

The Intersection of “Transparency” and “Conflict Management”

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Categories : [Board Governance](#), [Tools and Practices](#)

Date : February 6, 2015

In January, I had the pleasure of teaching two sets of veteran [county](#) and [city](#) elected officials through our LELA program, Managing Conflict: How to Disagree and Still Get Along. The experience affirmed some of my insights and stretched a few others.

Choosing policies and budgets on public matters puts elected officials in the center of conflicts. **Understanding and responding to conflict is a central leadership competency.**

This post addresses the first of two factors which make effective approaches to conflicts harder to achieve.

The effect of open meetings laws and government transparency on conflict resolution. Most people do not want their elected officials to make decisions in secret meetings. The NC open meetings laws set the standards for open discussion, with public notice and participation, when city councils and county commissions are conducting their business.

Elected officials often tell me they would like some options for more private settings to address tensions among board members and to “just think out loud” without it hitting the media. Many traditional conflict resolution approaches do seek confidentiality in order to have candid exchanges, to explore new ideas, and to reach more effective outcomes in a controversy. NC public officials can try out ideas one-on-one, but almost never can the majority or the whole group meet confidentially on policy matters.

- As reported by elected officials, staff, and outside facilitators, one top strategy for holding honest, robust discussions in the public eye is to develop and practice groundrules for effective conversations. Granted, there is no way to bind a recalcitrant member to the rules. However, public officials regularly report to me that doing this groundwork after any change in membership of the board provides a big pay-off. The goal is to set mutual expectations and agree on the practices which ensure everyone is heard, minority views are respected, and the board reaches well-considered decisions. Having ground rules – and using them -- is the foundation for managing conflicts. People “playing by the rules” minimize the risk of recriminations, grudges and retaliation later on.

- One strategy to boldly and safely generate more ideas within a problem-solving process is to allow elected officials to submit ideas that are compiled into a single list of options, without attribution. Then, the whole group identifies the pros and cons of each approach, whether or not each idea is likely to gain support. This broad thinking can help clarify the criteria for making a “good” decision and can generate options for modifying or combining ideas. The anonymity of the contributed ideas can help counteract any concern for public criticism.