Instruction Guide for
From Conflict to Convergence:
Coming Together to Solve Tough Problems

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I. Introduction

This guide is intended to assist instructors and teachers from a wide range of disciplines to effectively communicate the lessons and insights of ***From Conflict to Convergence: Coming Together to Solve Tough Problems***, a book by Rob Fersh and Mariah Levison published by Wiley in July 2024 (for more info and to view the book trailer, go to convergencepolicy.org/book).

The book reflects their experience of over two decades as practitioners of collaborative problem-solving on challenging and often intractable issues. Much of the basis for this story-driven book comes from the authors' experience at Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, a nonprofit organization dedicated to building trust and bridging divides to solve critical challenges, where Mariah Levison serves as CEO. Rob is the founder of Convergence, where he served as its first CEO (2009-2020) and remains on the board of directors.

The book is intended to inspire and equip a wide range of people to become more effective at bridging divides and solving problems together. The book's intended audiences include scholars and students, business and non-profit leaders, elected and non-elected public officials at all levels of society, philanthropic leaders, community leaders, house of worship leaders, and others. It is relevant to scholars and students interested in conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution, political science, law, business, non-profit leadership and management, argument, rhetoric, negotiation, and more.

Readers of ***From Conflict to Convergence: Coming Together to Solve Tough Problems*** will learn:

- Why to employ collaborative problem-solving.
- Ways that collaborative problem-solving can be used.
- The mindsets that are the foundation of effectively bridging divides and solving problems collaboratively.
- The fundamentals, or building blocks, that support effective collaborative problem-solving no matter how complex an issue is and no matter the setting.
- How leaders can employ the complete collaborative problem-solving process or subsets of it, as appropriate, depending on need, time, and available resources.

This guide is intended to support an entire course based upon the full book. It also can assist learning on a modular basis. That is, the guide can help scholars and students understand and apply lessons from parts of the book without necessarily addressing the whole book. For instance, instructors may choose to focus on collaborative mindsets, building trust, practicing curiosity, or creating good process without engaging with all aspects of the book.

In the following sections, instructors will find eleven modules, each with an overview, learning objectives, coordinated reading assignment, proposed discussion questions, and suggested activities for underscoring the lessons therein. Instructors can choose to use all the modules, reorder them, or pick and choose among them. After the modules, instructors will find additional

resources (articles, books, and podcasts) and information about the authors and Convergence Center for Policy Resolution.

II. Modules

Module One: Introduction to Collaborative Problem-Solving

Overview

The book's foreword by award-winning author Amanda Ripley (author of *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*) underscores that this book brings concepts alive through real life experience. The Introduction explains the power and limits of collaborative problem-solving and explains the authors' overall goals for the book to improve society and how people deal with differences.

Embedded in Chapter One is a compelling story of a breakthrough achieved in national health care policy in the US through collaboration. It illustrates the unique impact collaborative problem-solving can have and how shared solutions can be found without violating the fundamental values and principles of those participating. This chapter also explains how many people share values even as they may disagree on how to best solve problems consistent with those values. In Chapter Two, the reader is introduced to the books' three main sections: mindsets, building blocks, and process, which are discussed in depth in subsequent chapters.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- Collaborative problem-solving and its benefits.
- Where collaborative problem-solving can be employed and where it may not be possible or advisable.
- The heightened challenges political polarization and division create in addressing a wide range of problems.
- The beneficial effects of this approach both to solving problems and to society at large.

Reading Assignment

pp. xi-xii and 1-41 of ***From Conflict to Convergence***, including the Foreword, Introduction, and Chapters One and Two.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- What is your initial impression of the case being made for collaborative problem-solving?
- How realistic do you find the argument that a vast number of problems can be resolved in a manner that achieves "mutual gains" or "higher ground?"
- When facing a difficult or divisive problem, have you ever considered or assumed that for your perspective to "win" others need to "lose?" Have you considered "win-win" solutions?
- Do you see adversarial engagement as inherent and unavoidable in human interactions or do you see possibilities for conflicting parties to find solutions that meet a wide range of needs? Does heightened political polarization play a role in how you think about answering this question or affect problems you work on day to day?

Activity Options

The following activities can be done in the classroom, as a full group or in small groups, or as a homework assignment.

Activity One: Go to pp. 39-40 of the book for the first **Try It Out**.

- Readers are asked there to identify a divisive problem they are facing personally or professionally or see in their workplace, neighborhood, school, place of worship or in local, state, or national politics.
- Once the issue is identified, go beyond the initial statement of the problem to identify what big-picture goals those addressing the problem might want to achieve and frame those goals in a manner that people with differing, or even conflicting views, would find inviting to meet their concerns and needs.
- To deepen learning, students might be asked to consider both a more personal issue they are facing and to identify a public policy issue. These two examples are likely to stretch their thinking in different ways.

Activity Two:

- Read the *Convergence Collaborative Blueprint for Action* *on Supports for Working Families*.
- What strikes you about the framing of the project? What divergent goals and values are included? How do people on the left usually frame these issues? What about people on the right?

Activity Three:

- Read "Hope and Help for Collaboratives Approaches to Divisive Issues" by Rob Fersh for the American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section from June, 2021.
- This article provides a high-level overview of collaborative problem-solving. It lists several examples of unlikely allies coming together to solve problems. Can you name any other examples?

Module Two: Mindsets of Conflict Can Be Constructive and Everyone Gets the Benefit of the Doubt

Overview

In Module Two, students are introduced to the concept of "mindsets" and the fundamental role they play in encouraging people to collaborate. The reading assignment for this covers the introduction and first two chapters of Part Two of the book, which all focus on mindset. Developing a collaborative mindset contributes to people wanting to engage in collaboration to begin with and is key to the success of any effort at dialogue. While not everyone will enter a problem-solving process in a collaborative frame of mind, well-conducted processes often lead participants to internalize the mindsets described in this module and in Modules Three and Four.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- Conflict is a normal and expected part of daily life and, when handled skillfully, it can lead to higher level thinking and opportunities to learn and grow.
- How to prepare themselves to deal with the stress they feel in situations of conflict.
- The benefits for effective collaboration of holding others in positive regard or giving them the benefit of the doubt. Holding onto stereotypes or preconceived assumptions about others can limit the possibility for creating breakthroughs across differences on tough issues.

Reading Assignment

pp. 45-66 of ***From Conflict to Convergence,*** including the introduction to Part II of the book and Chapters Three and Four.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- What is your mindset about conflict? How do you typically view conflict?
- What are ways conflict can be positive? What could conflict help you and others achieve?

- How could you prepare yourself to engage constructively in conflict? What role might your own fears of and anxiety about engaging with others play in your ability to engage constructively with them?
- Can you identify a situation in your own life where you found another person or group had far different qualities or views than you first assumed? What led to the transformation in your view of the other person or group?

Activity Options

Activity One: As homework

- Go to the **Try It Out** on pp. 48-49. Practice staying present, breathing, and taking note of tensions in your body to help you relieve stress, anger, or tension. Think about how these practices, or others you tried (e.g. exercise, meditation, walking in nature) helped or did not help you stay calm and centered during a difficult experience. Write about your experience in 250-500 words.

Activity Two: As a classroom activity or as a written homework assignment of 500 words or less

- Go to pp. 59-60 of the book for another **Try It Out**. Identify a real-life situation you are facing or one you can readily imagine where you make assumptions about why people are saying something that you find either incorrect or objectionable
- Watch this short video on the fundamental attribution error.
- Practice taking a step back from a difficult conversation by asking yourself, “Why do I think they are saying this?”
- Are you falling into the “fundamental attribution error” trap? What else might explain their views other than some character defect? What could you ask this person to help you understand them without putting them on the defensive? What might keep you from seeing the other person’s challenges and needs?

Module Three: Mindsets of Curiosity Is the Cure and Relationships at the Core

Overview

In this module, students will learn how to develop a mindset of curiosity and will find advice on how to employ curiosity productively. In Chapter Five of the book, students will find a surprising anecdote on how curiosity employed around a charged issue involving guns helped transform understandings and relationships. In this module, students also will be encouraged to put the creation of positive relationships at the center of how they interact with others who come from differing backgrounds or hold differing views. Communicating directly with others provides new opportunities for deep understanding, empathy, and common ground, even if disagreements remain. Considering what life experiences and values have shaped others' views often provides a level of understanding that reading or indirect sources of information cannot match.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- How to avoid "confirmation bias," where people are primed to hear what they already believe rather than what is actually being said.
- How to employ curiosity effectively, including the ability to frame questions that reflect genuine curiosity and are not cloaked in criticism or skepticism.
- A variety of means to create positive relationships with others, ranging from "breaking bread," being open to deeper disclosures, or even sharing some vulnerabilities to move beyond shallow or transactional conversations.

Reading Assignment

pp. 67-86 of ***From Conflict to Convergence,*** including Chapters Five and Six.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- What does it mean to have a curious mindset? What benefits could it bring?
- What could you do to prepare yourself to employ a curious mindset? If someone was offering views you found difficult or even offensive, what would you need to do to stay curious rather than become reactive?

- The “Golden Rule” says that we should treat others as we want to be treated. What do you think about applying the Golden Rule not only to your personal interactions but in situations of conflict at work, in your community, or in politics? How might it be helpful?

Activity Options

Activity One: Large class discussion or small groups

- Watch this short video by Starts With Us about the mother of a gun violence victim and a gun rights advocate. Have students discuss how they used curiosity and relationship-building to develop solutions to gun violence.
- Now it is time for the students to try it out themselves. Go to the **Try It Out** on pp. 71-72. In small groups, one person will explain their views on a contentious issue where they know others in the room disagree. Ideally, find another person who holds conflicting views and ask them to practice curiosity using two key questions: “Did I get that right?” and “Is there more you can share about that?”
- Alternatively, students can be asked to speak to someone they know outside of the class with whom they disagree strongly on an issue of concern for them. The goal here is to have the student try a new approach to understand the views of the other person through curiosity instead of resorting to debate or dismissal as a first response.

Activity Two: Inside or outside of the classroom assignment

- Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 82 to employ an exercise developed by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.
- This exercise calls for individuals to think about someone they know who has different beliefs, goals, or experiences. Make a list of all the things you might have in common, such as religious background, love of sports, responsibility for aging parents, musical tastes, or more.
- Focus on this list to potentially break up the assumption that you have nothing in common or differences that are unbridgeable. See if you can find likely areas where your interests, values, and identities intersect.

Module Four: Seeking Higher Ground

Overview

This module deals with developing the central mindset of seeking higher ground. This mindset is at the heart of holding the possibility that problem-solving can meet disparate needs without compromising principles. Problem-solving does not have to be a zero-sum game and holding the belief that mutual gains are possible can drive a different kind of conversation among those who start at odds. Understanding the role of the five moral foundations all people share but may weight differently can help people see the commonalities they have and build a foundation for finding "higher ground." Recognizing that disagreeing on some things usually does not mean disagreeing on all things can provide an important foundation in the quest for "higher ground."

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- How problem-solving does not have to be a zero-sum game.
- How holding the belief that mutual gains are possible can drive a different kind of conversation among those who start at odds.
- How the five moral foundations all people share but may weight differently can help people see the commonalities they have and build a foundation for finding "higher ground."
- That recognizing that disagreeing on some things usually does not mean disagreeing on all things can provide an important foundation in the quest for "higher ground."
- That people can get important things done and find agreements in crucial areas despite remaining at odds on multiple issues important to them.

Reading Assignment

pp. 87-97 of ***From Conflict to Convergence,*** including Chapter Seven.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- Chapter Seven distinguishes "higher ground" from "common ground" while recognizing that achieving either can be very helpful. How would you explain the differences between

these concepts? Can you provide examples from your own life or generate hypotheticals where higher ground was found and where common ground was found?

- Consider the chapter's description of moral foundations. Can you ascertain where you fall in weighing these moral foundations and why?
- The chapter cites a project of Convergence on obesity and diabetes (pp. 94-96). What is your reaction to this as an example of identifying a higher ground solution? Does it meet the mutual needs of those involved? Does it appear to compromise any deep values or principles of the divergent parties participating?

Activity Options

Activity One: Classroom discussion or written assignment

- Watch Jonathan Haidt's TED Talk on Moral Foundations.
- Review the **Try It Out** on p. 93 of the book which calls for readers to think of a "hot political issue" that is close to their hearts.
- Describe which moral foundations might be most prominent among those on different sides of the "hot political issue" you have identified. In doing so, identify where their moral foundations overlap and where they differ.
- Describe in class or in writing some solutions to the problem you have identified that might satisfy the moral foundations important to those who disagree on the issue at hand.

Module Five: Building Blocks Overview and Mapping the Terrain

Overview

In this module, students will be introduced to the "building blocks" or fundamental concepts underlying collaborative problem-solving across different settings and topics. This module focuses primarily on the first building block, called "Map the Terrain," which explains the need to do careful, thoughtful homework before trying to convene people in a process to integrate differing points of view or to resolve conflict. This homework helps to identify who it would be optimal to include in a problem-solving process and to understand their needs. It also provides insights on how to meet the goal of making the process as inclusive as possible so that the widest range of valuable perspectives is included. The level of effort needed for mapping the terrain, which includes power mapping (understanding the differing levels of influence any participants may bring to the table) can vary widely. It may be very straightforward, such as when the problem to be addressed is internal to an organization and thus the issues and needed stakeholders may be readily identified. Or it can be more complicated and time-consuming, such as when it is a more open-ended public policy problem where decisions on the scope and goals of a project and who it would be optimal to convene can be more challenging to determine.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- The importance of gaining a full understanding of the issues in play and the differing viewpoints of likely participants in preparing for effective collaborative problem-solving.
- How the process of mapping the terrain can be a helpful way to build trust and reduce resistance among eventual stakeholders.
- How the inclusion of voices, which cause participants to stretch beyond preconceptions, can add great value to the results of any collaborative problem-solving process.

Reading Assignment

pp. 99-111 of ***From Conflict to Convergence***, including the introduction to Part III of the book, and Chapter Eight.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- Mapping the terrain usually includes some combination of reviewing written materials, such as reports and articles, and interviewing people who are possible stakeholders or very knowledgeable about the issues likely to be discussed. For people facing really pressing problems, it may tax their patience to engage in a thoughtful process of mapping the terrain. What do you see as the potential benefits of this deliberate approach?
- Chapter Eight of the book suggests that inclusivity of participants with a wide range of views can be very important in maximizing the quality and durability of results achieved. The task of being inclusive will vary depending upon the kind of problem being addressed and the nature of the potential stakeholders. What are important benefits of being inclusive of widely differing points of view in terms of the quality of conversation and the ability to implement recommendations? What special challenges might inclusivity present for problem-solvers in finding areas of agreement?
- When mapping the optimal participants in a problem-solving process, it is important to engage in "power mapping" to ascertain who has leverage and influence to best assist in the implementation of any solutions. What considerations should problem-solvers give to deal with the potential challenge of balancing both the need for inclusivity and the desire to maximize impact? How might problem-solvers address disparities in the power dynamics among participants?

Activity Options

<u>Activity One:</u> Class assignment or written homework

- Review the **Try It Out** on pp. 110-111 of the book.
- Return to the issue that was identified in Module One and Chapter Two of the book and answer the following questions:
    - What written sources, whether public documents or internal organizational documents, would best help to illuminate the differing points of views of stakeholders involved in a collaborative problem-solving process?
- Who might comprise an initial round of stakeholders to interview to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and to help identify other people it would be useful to speak to when mapping the terrain of a problem-solving process?
- Regarding the issue under discussion in this **Try It Out**, identify what individuals or groups (either by name or position) would be important to have at the table to help insure impact. For instance, perhaps it could be the mayor of a city, or the dean of a college, or the head of a business unit. For purposes of "power mapping," where does the leverage lie to effect change? Does it lie with one particular leader in a business, non-

profit, or governmental entity? Does it lie with greater public understanding? Does it lie with changes that must be legislated in some way?

Module Six: Building Block on Nurturing Trust

Overview

This module deals with the all-important building block of building trust and how the normal human tendency to form groups, often "us vs them" groups, can be a barrier to collaboration. This module explains why and how trust must be actively and continuously nurtured especially among people who are skeptical of the views and motives of others at the table. It is critical that participants trust the overall process, the convener, and each other. Trust is built among stakeholders when they find that they have shared values and goals. Disagreement often is more about how best to actualize those values and goals rather than on the values and goals themselves. Building trust is essential for weathering the inevitable disagreements that will arise. Trust is built as people see each other as full human beings rather than as just people who hold certain viewpoints.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- How important it is to initially and continuously build bonds of trust among those participating in any collaborative problem-solving process.
- Various means, like connecting questions, to build trust among diverse participants, including finding identities they have in common, practicing vulnerability by sharing personal narratives, and finding common goals they can work toward.
- The special potential of direct personal contact to break down misconceptions and assumptions they have about each other.
- How rules of engagement, sometimes known as ground rules, can help build trust once a dialogue process is underway.

Reading Assignment

pp. 113—124 of ***From Conflict to Convergence****,* including Chapter Nine**.**

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- It is challenging to foster trust when people perceive themselves to be in opposing, "us vs. them" groups. What might underlie this very human tendency to form opposing groups?
- Building trust can help people break down walls between them that are based upon assumptions about each other. Can you recall a time when you were part of an "in" or "out" group that later merged into a group that developed a shared identity and purpose?
- Trust is deepened when people are genuine and vulnerable with each other, disclosing information about their backgrounds and what lies underneath their perspectives. Why do you think that is so?

Activity Options

Activity One: As a group discussion or writing assignment

- Watch this short video about Contact Theory.
- Reflect on an experience you have had interacting with someone from a very different background than your own. Did the experience increase or decrease your understanding of and trust in that person?

Activity Two: Classroom group activity or individual homework assignment

- For those engaging in collaborative problem-solving, having "rules of engagement" or "ground rules" to govern the group's interactions can build trust in the fairness of any process and create safety in a room because it is free of personal attacks. Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 121. Review the list of proposed ground rules there. What additional ground rules come to mind as promoting constructive dialogue but still allowing for honest, and even passionate, exchanges of viewpoints?

Activity Three: Classroom activity for full class or groups of 3-5

- Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 124.
- Connecting questions often ask people to share a deeply held perspective or a formative life experience. Develop a question that can help people connect more deeply with each other. Then go around the group and have each person not only answer that question for themselves, but also state why their response is important to them.

Module Seven: Building Block on Listening and Really Hearing Each Other

Overview

This module underscores the importance of learning from direct personal interaction, on top of any other efforts like reading or listening to podcasts, for opening the door to deeper levels of understanding and empathy for others. Too often participants in problem-solving efforts see the issue at hand in binary terms. Understanding others' personal journeys provides a greater opportunity to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions and helps to "complexify" how people see the issues and each other. This practice, which can open hearts, can be a doorway to understanding others in new ways.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- How the power of deep listening and personal stories can transform difficult conversations into constructive exchanges.
- How to listen better and how to speak so that they in turn will be more likely to be heard.
- About the power of employing dialogue and how that differs from debate.
- Techniques, such as "the circle" and how to find facts together, will promote deeper understanding of each other.

Reading Assignment

pp. 125-137 of ***From Conflict to Convergence***, including Chapter Ten.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- Chapter Ten of the book suggests that once people feel truly heard, they are more likely to be open to hearing from others, including those with opposing views. What is your experience with listening when faced with disagreement from others? Do you agree that people are more likely to be receptive to the ideas of others once they, themselves, have had a chance to be heard and understood?
- Distinctions between dialogue and debate are mapped out on p. 132. Both approaches can add value. What is distinctive about what can be achieved through dialogue? Do you

have a personal experience you can share that sheds light on the strengths and limits of employing dialogue or debate?

- Facts are essential to finding solutions collaboratively. Having a shared set of facts among participants can help move a conversation forward. Yet in some instances, facts alone, without understanding the human dimension, can be incomplete. As the book says on p. 137, it is one thing to know a fact (e.g. the decibel level of a new, noisy highway). Yet, understanding how that noise impacts nearby neighbors adds important additional information. Can you think of a situation where the discussion of the human impact of certain facts has shed important new insights on the impact of those facts?

Activity Options

Activity One: Classroom activity or homework for groups of two

- Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 130. Practice the tips in this **Try It Out** that explain how individuals can best express their story and views on a difficult issue. This can be a hypothetical issue the instructor chooses and asks participants to pick a side, or it can be based upon the individuals' own life experience. Especially when an individual feels strongly they are in the right, it can help them to be heard more fully by others if they "hedge," "affirm," "stay personal," and "own missteps" as described in the **Try It Out**.
- Especially in charged situations, people often focus on preparing their own responses to what is being said instead of giving their full attention to hearing what others are saying. As an exercise for two people taking opposite sides of a challenging issue, ask them to practice listening with full attention, employing curiosity to learn more, and to refrain from answering or debating with the other person. Once both people have spoken, have them discuss what might have been different about this practice from their normal interaction on a charged issue. What did they learn from this practice?

Module Eight: Building Blocks on Generating Options for Mutual Gain and Taking Your Time

Overview

This module focuses on how to generate solution options that meet a wide range of needs in solving problems, sometimes described as creating “integrative" solutions. It is important that once finalized, the options under discussion do not leave participants feeling they have compromised what is most important to them. Crucial to this work is understanding the distinction of “positions vs. interests" first articulated in the book *Getting to Yes* by Fisher and Ury and how to employ the “OPTIONS” tool (Only Proposals That Include Others’ Needs Succeed) to find integrative solutions. Consistent with working to find mutual gain solutions is the notion that investing time up front to lay the groundwork for collaboration often saves time in the long run. Taking it slow to begin with should be put in the context of how long the conflict being addressed has already been in contention and how long the fighting might continue if no solutions are developed. While it can be helpful at times to have deadlines to create urgency and discipline in any process, some of the most fundamental tasks cannot be rushed if the interest is in creating wiser and more durable solutions. Most often this means going slow at the start to get organized and build trust so that the group can move faster later. Moving right into debate on the issues at hand without first generating trust and common understandings can be counterproductive.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- The importance of generating options that meet a wide array of needs in finding collaborative solutions.
- The fundamental concept articulated in the book *Getting to Yes* by Fisher and Ury that calls for distinguishing positions from interests. Interests, the underlying needs of a stakeholder, can ordinarily be met in multiple ways while positions on exactly how a problem needs to be solved tend to be inflexible.
- Why it is important to take the time to engage in various steps to lay the groundwork for success before participants engage directly on the issues.

Reading Assignment

pp. 139-157 of ***From Conflict to Convergence***, including Chapters 11 and 12**.**

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- Chapter 11 explores the distinction between "positions" and "interests" as laid out in the book *Getting to Yes*. Can you think of a situation you have either experienced or know about where people trying to solve a problem focused almost exclusively on debating the merits of their positions without getting to underlying interests? If so, what was the result? If some agreement was reached, was it durable or did it set the stage for later contestation?
- Chapter 12 focuses on the importance of not rushing into debate or forcing solutions before the groundwork has been laid for a conversation that addresses underlying needs and interests. In the real world, it is not always possible to take all the time needed to optimize the chances for "mutual gain" or "win-win" solutions. Can you think of an instance where a larger investment of time could have made a crucial difference in resolving a challenging issue? Where laying the groundwork for fuller and deeper communication did not occur but would have been useful?

Activity Options

Activity One: Classroom exercise (full class or in small groups) or as a homework assignment

- Watch this short video on the basic human needs that shape our worldviews. In a group discussion or as a writing assignment, reflect on how having a liberal or conservative worldview shapes one's perspectives, concerns, and needs about important issues. How is it related to the OPTIONS framework for problem-solving?
- Go to the **Try It Out** on pp. 145-146. Think about a contentious issue, perhaps the one you developed in module one (which is based on the **Try It Out** in Chapter Two of the book). Or it can be another issue of interest to you. Create a list of all the interests and needs that various stakeholders might have on that issue and pay special attention to identifying the needs of people you disagree with. Assemble a comprehensive list of these interests and needs. Highlight any items that were new to your thinking as you put yourself in others' shoes.
- Using the "OPTIONS" approach, try to generate as many solution options as you can that are integrative, that is, meet the needs of divergent or opposing points of view.

Module Nine: An Introduction to Process and the Initial Process Step of Discovery and Design

Overview

This module provides an overview of the process steps that lead to effective collaboration. The process steps will vary depending upon the complexity and locus of the problem being solved (e.g. Is it internal to an organization or a complex public issue? Is it a local, state or national issue?). Even if an informal process is planned, these process steps are worthwhile to consider. *The Discovery and Design* chapter included in this module provides more of the "how" in terms of implementing the "Map the Terrain" building block covered in Module Five. Crucial goals for discovery and design include building trust with likely participants, identifying the optimal people to invite to the table, and learning how to frame the overall goal of the exchange in a manner that is inviting to people of varying points of view. Initial discovery can lead to effective design of the process, including the frequency, duration, and location of meetings and whether they will be in person or online. It is often useful to write up what has been learned in the discovery and design stage so that those interviewed can know they were heard accurately and to give others a better sense of what being involved will entail.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- How to organize a collaborative problem-solving process in a wide range of settings, including how to conduct research and interviews to understand the issues and identify possible stakeholders.
- How to discern from these interviews a good design for engagement that includes frequency, location, and duration of any meetings of participants in the process.
- How to identify the issue they seek to address and frame it in a way that is inviting to different points of view.
- Criteria by which to decide whether it is appropriate and possible to pursue a collaborative process, such as: Would it add unique value? Will needed stakeholders participate? Is there enough time and are there enough resources to be successful?

Reading Assignment

pp. 157-171 of ***From Conflict to Convergence***, including the introduction to Part IV of the book and Chapter 13.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- As you contemplate how these process steps might apply to issues of concern to you, what kinds of problems are you considering? How formal or informal of a process might be needed to address the most pressing issue you would like to see addressed? Is it a private or public issue?
- Collaborative problem-solving is not always the right approach to addressing tough issues. What do you see as the most important criteria for considering whether to invest the time and resources to conduct such a process? Would you add any criteria to the list in the book?

Activity Options

Activity One: Classroom activity or individual homework

- Framing the main issue to be addressed can be critical to getting the buy in and participation of stakeholders who may be reluctant to participate. Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 167. Referring back to the original contentious issue you chose in Module One based upon the **Try It Out** in Chapter Two (pp. 39-40), try framing the issue so that it is likely to attract a wide range of interests by using the tips on pp. 165-166 concerning "connecting," "needs," "widening," and "solutions."

Module Ten: Process Steps of Dialogue and Destinations and Achieving Consensus and Impact

Overview

This module addresses the heart of the interaction among participants through a process of dialogue or deliberation. In this module, students will learn the essentials of how to conduct a successful dialogue process that leads both to recommendations and action steps. Book Chapter 14 on *Dialogue and Destinations* includes key advice on how to deliberate successfully, ranging from the development of shared principles to guide the formulation of group recommendations, to how to generate options that meet a wide array of needs, to tips on skillful facilitation of discussion, to dealing with unproductive statements that impede progress. Book Chapter 15, *Achieving Consensus and Impact*, explains how to move from options that are generated to a consensus on the best ideas to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders and thus gain support for them. This chapter also includes a focus on ascertaining what kind of impacts the group wants to have (e.g. public policy, internal organizational practices, etc.) and who has responsibility for moving any recommendations forward through a shared plan of action.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand:

- How to conduct a constructive engagement across differences on the issues being addressed.
- Tools for generating options that meet a wide variety of needs and interests.
- Tools for skillful facilitation such as summarizing and synthesizing.
- Tips for reframing unproductive statements, such as those that get personal or ascribe motives, that might stall progress.
- Tips for effective brainstorming.
- Approaches that can be used to create breakthroughs if issues are stuck, such as breaking into smaller groups.
- Tips for knowing if there is a consensus, such as the “Fist to Five” technique, and for determining how the group might define consensus.
- How to develop and implement a shared plan of action, including commitments from those participating on what they can do to move it forward.

Reading Assignment

pp. 173-198 of ***From Conflict to Convergence,*** including Chapters 14 and 15.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- When you consider any tough problem you would like to address in your own life through a collaborative process, which of the features of the two chapters in this module are most likely to be useful to you? How formal a process do you envision? How much facilitation might be needed? Might it be useful to develop principles that will serve as guidelines for any final recommendations? Would an effective brainstorming process, where people feel safe to share ideas, be useful to generate ideas that might not otherwise arise?
- Thinking about the problem you would like to address, what kind of impact would you most want to have? As you consider who would be at the table to generate mutual gains proposals, what do you imagine the roles of various participants might be to move consensus recommendations forward?

Activity Options

Activity One: Classroom activity in small groups or individual homework

- Review the *Convergence Collaborative on Supports for Working Families* Blueprint for Action Report (p. 3). As a writing assignment or group discussion reflect on:
- In what ways do you see the shared vision principles (p. 3) reflected in the solutions.
    - Do you think that the group missed any elements of a vision or principles that would be necessary to ensure that families flourish?
- Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 183. Thinking about the problem you identified back in module one and the range of stakeholders who would sit at the table, identify some principles of agreement that could be shared by a wide range of stakeholders. In reviewing these proposed principles, do you find them to be a strong foundation for finding shared recommendations? If not, how would you adjust those principles?

Activity Two:

- Go to the **Try It Out** on p. 196-197. Again, referencing back to the problem you identified in Module One, what kinds of commitments do you anticipate stakeholders would need to make to move forward proposals from the likely solution set? Would it involve just decisions from the top of an organization? Would it ask people to advocate or lobby? Or to communicate with wider audiences? What actions might be needed to ensure that consensus recommendations move forward?

Module Eleven: We All Can Be Collaborative Leaders

Overview

The authors make the case that if taken to scale in all sorts of settings, the widespread practice of collaborative problem-solving can not only generate better solutions, but also contribute to a society-wide cultural shift away from confrontation and division to a more functional and civil society. In the book's conclusion, the authors call for people in all sorts of positions and settings, and especially leaders, to practice collaboration as a norm in how they resolve problems. While collaboration may not be possible or advisable in all situations, it is a greatly underutilized resource that can be applied to a far wider range of problems and circumstances than commonly thought, from public debates, to workplaces, to interpersonal interactions.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand how the lessons of the book can be applied:

- At the community level.
- In public policy formulation.
- At the organizational level, both in for-profit and not-for-profit entities.
- In houses of worship.
- In academic settings.
- In building a more civil and functional society overall.

Reading Assignment

pp. 199-208 of ***From Conflict to Convergence***, including the Conclusion.

Discussion Questions

The following questions can be utilized in the classroom, with the full class or in small groups, or be answered as homework.

- In your current position, or thinking about future work you would like to do, do you think of collaborative problem-solving as a practical and advisable approach to employ when tough issues must be resolved? Based upon your experience or instincts, is it a realistic option to pursue?
- What do you see as the possible usefulness of teaching the concepts of collaborative problem-solving in learning environments, such as undergraduate and graduate studies

programs at colleges and universities or even high schools? How important and relevant might it be for students to understand and consider collaborative approaches to solving the problems they face in their personal and public lives at the current time and into the future?

Activity Options

Activity One: As a written assignment

- Answer the following questions:
    - What are the strengths of the collaborative problem-solving approach?
    - What are the limitations of this approach? Are there issues that are out of bounds or people who are inappropriate to include in the process?
    - How valid do you find the authors' assertion that if taken to scale, collaborative problem-solving can help ease polarization and division in wider society? Do you see this as a possible outcome beyond the direct address of specific problems? If not, why not? If so, why so?

III. Additional Resources

Articles

Fersh, R. (2021, June 28). Hope and Help for Collaborative Approaches to Divisive Issues. Just Resolutions Newsletter, *American Bar Association*. https://convergencepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/fersh-just-resolutions-article1-FINAL-1.pdf.

Johnston, K., & Fersh, R. (2021, January 7). We agree on almost nothing except how to solve problems across the political divide. *The Hill*. https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/533063-we-agree-on-almost-nothing-except-how-to-solve-problems-across/?rnd=1610048927.

Grose, J. (2023, December 13). 'Couples Therapy,' but for Politics. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/13/opinion/paid-family-leave-bipartisan.html?ogrp=ctr&smid=url-share.

Gruber, J. (2019, August 22). Investing in Relationships to Repair our Democracy. Medium. https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/investing-in-relationship-to-repair-our-democracy-a036959a91e7.

Ripley, A. (2023, February 12). A Minor Miracle on Capitol Hill. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/17/congress-modernization-committee-cooperation/.

Books

Brooks, Arthur C. (2019). *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*.

Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin Books.

Covey, Stephen R. (1989). *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Gerzon, Mark. (2016). *The Reunited States of America*.

Goeas, E., Lake, C. (2022). *A Question of Respect*.

Guzman, Monica. (2022). *I Never Thought of It That Way*.

Haidt, Jonathan. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

Hewertson, Roxi Bahar. (2022). *Lead Like it Matters...Because it Does: Practical Leadership Tools to Inspire and Engage Your People and Create Great Results*.

Kohn, Sally. (2019). *The Opposite of Hate*.

Senft, L., & William, S. (2015). *Being Relational: The Seven Ways to Quality Interaction & Lasting Change*.

Susskind, L., McKearnen, S., Thomas-Lamar, J. (1999). *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement*.

Ury, William. (2024). *Possible: How We Survive (and Thrive) in an Age of Conflict*.

Podcasts

Brooks, A. (Host). (2018-2019). *The Arthur Brooks Show* [Audio Podcast]. Vox Media. https://cms.megaphone.fm/channel/arthurbrooksshow?selected=VMP1848241654

Digs into the art of disagreement and the power of love with Arthur Brooks, Harvard social science professor, former president of the American Enterprise Institute, and expert on disagreeing well.

Milne-Tyte, A. & Davies, R. (Host). Let's Find Common Ground [Audio Podcast]. Common Ground Committee. https://www.democracygroup.org/shows/lets-find-common-ground.

Motivates the public to find common ground and reduce incivility and polarization by demonstrating how influential people of opposing views can unexpectedly find agreement without compromising core values. Common Ground Committee has many great podcasts of discussions with these influential people, including a handful from some of Convergence's project participants.

This is Civity [Audio Podcast]. Civity. https://www.civity.org/podcast/.

Features people who are building relationships to dismantle inequities and strengthen communities grounded in respect and empathy.

IV. About the Authors

Rob Fersh is the Founder/Senior Advisor of Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, a non-profit organization founded in 2009 to promote consensus solutions to issues of domestic and international importance. Immediately prior, Rob served as the United States country director for Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international conflict resolution organization. While at SFCG, he directed national policy consensus projects on health care coverage for the uninsured and U.S.-Muslim relations.

In the 1986-98 period, Rob served as president of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), a leading NGO working to alleviate hunger in the United States. Rob also served on the staffs of three Congressional committees, working for U.S. Representative Leon Panetta and for Senators Patrick Leahy and Edmund Muskie. While a Congressional staff member and at FRAC, he was deeply involved in shepherding passage of bipartisan legislation to reduce hunger in the United States.

Rob has held additional positions in the federal executive branch and non-profit sector. He was a 1994 recipient of the Prudential Foundation Prize for Non-Profit Leadership. Rob holds a law degree from Boston University and a bachelor's degree in Industrial and Labor Relations from Cornell University. He resides in Bethesda, MD, is married, has four children, and three grandchildren.

Mariah Levison serves as Convergence's CEO and President. Mariah uses a deep understanding of human relations to build trust and relationships across differences which lead to consensus-based solutions to complex and contentious issues. Her work in consensus building includes assessment, design, facilitation, mediation, collaborative processes, dialogue, public engagement best practices, restorative justice, and program development. Additionally, Mariah has been teaching these skills for twenty years in settings ranging from community trainings to foreign governments trainings to teaching the mediation clinic at the University of Minnesota Law School.

Prior to joining Convergence, Mariah helped to create and run the Minnesota State Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution. In that position Mariah used a collaborative problem-solving process very similar to the one used by Convergence to build consensus on state, tribal, and local issues; built the capacity of government to work well across difference; and facilitated the Minnesota Legislative Civility Caucus. Before joining the State of Minnesota, Mariah worked for nonprofit dispute resolution centers in Chicago, New York, and Minneapolis.

Mariah has a master's degree in International Affairs with a focus in conflict management from Washington University in St. Louis. When she isn't working, Mariah can be found biking, cross country skiing, or reading books with her two young sons and husband in Minneapolis.

V. About Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical challenges through collaborative problem-solving across ideological, political, and cultural lines. Since 2009, , Convergence has brought together leaders, doers, and experts to build trusting relationships, identify breakthrough solutions, and form unlikely alliances for constructive change on seemingly intractable issues. Our process is improving the lives of Americans and strengthening democracy for a more resilient and collaborative future. To get involved, visit us at: www.convergencepolicy.org.