy. Several of the key resources in this area are listed in Resources to Learn More at the beginning of this tip-sheet.

⁵ *Getting to YES* p.11.

⁶ *Getting to YES*, p. 11.

⁷ *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*, p. 117.

⁸ *Getting to YES*, p 40.

⁹ *Dealing with an Angry Public*, p. 221 and 232.

¹⁰ *Getting to YES*, pp. 35 and following.

¹¹ *Getting Things Done: Working Effectively to Achieve Results*, David Landis, CSAC Institute for Excellence.

¹² *Breaking the Impasse*, pp. 21 and following.

¹³ *Breaking the Impasse*, pp. 193-194.

¹⁴ See Generally Cal Govt. Code § 54950 and following. See also Discussion in *Alternative Dispute Resolution: Navigating Special Issues in Public Agency Disputes* available at <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/institute-resources-intergovernmental-dispute-resolution>.

¹⁵ See *Trancas Property Owners Association v. City of Malibu*, 138 Cal. App 4th 172 (2006); *Save Tara v. City of West Hollywood*, 45 Cal. 4th 116 (2008).

¹⁶ *Dealing with an Angry Public*, pp. 166-167.

¹⁷ *Dealing with an Angry Public*, p. 231.