# CONVERGENCE
## COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Collaborative problem-solving is a process that brings people together across ideological, political, and identity divides to build trusting relationships, identify breakthrough solutions, and form unlikely alliances for constructive change on seemingly intractable issues. It involves pooling together diverse perspectives, skills, and resources to generate higher-ground solutions that are wiser and more durable than those that could be achieved by working alone.

To engage in collaborative problem-solving leaders need to:

- ✅ Cultivate a collaborative problem-solving mindset
- ✅ Put key building blocks in place
- ✅ Follow a thorough process

## CULTIVATE A COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING MINDSET

Mindsets are integral to bridging divides and solving problems. They set leaders up to engage in tough conversations, build relationships, and increase understanding with others. Solving shared problems across our differences requires a collaborative mindset that helps shift us away from "us vs. them" zero-sum thinking and towards thinking focused on problem-solving.

## Five elements of a collaborative problem-solving mindset

**1** **Conflict Can Be Constructive.** See conflict as an opportunity to learn and push thinking to a new level. When conflict starts to feel threatening, try to stay present, breathe, and refocus on your body.

**2** **Everyone Gets the Benefit of the Doubt.** Remember that negative intentions are rare and seek to understand who people are — their experiences, their values, and why they think the way they do — before passing judgment on them or their viewpoints. Ask yourself, "Why do I think they're saying this?"

**3** **Curiosity Is the Cure.** Especially when you hear things that you disagree with or don't fully understand, cultivate curiosity, and keep asking questions to learn more rather than just react. Ask yourself, "What am I missing?" Ask the other person, "Can you tell me more about that?" Then briefly summarize what you think you've heard and ask, "Did I get that right?" and "Is there more you can share about that?" Remind yourself that no one person or group holds all the answers on complex issues.

**4** **Relationships at the Core.** Stay focused on building quality relationships as a key to solving challenging problems. Spend time breaking bread and getting to know each other more deeply. Seek to identify shared goals, values, identities, and life experiences and focus on them. The stronger the relationships built; the more likely mutually beneficial solutions can be found.

**5** **Seek Higher Ground.** Strive to develop solutions that integrate the perspectives and meet the competing needs of everyone who has a stake in your problem. This enables you to develop solutions that don't require anyone to relinquish their fundamental principles. Forget the "win-lose" paradigm and instead hold on to the belief that diverse parties can find answers of mutual benefit.

# BUILDING BLOCKS

Successful collaborative problem-solving rests upon a set of fundamental building blocks that create the foundation for its effectiveness in addressing shared challenges and conflicts.

## Ten Collaborative Problem-Solving Building Blocks

**1**   **Diverse Groups Create Better Solutions.** Groups are powerful. Collaborative problem-solving leverages the diversity of skills, experiences, and viewpoints within the group. Different perspectives lead to more innovative and comprehensive solutions.

**2**   **Dialogue is Not Debate.** Dialogue is a cooperative conversation where individuals engage in an open exchange of ideas. It emphasizes understanding, listening, and a willingness to explore various perspectives. Debate, on the other hand, is a competitive conversation where individuals defend their positions and seek to win or prove a point. The focus is often on highlighting differences and showcasing one's viewpoint as superior.

**3**   **Focus on Interests, Not Positions.** In every conflict both positions and interests are present. Positions are the fixed stance or demands of one side in a conflict. They rarely provide insight into an individual's interests, which are the underlying needs, concerns, fears, motivations, or values that drive the positions. By focusing on interests, participants in a collaborative problem-solving process can discover shared goals and overlapping interests that are often obscured when just examining positions.

**4**   **Courageous Communication Is Required.** Open and transparent communication is crucial to solving complex problems. The collaborative problem-solving process requires participants to share ideas, information, and feedback to ensure that interests and values are out in the open and recognized during the process.

**5**   **Relationships Are the Foundation.** Relationships are the grease that lubricates the gears of problem-solving. Invest in building trusting relationships through dialogue and ongoing demonstrations of vulnerability, courage, connection, and empathy.

**6**   **Shared Goals Create Shared Purpose.** Collaborative problem-solving gives participants the opportunity to create and work towards a common goal. A shared purpose not only unites collective efforts, but it also serves as a compelling source of motivation and propels individuals to solve complex problems.

**7**   **Deeper Problem Analysis Creates Deeper Understanding.** Deeper analysis of the problem and perspectives on the problem enables a deeper understanding of the underlying issues. It facilitates identification of root causes and establishes a shared understanding, which, in turn, lays a solid foundation for the development of clear and impactful solutions.

**8**   **Don't Split the Difference, Make the Difference.** Collaborative problem-solving processes help participants move beyond their positions and reflexive "us vs. them" zero-sum thinking to crafting creative solutions that integrate some of the most important needs and interests of all parties.

**9**   **Agreements Are the Goal.** Unlike dialogue aimed at developing understanding, collaborative problem-solving goes a step further and generates agreements. These wise and durable agreements include the collective wisdom of the group and address the needs of all participants.

**10**   **Action Planning Operationalizes Ideas.** The roadmap for implementing solutions defines clear steps, responsibilities, and timelines, ensuring that agreed-upon strategies are put into practice effectively. A well-structured action plan enhances accountability, coordination, and the successful achievement of collective goals in addressing complex issues.

# COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

The steps of a collaborative problem-solving process are greater than the sum of their parts. For especially complex issues, you'll likely find it most productive to follow all the phases with care. For less complex or more discrete issues, it's still best to consider all these steps, but some may not be necessary or could be executed with less rigor and formality.

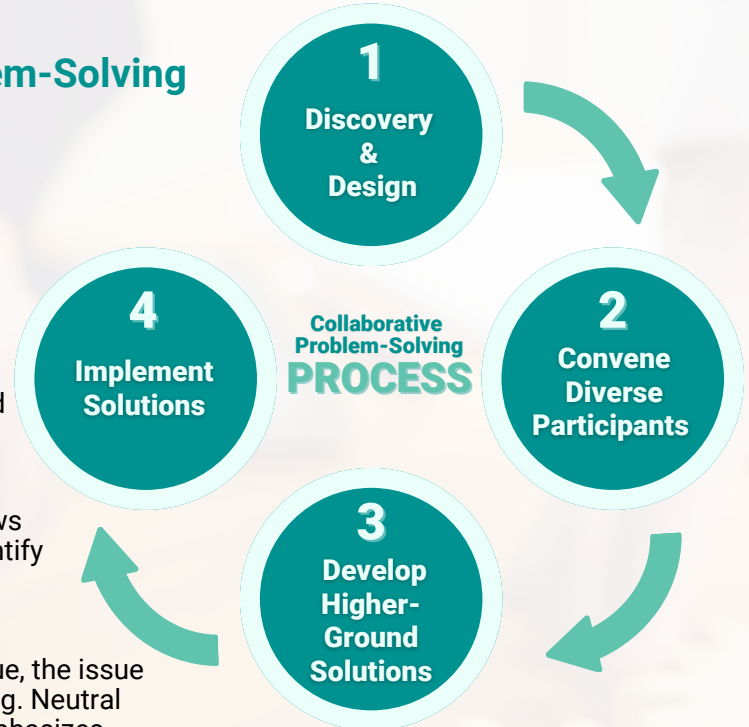## Four Phases of Collaborative Problem-Solving

### 1 DISCOVERY AND DESIGN

**Assess the Problem.** Begin by developing a thorough understanding of the issue at hand. This involves gathering relevant data, considering diverse perspectives, and building a comprehensive picture of all parties' lived experiences and concerns. This is typically accomplished through interviews with stakeholders who represent the full range of views on the issue, as well as reviewing relevant documents, such as reports, media coverage, and research.

**Identify Participants.** After completing a thorough assessment and conducting enough stakeholder interviews to gain a well-rounded understanding of the situation, identify the participants who represent both the full spectrum of perspectives and the influence needed at the table.

**Frame the Issue.** Before inviting anyone to join the dialogue, the issue must be framed in a way that is both inviting and disarming. Neutral framing promotes dialogue encourages empathy, and emphasizes solutions. For example, terms like "economic inequality" or "economic freedom" are politically laden, whereas "economic opportunity" is a neutral framing that can open the door to dialogue among a wider group of parties on economic issues.

**Design the Process.** The insights gathered through this discovery phase should directly inform the design of the dialogue process — tailored to the specific context and dynamics of the issue. In addition to setting the table, this includes decisions about meeting cadence and format, how information will be shared, potential pitfalls to avoid, and any other structural considerations that will help foster trust, transparency, and meaningful engagement.

**Collaborative Problem-Solving PROCESS**

- 1 Discovery & Design
- 2 Convene Diverse Participants
- 3 Develop Higher-Ground Solutions
- 4 Implement Solutions

### 2 CONVENE DIVERSE PARTICIPANTS

**Bring Parties Together.** Assemble a group of individuals who bring diverse perspectives, skills, backgrounds, experiences, and expertise on the issue. Diverse groups contribute to more comprehensive analysis and innovative thinking. Too often, we're quick to write off certain individuals or viewpoints as too extreme. While not every perspective can or should be centered, engaging with the full range of views generally results in wiser and more durable outcomes.

There are many benefits to regularly bringing people together to build relationships and trust over time. These interactions can reduce prejudice, build empathy through the sharing and elaboration of personal narratives, and foster a sense of psychological investment. As trust deepens, participants often begin to care more deeply about each other's views — and about achieving mutual benefit.

**Build Relationships and Facilitate Trust**. Relationships are key to successful problem-solving. Invest in building trusting relationships through consistent dialogue and ongoing demonstrations of vulnerability, courage, connection, and empathy. This can be encouraged through questions that invite personal storytelling and self-reflection. Questions that help participants uncover common ground, such as shared values or identities, are especially effective. Ordinarily, you will also want to ask participants to share the "why" behind their answer. For example, ask participants to share:

- A personal story that shapes your views on this issue and why
- The value that most informs your views on this issue and why
- A way that you feel that you and others aligned with your views on this issue are misunderstood and why

Shared meals or informal moments — time spent "breaking bread" together — also play an important role in relationship-building.

**Develop Shared Understanding of the Issue.** Developing a shared understanding early in the process is essential for generating higher-ground solutions later on. This includes clarifying definitions and language, but also leaning into complexity and nuance where necessary. Avoiding oversimplification ensures that the full richness of participants' experiences is acknowledged and respected. Dialogue is the most effective tool for building complex understanding of complicated and contentious issues. Create opportunities for learning together rather than assuming that everyone has the same knowledge and understanding of the issue. Create space for participants to explore, question, and expand each other's thinking. It's within those complexities that people begin to see the subtleties in others' motivations and needs, and consider perspectives or dimensions of the issue they may not have previously understood.

## ③ DEVELOP HIGHER-GROUND SOLUTIONS

**Identify Interests and Needs.** By focusing on interests – the "why" behind the inflexible positions that people in conflict often assume, parties in a collaborative problem-solving process can discover overlapping or compatible interests, needs and goals, that are often obscured when just examining positional demands.

**Establish Common Goals.** Collaboratively set goals that align with the needs of the participants. Ensure that all parties understand and agree on the goals, and have a shared vision for success. Establishing common goals can take several formats. One is listing the interests and needs of all participants. Another is setting a vision for what it will look like when the problem is solved. Yet another is establishing a set of criteria, such as feasibility, evidence-based, and impactful.

**Generate Options.** Foster an environment that encourages open dialogue and creative thinking. Brainstorming sessions and collaborative discussions can generate a wide range of mutual gains options without immediate evaluation. At this stage it is often helpful for participants to break into smaller groups, each of which has members representing the full range of perspectives on the issue, to dive more deeply into potential solutions on an aspect of the issue.

**Forge and Evaluate Higher-Ground Solutions.** Evaluate each generated solution based on how well it meets the range of needs and interests identified and fulfills the established shared goals. Facilitate discussions to collaboratively select the most viable solutions. This involves a thorough examination of the potential benefits and challenges associated with each option.

## ④ IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS

**Implement Solutions.** Develop a detailed action plan for implementing the selected solutions. Assign responsibilities to participants, establish a clear timeline, and allocate resources. Effective implementation requires ongoing coordination, communication, collaboration, and a commitment to executing the agreed upon strategies. Proactively address anticipated barriers and challenges.

**Evaluate and Adjust.** Continuously monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the implemented solutions. Gather feedback from parties, measure success against predetermined criteria, and be prepared to adjust as needed. This step involves a feedback loop to ensure ongoing improvement and adaptability.

## ABOUT CONVERGENCE

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical issues. Through our time-tested collaborative problem-solving methodology, we bring people together across ideological, political, and identity lines to improve the lives of Americans and strengthen democracy.

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